

Revelation 1:4b-8 ^{4b}Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. ⁷Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. ⁸“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

John 18:33-38 ³³Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” ³⁴Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” ³⁵Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” ³⁶Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” ³⁷Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” ³⁸Pilate asked him, “What is truth?” After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, “I find no case against him.”

Revelation 1:4b-8 and John 18:33-38

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“King of Truth”

Rev. Amy Terhune

“In 1957, Ben Michtom, president of the Ideal Toy Company, had a brainstorm: why not sell a Jesus doll? The majority of kids in America at the time were Christian, so he figured parents would jump at the opportunity to make playtime a religious experience. Other Ideal executives were horrified, but Michtom consulted with some religious leaders, including most notably the Pope, and the Jesus doll was born. It had beautiful brown glass eyes and was wrapped in molded swaddling cloth. It came in a 12” x 16” package, brown with gold on the edges, made to look like a Bible.

“The Jesus doll was a horrible flop. Parents were horrified at the idea of their child undressing the Jesus doll, dragging it around, sticking it in the bathtub, cutting its hair, coloring on its face, painting its nails—all the things kids are bound to do with dolls. Ordinarily, there is a no-return policy on products already shipped, but in this case it was such a horrible mistake that Ideal took the dolls back. It appears that what Ideal did with them was give each of its employees a doll and then ground up the rest and put them in landfills, which I find to be the most offensive part of the whole thing! [2 ¶s from *Uncle John’s Ultimate Bathroom Reader* (The Bathroom Readers’ Institute, Bathroom Readers’ Press, Berkeley, California 1996); as used in “Serving the King of Kings” by King Duncan, www.esermons.com. Adapted here.]

King Duncan responded to that story back in the early 1990s by writing, “If the president of Ideal Toys had asked you or me, we could have told him a Jesus doll or even a Jesus action figure wouldn’t work. For one thing, you simply can’t reduce Christ to the level of Barbie or Batman or a rock star, or a politician, or even a monarch. Jesus towers over every real or imagined figure that has ever graced the pages of literature or starred on the silver screen. Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords.” [from “Serving the King of Kings” by King Duncan, www.esermons.com.]

Which is true. He is indeed King of kings and Lord of lords. More on that in a minute. But I don’t have to tell you that a lot has changed in American culture since 1957 when Ideal released that first Jesus doll. See, in today’s modern Bible Bookstore, you can get a Moses, Joshua, David, Daniel, Peter, Paul, Mary, and yes, a Jesus action figure. Some of the Jesus action figures out there light up if you push a button on his back. One of them that I found on line even comes with a rock tomb like thing

roughly shaped like an igloo that has a stone to roll away and little bed where you lay the “dead” Jesus. On the back of the tomb, there’s a little lever that you push, and the bed will flip over, hiding the Jesus doll and pushing him out a secret trap door on in the back. When you roll the stone away again, low and behold, the tomb is empty! I mean, wow! Somebody put a lot of thought into that! I wonder if that teaches kids that the resurrection is a magic trick—y’know, on par with the quarter in the ear kind of thing! Maybe not. Who can say? But it does seem to suggest that one can indeed reduce Christ to the level of Barbie or Batman—and with little or no work at all.

In our scripture lesson this morning, Jesus tells Pilate, “for this I was born, and for this I came into the world: to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” And Pilate asked him, “What is truth?”

That question merits consideration. It seems to me that Pilate would like nothing more than to boil this situation down to a series of pat answers and easy choices. Clearly, Jesus baffles him. The Jewish leaders annoy him. Pilate would give anything for a Barbie or Batman kind of Jesus. But it’s not so easy when Jesus is standing right in front of him. And the fact of the matter is, action hero dolls notwithstanding, it’s not so easy for us either. As soon as someone is sick, or the job is lost, or the marriage is failing, or our plans aren’t working out, we’re left asking the questions. Who is Jesus to me? What is really true?

About a hundred years ago, several series of events were unfolding that would eventually erupt in 1914 and plunge the entire world into the First World War. Interest in Marxist philosophies was growing, dictatorships were on the rise, unrest seethed beneath the surface. The leader of the Roman Catholic Church at the time was Pope Pius XI, who was deeply grieved and concerned by rising tensions and hostilities. And so he instituted a new, innocuous little celebration on the last Sunday of the Christian year called Christ the King Sunday. In so doing, he organized the church year such that we begin with Advent by awaiting the return of Christ and ends our year by declaring with unequivocal certainty that Jesus Christ is the King of the world, of all time, of all peoples. Pius XI had the audacity to declare that Jesus Christ is the King, and that our loyalties should go, first and foremost, to Him. That’s a bold claim—and a controversial one. You may not think so, but it was and it still is, and as unbelievable as it might seem, believe me when I tell you, the Pope suffered harsh criticism for declaring this simple truth. Yet for Pius XI, and many others, it is truth. Jesus is not just a friend. He is a savior. He is not just a bridge to God, he is the King of my heart and my world.

