

There are a lot of things that I'm fascinated with...baseball statistics, the history of film in America, the music that has influenced the lives of others, but there is one little known fascinated corner of my brain that I don't always get a lot of opportunity to talk about. Henry VIII. It's actually been a period of history that has always captivated my brain. When we went to London when I was in high school, the thing I was most excited to see was the Tower of London. I was obsessed with all things Anne Boleyn and the weird reign of terror that characterized Henry's time on England's throne.

He's such a mesmerizing figure to me because on the one hand, he did some things that completely altered the course of history, while on the other those history altering things always seemed to come with a side of execution. He was instrumental in bringing the Reformation to England and releasing the paralyzing grip the Pope had on people, yet, he also signed off on the ransacking of hundreds of monasteries and the execution of countless monks, even going so far as to execute one of his best friends, Sir Thomas More because he wouldn't break with Catholicism. He set up the first Royal College of Physicians, which vastly improved medical treatments in England, yet that also led to countless women being thrown in the tower for suspicious apothecary acts, because suddenly folk medicine was witchcraft! He brought England to a new level of international politics and prowess,

while also acting a complete, barbaric fool in front of the King of France and making himself look like a stubborn jerk. And of course...he infamously made it very well known that he only wanted to be married to the people he wanted to be married to, completely turning the world upside down by making divorce a totally ok thing for any reason whatsoever, except ya know, that also led to three of his wives being executed to make said divorces happen...which isn't the greatest look, but hey, progress!

Because of this, Henry's court was simultaneously one of the most sought-after places to be, with its lavish wealth and deep appreciation of music and culture, and one of the most dangerous places to try and exist. Henry would throw people in the Tower if they looked at him the wrong way on the wrong day. He was constantly swayed by whispers and rumors, paranoid to a fault, and constantly using his power to get rid of people that he disagreed with, that he deemed a threat, or honestly that he just didn't want around anymore. Some of his best friends ended up in the Tower for reasons that were laughable, all because Henry's whims were as finicky as the wind. He was the king. So, he did what he wanted, when he wanted, and if you got in his way, off with your head. Done.

Honestly, as much as Henry VIII has this reputation, it's not exactly an aberration when it comes to monarchs who have gained too much power,

or who simply by virtue of being a king or queen *know* they can do whatever they want, however they want, because at the end of the day, they're the only one whose opinion really matters. History is rife with stories such as these, monarchs, leaders, heads of state who got a little too big for their britches, even though they have no reason to think their britches should be any smaller. And honestly, this has been playing out since time immemorial. We see it in crystal clear view in our gospel this morning.

It may feel jarring as we are anticipating the Advent season and the echoes of *The Most Wonderful Time of the Year* already resounding in our heads to be spun back to Good Friday. When we're already thinking of mangers and shepherds, we don't want to be pushed back into the judgment halls of Pilate to hear him debate with Jesus over the semantics of what it means to be a king, but here we are. We find ourselves smack dab in the middle of John's Passion story with Pilate once again questioning Jesus about his motives, his actions, and just *why on earth* he has found himself in this position when it seems to Pilate this all could have been avoided.

We tend to think through all sorts of reasons for Jesus' arrest. The miracles, the crowds, the raising of Lazarus, they all play a hugely significant role, but more than anything it was treason that got Jesus arrested. Treason which he didn't even really commit himself. Rome's

biggest concern with Jesus was that one little word...*king*. His followers had welcomed him into Jerusalem like a king, he talked frequently about the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, and in a world where there was no king but Caesar, such words were dangerous, treasonous, enough to get you killed. Yet, Pilate doesn't seem to buy it. He seems to see that there is a bigger coup going on here and that Jesus is possibly an innocent bystander caught in the middle of a lot of chaos, so he hones in on the issue.

