

November 26, 2017

“Nevertheless”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Habakkuk 3:17-19; John 18:33-37

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Once upon a time in England there lived a King named Henry VIII. And like most earthly kings, rulers and politicians have a strong inclination to do, he put himself and his interests first and foremost. In Henry's case, he apparently had a strong libido and a desire for many mistresses and wives. You all know the story of how he would take one, and then when she didn't produce him a son, he would have her sent away, hung, or have her head chopped off. Abuse by men in power happened even back then. Now the only obstacle to Henry having his way in these matters was the Catholic Church and the threat of excommunication. Yet despite the church's threat, Henry broke away from the Catholic Church and in 1534 declared himself “the Supreme Head on Earth of the Church of England.” And all his subjects had to pledge loyalty, not only to Henry, but also to his church, upon the penalty of death. Sir Thomas More, Henry's chancellor, refused to take the oath and he too, was beheaded. And his last words were, “The king's loyal servant, but God's first.” In the face of certain death - "The king's loyal servant, yes, but God's loyal servant first."

Well, all these events didn't play out too well with many of Henry's subjects who wanted religious freedom, and in the late 1500's a separatist movement began within the Church of England. The core of this group would later come to be known as the Pilgrims. In 1620, one hundred and two of them left England and after sixty-five fearful days on the stormy Atlantic Ocean, landed first in Provincetown, then in Eastham, and finally settled in Plymouth. It was cold, food was scarce, and they had no shelter. Yet in the face of all these hardships, one of their leaders, William Brewster gathered the Pilgrims together in worship and read Psalm 100. *Worship the Lord with gladness. Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us and we are his. Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him. Bless his name. For the Lord is good. His steadfast love endures forever and his faithfulness to all generations.*

And here we are many generations later, celebrating this Thanksgiving holiday weekend, and hopefully we all gave our thanks and gratitude to God first, for all our many, many blessings. For each and every one of us, regardless of our situations, can be thankful for something in our lives. And each and every one of us should bless His name, for the Lord is good!! Yet...even in the midst of our thankfulness, each and every one of us also struggles with some issue in our life. It could be our health, our children, our addiction. It could be money, depression, stress or any number of other problems or situations. And our pain is real, the questions are large, and the answers don't come easily.

But that's why the words of the prophet Habakkuk we heard can speak to us today... *Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there is no fruit on the vines; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields produce no food; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty, yet I will rejoice in the Lord! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation! The Sovereign Lord is my strength!*

These words were written in the midst of some of the darkest times the Israelites had ever experienced. And yet, the prophet reminds them, and us, that our faith and trust in God is not based on our circumstances or what we have or don't have, it is based on who God is. Our faith and trust in God is based on God's power and love and grace toward us, God's promise of our salvation and eternal life. That is the kind of faith and trust the prophet Habakkuk had in the face of severe oppression, and that Sir Thomas More had in the face of execution, or that those one hundred and two Pilgrims had in the face of enormous hardships as they sought the freedom to worship God as they wished. And that kind of faith and trust can only come from a deeply rooted belief and confidence in the majesty of a sovereign God, a sovereign King, that is indeed ruling over a kingdom that, as Christ said today, is "not from here." A kingdom that is not from here.

And that is why we celebrate Christ the King Sunday. Christ the King Sunday was conceived by Pope Pius XI in 1925. While the church has always depicted Christ as a king, it apparently took one thousand nine hundred and twenty-five years for the church to make it official – Christ is King! On that first celebration of Christ the King, the fascist, Mussolini, was running Italy. A deranged and evil man named Adolph Hitler and his Nazi party was growing in popularity in Germany. And the entire world was suffering through a Great Depression. Yet in the midst of those difficult, violent and trying times, which remind us so much of today's world, Pope Pius asserted that, nevertheless, Christ is "King of the Universe." This celebration became the church's great "nevertheless" to the godlessness and suffering in the world. Christ the King Sunday asserted that no matter what the circumstance, "nevertheless" Jesus Christ is Lord and he shall reign, as the Bible says, "forever and ever and ever." Let's go back to that scene in today's scripture where a beaten and scourged Jesus stands before the proud Pontius Pilate, who sneeringly asks, "So, you are a King?" And Jesus responds, "My kingdom is not from here." No, Jesus' kingdom is not from here. Not from here, where Pilate can only rule because of the strength and power of Caesar's legions.¹ Not from here where tyrants and rulers in North Korea or Syria or a score of other countries, suppress their citizens, stripping them of basic human rights and dignity. Not from here where even in our own nation, we witness corruption and abuse at all levels of power. Not from here, where there are mass shootings and suffering and poverty and all forms of despair. No, Christ's