Interestingly, in our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus tells Pilate “my Kingdom is not of this world.” We understand that to mean that the Kingdom of God is not like any government here on earth. It is not subject to corruption, to greed, to compromise, to in-fighting, intrigue, politics, and violence. In short, it is not subject to our human frailties, because it isn’t human, but divine. Yet while His Kingdom is not of this world, we do assert that Jesus Christ is the King of this world. “But that begs the question: what does it mean to say that Christ is King of this world? Knowing that the world as it currently exists is certainly not the kind of world Christ desires, we cannot help but conclude that the world is unfinished. There is work yet to be done.” [adapted from “Christ the King” by King Duncan, www.esermons.com.] So when we say Christ is King, the first and most obvious thing we say about him is that we follow a working King. We follow a King who is intimately involved in the daily proceedings of this world.

“As a contrast, think about King Louis the XIV of France, who ascended to the throne at age 5. He was pampered and catered to his entire life. The symbol of his reign became a sun, suggesting his belief, perhaps, that all the world revolved around him. He crushed the people under taxes while living a life of luxury and obscene opulence. He was completely insulated from the daily lives of his people, utterly indifferent to their suffering. His legacy is pathetic. He is known for only two things: for building the palace at Versailles and for being the cause of the French Revolution—the bloodiest, ugliest, most violent revolution the world had ever known to that time.” [adapted from “A King – A Kingdom” by Warren T. Smith, www.esermons.com.]

Jesus is as opposite as can be. He lived a simple life, on the edge of poverty. He takes on our suffering. He understands our brokenness. He still can be found in the streets and the alleyways of human existence. He knows us personally. And in spite of the brokenness, He loves us deeply, which is the mark of any truly good leader. He doesn't see the labels we sometimes put on one another: worthless, good-for-nothing, brainless, powerless, lazy, incompetent, feeble, hopeless, failure. God sees us through the eyes of Grace. But God communicates that love through the ongoing work of Christ—work that involves, and to some degree, *depends* on you and I. There is work yet to be done in this world, but we follow a working King. Scripture tells us that the God of the universe neither slumbers nor sleeps. He is constantly working, patiently creating, relentlessly loving. We do not follow a King who deals with generalities and then goes out to play a game of golf while his underling works out the details. God rolls up his sleeves and digs into the work of saving human life, one heart at a time. It's painstaking work. Victories seem small, setbacks are regular. But God never loses hope, never stops seeing the best in each of us, never stops offering his hand, never quits working. We follow a King who never loses touch, a compassionate and loving King who wants nothing more than our wholeness. We follow a profoundly personal King.

But a second truth follows that. To say that Christ is King, is to say that Christ has power—power over this world and power over our lives. We say his is in charge of our lives. We follow a powerful King. We follow the King of kings and the Lord of lords. We follow the creator of the universe, the master of time and eternity, the conqueror of death—a powerful King indeed. We say he cannot be reduced to an action figure doll.

There's a song the children sing at summer camp sometimes, which is a favorite to a lot of the kids. It's never been one I particularly liked, however, although when I objected to it on theological grounds, I was told that I'm seriously overanalyzing a silly camp song. The adults think it's funny, too, so I'm undoubtedly going to annoy someone this morning who loves silly camp songs. Admittedly, it's not the first time I've been accused of overanalyzing, but in this case, I still think I'm right. The song goes like this:

If I had a little blue box to put my daddy in,
I'd take him out and kiss, kiss, kiss, and put him back again!
If I had a little pink box to put my mommy in,
I'd take her out and kiss, kiss, kiss, and put her back again!
If I had a little white box to put my Jesus in,
I'd take him out and kiss, kiss, kiss, and put him back again!
If I had a little red box to put the devil in,
I'd take him out and SMASH HIS FACE, and put him back again!

