

“A Different Kind of King”
John 18:33-38a

Delores Williams, African American theologian and teacher, often talks about her experience growing up in the deep South in church. As I’m sure some of you have witnessed before, African American churches often times have a call and response style to their worship that full of joy, and an energy that is just palpable as you walk into the sanctuary. And once you’ve preached in a black church, it’s very hard to come back to the white church. Don’t worry, I’m not going to ask you for a call & response this morning. Delores remembers Sunday mornings, the minister in the pulpit shouting out, “Who is Jesus?” The choir would respond from behind, “king of kings and Lord Almighty!” And then, an elderly woman from the back of the church in a voice so fragile and frail you could hardly hear her, would sing her own answer, “poor little Mary’s boy.” Back and forth they sang, “King of Kings and Lord Almighty!” ... “poor little Mary’s boy.” Delores says this was the black church doing theology. Who is Jesus? King of Kings cannot be the answer without seeing poor little Mary’s boy. These images clash. There is a dissonance in the song, as there is on this day that we celebrate Christ the King Sunday, or the Reign of Christ Sunday. How can Jesus be both King of Kings and poor little Mary’s boy? The images clash. One is mighty and powerful. The other is meek and poor. One is strong and royal. The other is small and vulnerable.

To fully understand the context of this particular snapshot in the life of Jesus that we read from John’s gospel, it’s important for us to explore more about the leadership structure of Jesus’ day. The kingdom language that is used here, sounds a little bit different when we begin to explore another leader that deeply impacted the

expectations that many had for Jesus in his ministry, Herod the Great - King of Judea. King Herod died the year that Jesus was born. We all know that Jesus was born off the beaten path in a little town called Bethlehem, and Herod was buried about 3 miles east of Bethlehem in a massive fort called the Herodium. For followers of Christ, we attach a great deal of significance to the birth of Jesus, his birth and death are the most significant hallmarks of the Christian faith. But in his day, Jesus' birth was a relatively quiet affair. It was a hushed emergency birth in a feeding trough behind an inn. Unlike Herod's burial, which was the exact opposite of everything we can begin to imagine from Jesus' entrance into the world. He very literally had a mountain constructed in the flat dessert so that people could see this impressive, massive structure and remember with reverence his legacy long after he died. Herod ruled for 34 years, and by all the ways that the world judges he was a powerful, influential, effective leader. His architectural influence is still present in Israel, he built the city of Caesarea on the coast, he built Masada, rebuilt the temple, and the wailing wall. He was not a religious man, but he used religion to manipulate and bring about his own agenda and purpose. And he used everything - art, architecture, sports, palaces, shrines - all of it was used to promote Herod's power and establish a lasting legacy. He also used the destructive power of violence to maintain his kingdom. This was the man that gave instructions that on the day of his death, Jewish elders from a number of villages were to be killed simultaneously, so that a cry would be heard across Israel. This was also the man that heard about the birth of Jesus and ordered the massacre of innocent children. This was the kingdom of Herod. This was his leadership style. This is the world that Jesus was born into.

Both the expectation and the temptation of Jesus was to model his leadership, techniques and methods after Herod. In his book, "The Jesus Way," Eugene Peterson writes: "So why didn't Jesus learn from Herod? Why didn't Jesus take Herod as his mentor in getting on in the world? In the world into which Jesus was born, no one has done this kingdom thing better. It's true that Herod was not interested in God, but everything else was intact. All Jesus had to do was adopt and then adapt Herod's political style, his skills, his tested principles and put them to work under the rule of God."

I must admit that language of kingship, takes my mind to the royal family, and more specifically to my latest Netflix binge, "The Crown." If you're looking for a new show, I would highly recommend this historical drama series. The show has been praised for its excellence in cinematography, writing, acting, and the relatively accurate historical account of Queen Elizabeth's reign. It is the type of show that you need to watch with history book or google in one hand, pausing the show every few minutes to learn more information on these characters. The first season covers the period from Queen Elizabeth's marriage to Phillip Duke of Edinburgh. Full disclosure, I've only seen season 1, and I am not a TV watcher that likes to read ahead on shows so I know what's coming. However, because it is largely biographical and covers so much history, we know that Queen Elizabeth and Prince Phillip had an extremely rocky marriage. It's cringe-worthy and deeply uncomfortable to watch the dynamics of authority at play between Elizabeth and Phillip, and most of it revolves around the power structure of the royal family. Queen Elizabeth holds all authority, and for most of season 1, Phillip acts emasculated, and though he has lost his sense of self. Power and authority, can be a

dangerous combination used to manipulate, control, and conform to the whims of society.

This trial narrative that we read in John's gospel makes us question everything we know about what kingship really means. It begs the question, what does it truly mean to have power and authority? Pilate wants to know who Jesus is, and more importantly what kind of king is he? Even calling someone a "king" connoted political authority, and quite frankly Pilate is a politician. Jesus never really answers Pilate's direct question - "Are you the king of the Jews?" in a straightforward, easy way. As we see in other parts of the Gospels, Jesus often times answers direct questions with a heavy pause of silence, followed by a clever response and other times a story. And this exchange is no different. Instead of answering directly, Jesus responds that his kingdom is "not from here." He goes on to say "and if it were, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews." Can you hear the devastation in his voice? The devastation that he has lived and taught and worked with these people, and not only are they turning their backs on him in this ultimate betrayal, but he's saying they just don't get it. Pilate has an "aha" moment, as I imagine him trying to one up Jesus here as he says, "so you are a king!" To which Jesus essentially says, that's the title you give me, but I came into this world to testify to the truth. Then Pilate says the three most haunting words of this passage, "what is truth?" We cannot presume his tone or his intent. But I wonder if he's searching for answers nobody else had given him. I wonder if this existential question begs for more than an individual answer. What is the truth about God, about life, about death, about who we are, and if there's even a God. We get a glimpse of why Jesus doesn't answer questions directly.

