

Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
Rev. William Love
Sunday, November 22, 2009

I N R I

Jeremiah 23:1-6
Revelation 1:4-8
John 18:33-38

The first words in the Bible are: *In the beginning God*. Those words put a bracket around the beginning of history. At the moment of the beginning, there is God, without whom there would have been nothing.

In the beginning, there is God.

The last words of the Bible — and by that I mean the entire book of Revelation — in language that is often confusing, perhaps sometimes frightening, in a cryptic kind of poetry whose code we are not fully sure we have understood, in a book from which extravagant claims and ominous predictions have been made — the last words of the Bible say: *In the end God*.

Just as God was in the beginning of things to create us and all that is and to get us started in the direction God intended we should go, Revelation and other writings say that, at the end of human history, God will be there to complete things, to make sure all things turn out the way God originally intended, to tie up the loose ends (which Calvin called the *remnants of sin*).

That puts a bracket around the other end of human history. In the beginning, God. In the end, God. Before everything that ever was and after everything that ever will be and in every moment in between, God.

The way that is said in our reading from Revelation is: *I am the Alpha and the Omega*. The first letter of the Greek alphabet and the last. The beginning and the end.

That end time is described in a number of different ways: the Last Judgment, the Day of the Wrath of God, the Day of the Lord, the Second Coming of Christ. Some descriptions are more foreboding and forbidding than others.

It is the time when the Kingdom of God is ushered in fully, when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord [Phil. 2:10-11].

Even as we look forward to the universal recognition of Christ as King, we look back to the time he became King — and look for some understanding of how we are to live between those times.

Jesus had been arrested by the leaders of his own nation, which had become a remote outpost of the Roman Empire. Because of trade routes and such political and economic consideration for things to remain peaceful in this part of the Empire, the Romans granted a considerable amount of religious tolerance to these people.

The religious leaders arrested Jesus. After a mockery of a trial, they determined that Jesus should die. Not having that power themselves, they had to go to the Roman governor. They brought Jesus to Pilate and let Pilate know that they expected capital punishment.

Their accusation was that he claimed to be King of the Jews.

Pilate did not have a lot of respect for these people. He may have believed that a condemned criminal was as good as these people deserved for a king.

Pilate had to go out to them to find out what was going on. They would not enter the praetorium, lest they be defiled. This is not how Pilate would have chosen to begin his day.

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Standing before Pilate was a poor, bedraggled soul, who looked anything but regal. And like it or not, Pilate had to deal with him.

Pilate was astute enough to realize he had a political problem on his hands. Pilate delivered Jesus to them to be crucified when they said, *If you release this man you are not Caesar's friend; everyone who makes himself a king sets himself against Caesar* [Jn. 9:12]. Pilate could not have that kind of word getting back to Rome. And finally, the solution was a political solution.

Pilate's job was to administer Roman law in the unpleasant region of Judea over this difficult people. He knew, however much Jesus may have offended the sensibilities of the rulers of the Temple, he was not a criminal deserving punishment of any kind, let alone death.

Jesus said, *For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth.*

Perhaps flippantly, perhaps cynically, Pilate said, *What is truth?* and turned and left the room without waiting to hear a response.

It may be Pilate really did not know what Truth is.

It may be the only truth he knew was expediency, the truth was the best you could make of a situation when you had to make a decision. And Pilate was caught between his superiors on the one hand, who wanted peace in his territory (whether what he realistically had to do to keep the peace fit neatly with Roman law or not) and the Jewish leaders on the other hand, who were not above causing enough unrest to make his life difficult and his position insecure in order to get what they wanted.

It may be Pilate knew what the truth was, and it did not make a lot of difference. He seemed to know, under Roman law, Jesus was innocent but, if Jesus had to be sacrificed for expedient political ends, it would be Jesus' tough luck.

As I thought about Pilate's reaction, I realized there are two kinds of people about whom I am a little skeptical.

The first kind are those who do **not** know what the truth is.

Pilate asked, *What is truth?*, then walked away without waiting for an answer because, I suspect, he did not want any answer at all.

People who do not know what the truth is can seem very intense about finding truth. But they do not want to commit themselves until all their questions are answered — and they will always have at least one more question than anyone has answers.

They do not want an external standard of Truth, but they want to use and interpret and manipulate the perception of reality to their own benefit (anything seems to be okay, as long as no one gets hurt), perhaps fooling themselves as much as anyone.