¹ Collected Sermons of Will Willimon, Who's In Charge Here"

kingdom is not from here, where we are subject to the human condition. Christ's kingdom is a heavenly kingdom where all things, yes, all things will ultimately be made right.

That's why Christ the King stands over and above any and all earthly powers, even though God gives Satan a mighty long leash these days. Yes, as Christians, we have the assurance that, *nevertheless*, Christ is King. St. Paul said, "Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and he is supreme over all creation. Everything was created through him and for him, and he holds all creation together." And the reason we have hope is because this heavenly king dared to leave his throne in heaven and come to be subject to the very same human condition that you and I are subject to. He came not to observe, but to be a part of unfair suffering and sorrow and pain. He came to be subject to cruelty and injustice and evil. He came to be part of a world of oppressive and corrupt government, of greed and poverty and disease and betrayal and denial. He wept, he was hungry, he was humiliated, he was threatened, he was hated. And he was crucified and he died. And the powers of this world thought they won.

But no, Christ the King reigned supreme over all these conditions. Because in the end, he was the victor. Nothing could defeat Christ the King. Christ our King. The One who stands as our hope and comfort in an imperfect and unjust world.

Let me close with this story. A man emerged from a London bomb shelter one bleak morning during the darkest days of World War II. Explosions had rung throughout the night, and devastation and destruction was all around. Amid the rubble, the man was surprised to encounter a newspaper vendor hawking his wares on a street corner. He asked the newspaper salesman, "Who do the papers say won last night?" "I don't know," replied the vendor, "I don't read the papers. I don't have to know who the papers say won the battle last night, because I already know who has won the war."² Yes, we will fight battles along life's journey here on earth, but we know who the ultimate victor is. We know who wins the war. The one who, Paul says, "God elevated to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

² Who's In Charge Here, Will Willimon

Yes, we live in an imperfect and unjust world, but *nevertheless*, Jesus Christ is the victor... because he is the Messiah – the Savior – Emmanuel, God with us. The Word made flesh – the firstborn of all creation – and the firstborn of the dead. Jesus! He's the One who is and was and is to come. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. He is the Son of God and the Son of Man. He is Wonderful Counselor – Mighty God – Everlasting Father – and the Prince of Peace. He is Alpha and Omega – the beginning and the end – the resurrection and the life. He is the great I AM. He is the bread of life – the living water – the light of the world – the true vine to which we cling – the cornerstone of our faith and the gate through which we are saved. He is the way – the truth – the life – He is the judge of the living and the dead. He is the author of our life, the source of our hope and the deliverer of our souls. He is the Lamb of God, He is the King of heaven, and He is the Head of the Church.

He is our redeemer – our rock – our righteousness – our advocate – our protector and our friend. He is salvation to the sinner – eyes to the blind – ears to the deaf – compassion to the hurting – companion to the lonely and strength to the weak. His love knows no bounds – his peace passes all understanding – his mercy goes beyond measure and in Him our joy is made complete. He is the one who calms our storms – dries our tears – heals our wounds – relieves our fears – forgives our sins and renews our soul. He is unparalleled – unprecedented – unmatched - unsurpassed. He is indescribable – incomparable – irresistible – irreplaceable. He stands alone in history – he is the doctrine of true theology – he is the mind no man can grasp. He is Christ the King. Christ the King! And to him be the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and forever and forever. Amen. Amen.