Are you a king? Where is your kingdom? Your people say you are a king, what do you say? The questions come in a never-ending barrage, Pilate trying to get him to say definitively one way or another if he sees himself as a king, if he actually is a traitor to the Empire. Yet, Jesus won't give in to the games Pilate is trying to play. He acknowledges he has a kingdom, but it's not of this world, so it's not a threat to Caesar. He says everyone else says that he is a king, but he has not said it himself. He says that people who listen to him know the truth, without ever saying what that truth actually is. Jesus matches Pilate word play for word play and it gets them nowhere. Pilate gets frustrated. Jesus knows what is coming. And just like in Henry VIII's court, there is only one inevitable conclusion, execution and death for those who threaten the status quo of the king.

The oddity of today though is that we come here, at the end of the church year, to specifically celebrate the fact that Christ *is* king. Christ is our king. Christ who has given us a template of a kingdom we are called to help bring on earth. Christ whom we worship and praise with love, with devotion, with respect, with joy. We want to answer Pilate's questions by saying, *yes!* Christ is our king. He is a king like no other, and we rejoice in the kingdom he came to earth to bring. Yet...there's a flip side and a mental struggle that comes with our proclamations of Christ as king, and they have everything to do with our earthly images of kings, of our minds that when we hear king, automatically conjure up thoughts of people like Henry VIII and every other monarch who has taken advantage of their title.

The struggle of Christ the King Sunday and the end of the church year is that all the kingly Christ imagery comes with a heavy dose of judgment day, end of the world imagery too, and so we tend to think of Christ as a king sitting upon his throne, in all of his power and glory, ready to declare sentencing upon everyone and hold them accountable for their sins. It's not a comforting image. It feels like we will role reverse with Christ in our gospel today. We will feel as though we're standing before Pilate and having him ask, "What have you done?" and we will know that unlike

Christ, we have no good, solid, defensible answer, but merely our sins to hand over and wait for the inevitable gavel of judgment.

Now, shout out to Chip Carpenter for sending me the video that inspired where this sermon is about to go, because the other day he sent me a TikTok from Reverend Rosie, who is an amazing pastor and purveyor of social media wisdom. She was laying down some truths about Christ as King and the impending judgment day we all wonder about. She said, “This is how I imagine judgment day going down for me. I’m sitting in the room, I’m preparing for all of the things I need to say to God and getting ready for all of my justifications for all of my behaviors both good and horrible. And I have a stack of files and my case is ready and Jesus comes out and says, ‘It’s time. Would you like me to present for you?’ If I agree, we go into the room and I stand there in silence, and Jesus says, ‘This is Rose, your beloved.’ And God says, ‘Perfect...’ Not because of anything I’ve done, but because of the one who presented me. Dear ones, that fight about judgment day has already been won.”

The beauty of today is that it comes with a reminder that Christ is a king unlike any other that has walked this earth or will ever walk it. He doesn’t come with some passing whim of judgment, casting people out because they looked at someone the wrong way or said the wrong thing or

even did the most grievous of sins. He comes with grace. He comes with hope. He comes with forgiveness. To the point that no matter what our answer is to the question, “What have you done?” his answer is always, ok, I hear you, I forgive you, and I love you. I think we’re all really well aware of our lack of perfectness. We are blissfully, painfully imperfect, but in God’s eyes, through the eyes of the cross, through the eyes of Jesus the beloved, we are perfect. We are beloved, without any questions, without any justifications or caveats, we just are. Plain and simple.

Now, being the good Lutherans that we are, that doesn’t mean that we’re buying into some cheap version of grace that says if we’re forgiven already, it doesn’t matter what we do. No, we buy into costly grace that says we are forgiven always, but that doesn’t mean we don’t keep striving to live into the gospel, into being disciples, into heeding God’s word. But we’re never going to get that 100% right, and for those not 100% right moments that fill the files of our life story, Jesus picks them up, reads them, shrugs his shoulders and says, “Uh huh, I died for that too. I’ve already forgiven it.” Beloveds, the world is hard enough, life is hard enough without fearing some far away judgment hall where Christ reigns in some weird Tudor England version of terror. The only judgment hall hangs right here, at the cross of Christ, where he declares, “I am king and all is forgiven.” **AMEN!!!**