The second kind are those who **do** know what the truth is.

That probably sounds a little strange. I think an example of someone who knows what the truth is is the Mahmoud Ahmedinejad or Glenn Beck. I do not think either tosses and turns at night, plagued by doubts. My guess is that they really believe that what God thinks about things and what they think about things are the same, that what God wants done and what they think should be done are identical. Mahmoud Ahmedinejad and Glenn Beck know what the truth is.

We see less extreme forms in ourselves. I have seen bumper stickers that say *God said it; I believe it; that settles it.*

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Knowing what the truth is (or thinking we do) closes us off from truth and closes us off from God. In effect, it says: God has said everything God is going to say, I have heard and understood it all completely, and there is nothing anyone can say to get through to me.

That means: God has nothing else to say to me (which closes me off from God), no one else can tell me anything either (which closes me off from others), and my faith is as mature as it is going to get (which means my faith has quit growing).

To know what the truth is to that degree of certainly fails to consider, as Paul wrote, *our knowledge is imperfect and we see in a mirror dimly*. And it means we no longer hunger and thirst for the knowledge of God.

We can avoid seeking for the Truth by claiming we do not know what Truth is, as Pilate did, or by claiming we do, as the rulers of the Temple did. Either choice, I think, misses the Truth and misses God.

Frederick Buechner said, *Two of the noblest pillars of the ancient world—Roman law and Jewish piety—together supported the necessity of putting Jesus Christ to death in a manner that even for its day was peculiarly loathsome. Thus the cross stands for the tragic folly of [human beings] not just at their worst but at their best.* [Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, 18]

Jesus answered Pilate's question by saying: *My kingship is not of this world...my kingship is not from the world.* He did not mean his kingdom is otherworldly, divorced from this world. It is **this** world he came to save. *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.* [Jn. 3:16-17]

Jesus' kingship does not have its origins in this world. Its source is not from this world. He was where he was because one of his most intimate friends betrayed him, the others deserted him (except Peter, who stayed around long enough to deny him). Human hands placed no crown on his head (except one made of thorns). He was not elected by human will nor defended by human power.

Jesus said, *I have come...to bear witness to the truth.*

It is not a truth of this world, though I think it is a truth about this world.

We do not know a whole lot about God by virtue of our intellect or our powers of reason. What we know about God is what God has chosen to show us. Our truth about God is not from the world.

We may look at nature and think we can say something definitive about God the Creator. We look at the glorious colors in the fall or at nature bursting to life in the flowers of spring, and we think from that we can say something about the God who created nature.

We fail to complete the picture by looking at nature when it is as savage as it can be beautiful.

We do not look at a volcano pouring molten lava through towns and homes, an earthquake killing by hundreds and thousands, a drought and famine in Africa, a tsunami in southeast Asia, or a hurricane's destroying life, property, and crops across Haiti and Florida or along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and then reach our conclusions about God the Creator. Our description might be far different.

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Though our reason may lead us to suspect there is a God, our reason fails to tell us much definitive about God. We cannot reason our way to the truth Christ brings. We cannot reason our way to God's sending Christ or his self-sacrifice on the cross.

We cannot, by our reason, arrive at the truth Christ brings. It is not a truth from the world; it is a truth about the world.

It is the truth about our need for a Savior. And it is the truth that he died to defeat all of his enemies—and ours. And God raised him from the dead as the victor over those enemies—as Lord, as King.

It is difficult to look at our world and believe that Jesus is Lord. It is tempting to think his kingship has not yet come, that he will be crowned at the last day, that the Kingdom will be brought in by God's dramatic intervention.

That denies Easter its power. Easter tells us he is already Lord.

In every war that is won, there is a decisive battle that determines the outcome. In World War II, it was the battles after D-Day. After those battles, the war was decisively won. The enemy did not give up the struggle right away. They fought on. They did damage; lives were lost before they surrendered completely. But they could not change the outcome.

Easter is the decisive battle. The forces that seek to deform and destroy human life have been defeated. They have not admitted it yet. They fight on. Christ's rule is not unchallenged. But the outcome is assured. And Christ is King.

And Christ's victory at Easter makes it possible for us to struggle against the evil around us and within us. It is not only possible but, if our citizenship in Christ's kingdom is to mean anything, it is necessary.

The victory will not come by our efforts. But it will surely come. And the victory of Easter will be recognized in all the world and Christ will reign, unchallenged, as our Sovereign King.