As Frederick Buchner says, “ It is a truth that can never be put into words because no words can contain it. It is a truth that can never be caught in any doctrine or creed including our own because it will never stay long enough but it is always moving and shifting like air.” The truth is standing in front of him, handcuffed and defenseless. Jesus did come to this earth to establish a kingdom, it’s just not what anyone was expecting.

This image clash was so steeped into the culture of the day, that we see Jesus over and over again wanting to make sure the disciples fully understood this alternative vision of leadership. One of those instances happens in Mark 10:42-44, we read “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.” But it is not so among you. This phrase reminds me of the six times in scripture where we hear Jesus say, “you have heard it said...but I say to you.” As if Jesus is saying to his listeners, everything that you think you know about the law of the land is falling away. Everything you think you know about politics, and power and authority is gone. Follow me, I have a new way.

A number of years ago, archaeologists discovered the bones of a group of Neanderthals. Among the bones, were the remains of a man who had lived with a severe disability since childhood. The scientists were moved with a sense of wonder and awe, as they discovered how this tribe went about caring for this man. In the animal world, and in this time, those who could not keep up were often times discarded and forgotten. But, so early in human life a tribe of people arranged themselves around

the needs of this one man who was deeply broken. This was a hunter-gatherer world, and the group would travel in a pack between 7-10 miles a day, searching for food. And scientists discovered that they had carried this man every day of his life. They shared their food with one who could not gather anything to share in return, and they cared for his broken body. I would imagine that this would have been a substantial burden on their tribe, but they held on to the belief that this man could not be left to die.

There are few better signs of this kind of life today than Peacehaven Community Farm in Whitsett, NC. I learned about Peacehaven a few years ago, when I took a group of youth to Passport Missions. Peacehaven Community Farm was our mission site for the week, and from the first time I stepped foot on that clay soil, I knew that we were all going to see God's kingdom in a new way. Peacehaven's mission is to connect people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to the larger community through this model of shared living and working on a sustainable farm. This farm is located on 89 gorgeous acres of organic gardens, and rolling pastures. Their mission is to connect people with special needs to their community, by working toward this common goal of farming together. People with and without disabilities live and work on this farm side by side, and the food is sold and given away to people in need.

I listen to a podcast hosted by writer and former Episcopal priest, Ian Morgan Cron. On last week's episode he told this story about an interaction he had with Desmond Tutu, Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town, South Africa. Tutu is a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, and is an incredible theologian and human rights activist. I could go on and on about the influence he has had on my faith journey and spiritual development. Ian was assigned to be Desmond Tutu's chaplain for the week, as he

was in his town attending and speaking at different events. Ian's job as his chaplain was to chauffeur the Archbishop around, making sure he got to his events on time and that all his needs were met while he was in this city. One night, they were headed to a fundraiser dinner at the most exquisite venue in the city. Desmond Tutu was the honored guest and speaker for the evening, and there were 500 of the city's richest in the same room waiting on him to speak. They pulled up to the venue in a limo, and Ian started walking with Tutu inside the venue when he stopped in his tracks. Lined up on the sidewalk were 15 valet parkers, who had been working all evening to usher these dignitaries to their cars. They were already running late for the event, so Ian was trying to quickly get Tutu inside so they could begin the fundraising dinner. Instead, Desmond Tutu spent the next 30 minutes outside with the valet parkers, asking them about their families, their children, and what they like most about their jobs. This was all while 500 of the city's richest awaited his arrival inside.

Jesus lived, announced, and inaugurated a new social order. We see Jesus in places we never expected. We follow a king who engaged in deep theological conversation with a Samaritan woman who had five husbands and was living with a man who was not her husband. We follow a king who put a towel around his waist to wash his disciples feet. We follow a king who ate with outcasts and lepers and prostitutes. We follow a king that touched people who weren't supposed to be touched, and healed people who weren't supposed to be healed. We follow a king who staged a triumphant entry into the capital city by riding a donkey, symbolizing peace. We follow a king that turned over tables in the temple, and ticked off authorities. We follow a king that loved his enemies to the point of his own death at their hands, and we follow a king

that beat death by rising from the grave. That's the king we worship. That's the king we follow.

Sisters and brothers, any time we confuse following Jesus with anything other than that good news, we are misguided by the power and authority of an agenda that is not the gospel. His life and his teachings lead us to liberation. It leads us to a kind of upside-down kingdom where those who are on the opposite side of power always come first and lead the way. If we are able to live into this kind of surprising reality of the God we know in Christ, we're invited to join in this story by meeting the real needs of our neighbors. The word became flesh, and we see him revealed not in power, but in vulnerability, not in might but in brokenness, not in judgement but in mercy. Christ takes all that we associate with lowliness and elevates it through participation in his kingdom.

Today, we can find him in places like the clothing ministry, in the face of Sandra who lost her home, her car, and all her possessions in Hurricane Florence and somehow found her way to our church looking to get back on her feet. We can see his spirit in the life of those Neanderthal's, taking care of that disabled man. We can see him farming the soil, side by side with those that live at PeaceHaven Community Farm. We can see him in the life of Desmond Tutu, who was more interested in making sure the valet parkers were seen and heard. King of Kings, and Lord Almighty cannot be true without poor little Mary's boy.