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Listening for His Voice

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be a witness, O God, to your Way of love, justice and faithful walking with us. Amen.

Scriptures: John 18:33-37

As we've heard already, today is the last Sunday in the Christian liturgical calendar. Goodbye season after Pentecost. Hello, Advent, which begins next Sunday, Nov 29, sort of like New Year's Day for us as people of faith. The tradition in its wisdom calls today, kind of like New Year's Eve, Reign of Christ Sunday, or in more old fashioned parlance, Christ the King Sunday. It provides for us an opportunity to reflect upon the nature of Jesus' reign as sovereign in our midst before diving into the pathos and promise that is the Christmas story to come.

So if today is our Christian New Year's Eve, it must be time to party, right? Well, maybe, and almost. Like New Year's Eve, today might first better serve to be our day to make New Year's resolutions for ourselves. But in Christian context, our resolutions need have nothing to do with the usual fare we think of....losing weight, exercising more, you know the like. No, today our lectionary passage tempts us to make a decision about our lives as Christ-followers. Like Pilate, we too have to figure out just who this Jesus claims to be and decide whether we believe him or not. If we believe him, then the challenge is to listen for his voice and live like him. If we don't believe him, well then, according to John's theology, it's almost like choosing death. Pilate has the power to acquit Jesus and set him free or to sentence him to death. In our decisions every day – how to act, what to say and not say, how to treat our partners, children, friends, the people we work with here at church, the homeless, hungry and refugee – we either proclaim Jesus alive or we deny him, full-stop.

Friends, I don't mean to be harsh here. You know what I believe – that it is our biblical witness that God in Christ is a both/and kind of guy, building bridges between us and the Love that is our truest reality, connecting us one to another in a cosmically awesome way, even when sometimes or often we act in the exact opposite way. But John's account of Jesus dialoguing with Pilate – who can either save him or crucify him – kind of puts us in either/or territory. We can no longer afford to stay on the sidelines. Jesus speaks of having a kingdom that is not of this world. He came to testify to the truth. It's up to us to decide just what is the truth he refers us to. Is it the power and might of an earthly king, one who would call up armies to protect what is his and smite all the rest? Or is it something far different? A power and authority based not in might, or armies or monumental buildings clad in gold, or in our own need to be right, to be each other's judge and jury, but in sacrificial vulnerability and humility as a fully awake, alive, and fearless human being?

Ah, there! Now maybe we're getting somewhere! Jesus' truth, the God he knows as intimately as his own father, leaves nearly everyone who hears it flabbergasted. Although I bristle at the author's way of inserting his own bias into the dialogue – Jesus as a Jew himself never would have referred to his own people as “the Jews,” as if they were some third-party rabble he had disowned – no, the truth is that he was disowned by everyone who had any authority or power around him – Jew and Roman alike. It seems they all had accommodated themselves to the worldly way power was used in that time and place – even when to do so invites a life like a living death. Clearly, when Jesus tells Pilate “Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice,” it's mostly a rhetorical question, because most people weren't then, and aren't now, listening. It's too scary to listen, because if you do, you might just end up where Jesus is, liable to lose any privilege and power in the current system as it is. But at what cost.

One contemporary story might illustrate this point. In yesterday's New York Times, journalist Azadeh Moaveni interviews three young women who grew up in Raqqa, Syria, the defacto capital of the self-styled Islamic State militant movement.¹ Before the militants arrived in their city, they had enjoyed a lively and free life with few constraints put upon them by their religion. They went to parties, associated with both men and women, wore modest but recognizably western and stylish clothes, makeup and the like. They surfed the internet and followed their favourite shows. They wore bikinis to the local beach. Life was good. But then ISIS showed up, changing everything. All the freedoms disappeared. Fear was everywhere. To survive, and to help their families survive, these women decided to join the movement. Aws, and her cousin Dua, both agreed to marry foreign fighters who ended up dying in suicide missions. To relieve the boredom of largely cloistered

lives, and make a little money, they joined the women's police to enforce the strict rules of modesty that kept women out in public enshrouded in ballooning black sacks, nothing uncovered but their eyes. But when they had to denounce and witness the beatings of their own friends, mothers and sisters, they knew they'd bargained with the devil and lost. Eventually, they escaped and now live in a Turkish town near the border. They have to hide their past collaboration with the militants for fear of reprisals. But they dream of a brighter future.

Faced with the same facts on the ground, would any of us been quick to do anything different than Aws and Dua? To go against those who have the power, authority and guns to back it up seems foolish indeed. If you can't beat them, join them, right? But Jesus didn't settle for that. Instead of choosing a both/and path through life, he staked his life on the side of his Abba Father, who showed him that true power rests not with those who assert it by coercion or force, but with those willing to let go of self, let go of property, wealth, privilege, position, until the illusions of security fall away, and you discover the power of your own unadorned humanity. It's then that your humanity can recognize and touch the humanity in another who is also awake, alive and fearless. It's then you see God's face in every face. And from there, a new movement can arise, one with the power not to knock other people down, but to set them all free.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, that's not a bad place to arrive on this last Sunday of one liturgical year, and the birth of another. Perhaps we are called to make our New Years Resolution, to die to the parts of ourselves that deny a living Christ as our king, in favour of listening for the voice of the One who calls us to model his humble, vulnerable, living presence. If we can do that, then maybe, just maybe, we'll truly be ready to receive the coming gifts of Christmas joy. Amen.

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/22/world/middleeast/isis-wives-and-enforcers-in-syria-recount-collaboration-anguish-and-escape.html?_r=0