

Christ the King Year A Nov. 26, 2017

A Remarkable Year

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Historians have noticed that the year 1968 was a year marked by dramatic events and changes for America and the world. It was the year that began with North Korea seizing the USS Pueblo, a US surveillance ship. The seizure resulted in the death of one crewmen, the imprisonment of the rest of the crew and the worsening Cold War tensions; while the crew was eventually released near the end of the year, the ship remains in the possession of North Korea to this day. 1968 was the year of the Tet Offensive, which was the beginning of the end of US involvement of the Vietnam War; it was also the year the Zodiac killer took two lives, and an 11-year-old girl murdered a 4 year old. The year was marked by multiple demonstrations, many of which were broken up with police violence in America and around the world, as well as race riots in major cities like Miami, Chicago, Little Rock, and Gary. Speaking of riots, we shouldn't forget the demonstration outside the Democratic National Convention in Chicago that year. 1968 was the year of the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. which left the country not only sad, but disheartened, and was followed by the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy. There was a nerve gas leak in Skull Valley, Utah, and several countries, including the US were testing nuclear weapons.

1968 was also the year Yale University announced it would admit women to its academic program, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, Boeing introduced its 747 Jumbo Jet, which opened the possibility of air travel to more people, the Poor People's March on Washington DC, and two US Athletes raised gloved fists in a statement of black power at the medal awards ceremony at the Summer Olympics in Mexico City. It is the year CBS's television show 60 Minutes premiered, as did PBS's Mr. Roger's Neighborhood, and the campy science fiction TV show Star Trek featured the first televised interracial kiss. And on Christmas Eve, three men, Frank Borman, Ohio native Jim Lovell, and William Anders became the first human beings to travel from the earth to the moon and orbit the moon, as the crew of Apollo 8. A few days later they returned home to an earth that would never be the same after such a remarkable accomplishment and a remarkable year.

Since I wasn't even a glimmer in my newly married parents' eyes in 1968, I have to rely on the memories of others to inform me of what it was like to live during a time that must have felt unstable at times, with the Vietnam War raging so far away, the Cold War breathing tensions into every day, and changes that kept chipping away at the status quo in the pursuit of equality. For someone on the outside, it looks like an

exciting time to be alive. But not everyone remembers it that way. Episcopal priest and popular speaker and writer Barbara Brown Taylor writes in her book *The Seeds of Heaven*, that she did not feel encouraged or excited by the events of that time, when she was in college. She writes it was a time of anxiety for her, so much so that she experienced trouble sleeping and was worried about her future, about what she would do and what the world was coming to.

These anxieties were put to rest, she wrote, one night during a thunderstorm when she had a vision of the Second Coming of Christ. She admits this experience was fueled in part by her imagination, yet it deeply comforted her to look out her window and in the middle of the dark, swirling clouds of the thunderstorm she saw a light and from that light there emerged the image of a great horse with Jesus himself on its back. She said the vision only lasted a few seconds, after which the storm moved on, she fell into a peaceful, restful sleep, and after that life went on. She was able to make decisions about her life without anxiety, as she now realized that no matter what happened in the world of politics, human rights, wars, or entertainment, somehow, in the end, Christ will have the last say, that it is our responsibility to live the best we can until such a time. So that is what she did and is doing.

Barbara Brown Taylor's revelation is at the heart of today's lessons and the underlying theme of this last Sunday in the Church year, the day the Church calls Christ the King Sunday. It is the day the Church set aside to celebrate and remind us that no matter what happens in the world, no matter who the leaders of the world or our local governments are, no matter the progress that is or isn't made in politics, civil and human rights, our true king is not a president, dictator, scholar, or an entertainer, it is Jesus.

The day itself is a fairly recent addition to the Church Year, as it wasn't around until 1925, when Pope Pious XI instituted Christ the King Sunday as a response to the growing fascist movement in Europe. Which means Christ the King began as an act of resistance against an unjust government.

That is why all our readings today were about the final judgement of God. It is really too bad that many of these readings have been co-opted by non-Biblical theologies like the rapture that seek to answer the questions and fill in the unknown elements of these readings, such as who will be admitted into God's Kingdom and who will end up in hell. I believe it is one of our greatest temptations as human beings to try and fill in the unknown with just about anything instead of being at peace with living with that which we just don't know. Because those attempts to explain away who will or will not go to heaven just fills these readings with an anxiety I'm not sure was ever the intention.

Ezekiel's words are filled with comforting compassionate imagery of healing and his vision of judgement sounds ever so much like the 23rd psalm where the shepherd leads the sheep to those cool, clear waters and green grass; in fact, these words can easily conjure up images of Jesus feeding the multitudes and healing the sick. In the reading from the letter to the Ephesians we receive such lovely words about Christ filling all emptiness with his fullness. For anyone experiencing the heartbreak of loss or loneliness, such words must be hopeful. Then there is Matthew's Gospel, with the image of Jesus himself coming in clouds of glory, not unlike Barbara Brown Taylor's vision, and *his* judgment which talks about seeing Jesus in our neighbors.

I've known many people who find these words of Matthew's Gospel intimidating and frightening and many times that fear is what motivates them to give to charities and beggars. And while it is good to help those in need, we also need to remember scholars tell us the impetus for this section of Matthew's Gospel was an attempt to motivate and encourage a community that was losing heart. Early Christians had believed Jesus was returning within their lifetime, and when it started to seem obvious that wasn't going happen, the members of that community began to think God had abandoned them, or they had been duped, and were even beginning to give up. There were feelings of hopelessness; if Jesus wasn't returning soon, then why live the way he exemplified, why not just give up and do what everyone else was doing. Scholars tell us the author of Matthew's Gospel was trying to remind the disheartened that even if things weren't happening they way they wanted, that didn't mean Christ wouldn't return, so they needed to hang in there, to keep doing what they could, so that the world would see Christ's glory, his kingdom, even in the simple act of noticing the person most others pass by. For just the act of acknowledging another human being can mean the difference between a heavenly experience or the hell of being ignored.

As we come to the end of another Church Year, and near the end of another calendar year, it is a good time to remember that no matter how we see this year: whether it is one that fills us with anxiety, or hope; if we are feeling the weight of loss or fear of changes, if we are feeling frustrated over events we wish we had more influence over, if we are excited or dispirited, it is good to hear the words of the scriptures assure us that in the end, we are not the ones responsible for the final judgment of all things; that is God's burden to bear, and God responds to this responsibility by making Jesus our king, which means his kingdom will probably look more like foot washing than jet setting, for he showed us compassion is his power, and he will overturn our way of doing things, and that is good news. Good news that can be the encouragement we might be needing today to keep loving as Jesus taught us, to keep a watchful eye for the blessings and wonders around us, for the Presence of God in unexpected places, and to keep moving toward the kingdom of God's love, so that the world will know it when it when our king comes again.