Okay, never mind the red box, as problematic as it may be. It's not relevant to the sermon this morning, so I'm not going there. Never mind the blue or the pink box. We'll not go there this morning, either. But the white box—the little white box for Jesus: that bugs me. My Jesus doesn't fit in a little white box. My Jesus doesn't fit in a big white box. And while I firmly and wholeheartedly accept the notion that God resides in the spaces between subatomic particles as well as in the vastness of solar system, I can't accept the picture of Jesus as a boxed set. Naturally, we're supposed to have the Spirit of Christ reside in our hearts, but the whole point of that is that our hearts shouldn't be able to contain him! That spirit ought to spill over into everything—the way we live, the way we make decisions, the way we treat others, the way we think about past, present, and future. Is Christ personal? Absolutely and unequivocally yes! But we dare not confuse “personal” with “pocket-sized”. C.S. Lewis captured this truth so beautifully in his *Narnia Chronicles*. Aslan, the great lion, is the allegorical representation of Christ in the children's world. He is good. He is wise. He is loving. But as Mr. Tumnus points out to Lucy, he is not a tame lion. We can't put him on a leash or in a cage...or a little white box. He doesn't belong to us. We belong to him.

Here is the true mark of power—we follow the author of love. Love is the pinnacle and base of God's power. Love is what sent Jesus to us. Love is what healed the sick and welcomed the outcast. And love is what led Jesus to the cross—love for us. Love is what defeated death and love is still what drives his Holy Spirit to be among us. And love is what will ultimately usher in the Kingdom of God.

To pull Jesus out of a little box from time to time and kiss, kiss, kiss, is not placing ourselves in his hands. It is not love or service. It is not truth. And so, finally, when we say Christ is King of an unfinished world, we not only acknowledge that he is working or that he is powerful, but we enlist ourselves as subjects in His Kingdom, and we pledge ourselves to His service. In the end, it comes back to you and me.

An Amish man was once asked by an enthusiastic young evangelist whether he had been saved, and whether he had accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior? The gentleman replied, "Why do you ask me such a thing? I could tell you anything. Here are the names of my banker, my grocer, and my farm hands. Ask them if Christ is my Lord and Savior." [from Brian Stoffregen, Exegetical Notes, illustration for CTK Sunday, www.esermons.com.] He makes a good point. What is the truth that guides us?

In his project to document stories of the Holocaust before all those who witnessed it firsthand die off, Steve Spielberg has captured on film some tremendous stories of love and courage. But I stumbled across one of his stories as an example of how truth of God sometimes guides us.

In 1943, German troops took over a small island in the Tiber river in Rome which had been converted into Jewish ghetto. As they rounded up Jews to ship them to death camps, Dr. Vittorio Sacerdoti, then 28 years old, began admitting friends and neighbors, mostly children, to the small, ancient hospital where he worked. The Germans came to apprehend the patients, only to discover many of them beset with violent coughing, aching joints, and a little nausea. According to the medical report, these patients had K Syndrome—a deadly airborne disease that progressed slowly, eventually shutting down organs and leading inevitably to death. K Syndrome was highly contagious, which is why its victims were quarantined in the hospital. The German commanders didn't want to get anywhere close to such a nasty disease, so they fled like rabbits, according to Sacerdoti, and they did not return.

Well, I probably don't have to tell you that there is no such thing as K Syndrome. It's a made-up disease. It's a flat-out lie. The patients were coached to cough like crazy because it scared the soldiers away. This supposed deadly disease in fact saved the lives of 45 children and teenagers, although Dr. Sacerdoti and his patients had to master the art of deception in order to pull it off. Thou shalt not lie made it into God's top ten list of rules, and yet, are there any among us who do not admire the courage of this doctor and accept his lie as justified? I doubt it. Because the doctor honored a deeper truth—that human life is sacred, that blatant prejudice and genocide are evil. The doctor lied and deceived on a surface level in order to remain faithful to that deeper truth—one based on his faith in the love and grace of God. [2 ¶s rephrased/extrapolated from Mikal Keefer, *News You Can Use, 101 Sermon Illustrations* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishers, 2006) pg. 84 and <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4066105.stm>.]

"What is truth?" "Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Made the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the leper clean. He's walked on water, feed 5000, calmed the storm, raised the dead. He's challenged the authorities of scripture and beat them at their own game. He's turned over money tables, foreseen the destruction of the temple, saved a woman caught in adultery. He's done real and genuine good. He's also pushed some really sensitive buttons that needed pushing. What has he done? What is truth? They're not the right questions. If Pilate really wants to get at what makes Jesus such a threat, he'd do better to stick with his original line of questioning: who are you? Are you the king of the Jews? Because maybe truth isn't a what, but a who. Are you the king of the Jews? Of the world? Of my heart? Of my life? I don't know how Pilate ultimately answered that. But I know how I answer. I reach out to him as my savior, my shepherd, my King, and my God. Amen.