

Sunday, November 22, 2015 – Christ the King Sunday, Pizza & Pledge Sunday
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
John 18:33-36

Hard to Believe

Where did November go? How is it that Thursday is Thanksgiving? How is it that today is the last Sunday of the church year—Christ the King Sunday, if you follow the terminology and calendar known as the liturgical year. It would be hard to believe, but for all the kingly imagery in church today: in the Bible readings, in the hymns, on banners—it would be hard to believe but for all these things saying that today is Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the church year.

It would be hard to believe that next Sunday begins a new church year, the first season of which is Advent, the 4 weeks leading up to Christmas. It would be hard to believe, but that upstairs in the Educational wing scenery for the Christmas play is being painted, and scripts are being memorized, and children are trying on robes, and trying on roles. They get to be disciples. They get to be animals. They get to be God. It would be hard to believe that Advent is arriving, but that the Worship Team will be getting out the decorations on Saturday. (10 am, and you're all invited, and there are crafts for the kids).

It would be hard to believe, except for these things that we see and hear that tells us, yes, that's when it is, that's what's coming. Without them, these seasonal and cyclical practices, without these tangible things, these things we see and do in church, without them, it's hard to believe. I think that's why we have them: because without them it's hard to believe. And I'm not just talking about the church year. Without these things that we touch and do, it's hard to believe in God.

That is the thing that's truly confounding, that makes us shake our heads, that's the question of our time: how hard it is to believe in God. When you or someone you know gets sick, and there's no getting better. When cities get bombed and innocent civilians die. When refugees suffer the consequences, when victims get blamed. When members of different religions rise up against one another. When members of the same religion, when members of the same church, rise up against one another. When darkness falls ever earlier outside, when darkness falls inside of our hearts. When the world seems a hopeless and indifferent place, it's hard to believe in God.

We are out of touch with our time if we don't acknowledge how very hard it can be to believe in God. It's not just that the church calendar is strange—belief in God is strange, different, and often, hard. It's hard whether you outside the church, or in it. There are many people outside the church who are indifferent to it. We know them, and we are them, too. Who has not experienced that distance, and dissatisfaction, the disengagement with all that is around you—and the disengagement with yourself, within yourself, that internal struggle, the feelings of both dullness and darkness. I think they are some of the hardest, most contemporary, and most familiar, varieties of disbelief.

We can be so out of touch with God.

I think that's why God gives us things to touch, patterns to repeat: to help us believe, and to remind us how God is revealed: in the physical, and in the routine. We are at odds with something fundamental about God if we disregard or dismiss this, if we forget that Christian faith is a materialistic faith. Perhaps that sounds strange, the word materialistic often has strongly negative connotations. But Christian faith positively asserts that materials—a loaf of bread, a cup of wine—can mediate God's presence, can build up faith within us. This faith is not

just something we have, though, it is something we do. As we hear at the communion table: “Do this.” Christian faith is practical, it needs to be practiced, and Christian faith is materialistic—it’s materialistic, for in becoming a human being, God says matter, matters. At the center of Christian faith is a body, someone people could see, and touch, and wound, and kill: Jesus.

On the last Sunday of the church year, we hear a part of the trial that was held just before Jesus was killed. Today in the gospel reading we hear a private part of that trial, a personal conversation between Jesus and a local ruler named Pilate—Pontius Pilate, to use his full title, the one by which he will be named later today in the Nicene creed, one of the ancient creeds that we say every Sunday, both of which include Pilate, by name. Though Pontius Pilate lived and ruled two thousand years ago he is a man for our time. If you read the entire trial scene, the verses before and after today’s gospel reading, you can hear how Pilate is surrounded by warring factions, by political and religious unrest, and an ever present threat of violence, how he watches it—and wants to wash his hands of it, how he struggles with indifference and cynicism, how he is confounded by the presence of the Christ. Pilate is a man for our time. As we do today, Pilate puts God on trial, asks Jesus if he is a king.

Jesus does not answer directly. Maybe it would be easier for us to believe if he did—but that’s not the kind of king he is, that’s not the kingdom he rules, that’s not the way of faith. Christian faith is a way of being, a practice of living, a hope in and of another kind of existence, a kingdom that is not from here.

Even as we are putting him on trial, God invites us to live into this other kingdom. We do so by what we do: by the patterns we keep, by what we touch, by how we spend our time and energy and money. The cycle of the church year and the practices of worship can help us with this, can give us tangible things to see and feel and taste, can remind us what matters. Today, in addition to the sacramental meal at the altar, there is a meal after worship. Today, in addition to the offering plate that is passed every Sunday, there is that very tangible thing that is a pledge form. That we focus on this today, that the church asks for money, can sound materialistic. It is. We live in a material world. (Madonna had it right.) God came, and still comes to this material world in material ways. God’s work is done with material resources. That we ask you to be part of this by filling out a pledge form, can prompt all kind of internal feelings, personal struggle. It can be hard—at least it can for me.

It can also be a way to live in another kingdom, to come to another verdict about what rules our lives. Will we live in a kingdom ruled by violence and accusation and anxiety and apathy, or can we—in tangible, practical, repeatable ways—can we live into a kingdom of hope, and courage, and generosity, and grace?

That second kingdom, that’s the one that’s not from here. We don’t know when, but we know it is coming, and we can live in it, even now.