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A Wise Reign  
John 18:33-37

*At the National Spelling Bee in Washington, D.C., some years ago, a little eleven-year-old girl by the name of Rosalie Elliott made it to the fourth round. She was the state champion of South Carolina and many from her home state were there to cheer her on. But then she was asked to spell the word "avowal" and a real controversy developed. You see, she spoke softly and in her southern accent, the judges couldn't understand her. Did she say "a" or "e" as the next-to-the last letter in the word? And a great discussion ensued and the judges couldn't decide. For several minutes they listened to tape recorded playbacks. Was it an "a" or an "e" that she said? But they just couldn't make it out. Finally, Chief Judge John Lloyd put the question to the only person who knew...Rosalie herself--"Was the next-to-the-last letter an 'a' or an 'e'?" he asked. And by that time, Rosalie knew the correct answer, for everyone all around her was saying it. But you know what? Without even hesitating a moment, she said to the judge, "I'm sorry, sir, but I misspelled the word. I said 'e' and the correct letter is 'a.'" and with that, she stepped down off of the platform and walked across the stage and down the steps, and she disqualified herself from the National Spelling Bee in Washington, D.C.! (Norman Neaves).*

Today is reign of Christ Sunday, the last Sunday of the church year. Next Sunday, December 2<sup>nd</sup>, is the First Sunday of advent and the beginning of a new church calendar. So you may be asking, what is reign of Christ Sunday? This Sunday in the liturgical calendar is when we celebrate the enthronement of Christ and our own theology. Today is that time each year when you and I ask ourselves whether Jesus is truly the Lord of our lives or not.

The back story for this day is the dialogue between Jesus and Pilate, our lesson for the morning. Much of what they speak about has to do with telling the truth. In the final verse of the chapter--not included in our scripture today--Pilate asks Jesus, "What is truth?" Our lesson from John gives rise to the opening illustration of Rosalie Elliott, who proved to be an admirable truth teller in the face of genuine pressure.

Our Gospel reading is in the shadow of Good Friday, and it is in this famous encounter between Pilate and Jesus where we read Pilate's question to Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Today's Old Testament lection--which we did not read--is from 2 Samuel and contains the dying words of Israel's greatest king, David. So we have scriptures on this day from a heavenly king and an earthly king.

In Jesus' reply to Pilate, he says that his kingship is unlike anything governor Pilate knows. "My kingdom is not from this world," says Jesus. "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." After that exchange, Pilate asks Jesus if he is a king. By way of reply, Jesus says, "...for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs

to the truth listens to my voice." After our passage closes, Verse 38 gives Pilate's haunting, final question to the condemned prisoner: "What is truth?" Jesus does not provide a reply and is led away to receive his death sentence.

Pilate's question must be our question, of course. As we attempt to answer that question, we may be led to ask a series of other questions: "Who is this Jesus? What do we say and believe about Jesus? What is the truth of Jesus for our own lives?" (Kathryn Matthews Huey, "A Wise Reign"). The theologian, Emilie Townes, who once spoke from this pulpit, says that God "asks us to look deeply into who we are and what we have become, and to try to live into what we can and should be."

As I look at the John passage, I want to speak my own truth—in a very candid and straight forward fashion this morning. I want to address two situations that have troubled me greatly. Please do not construe these observations in political terms, because to me they are decidedly not. In my mind and heart, each of them transcends our government. Because of that, I view both of these situations as moral and ethical crises of prime importance.

The first concerns the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, the American journalist who was killed when he entered the Saudi Arabian Consulate in Istanbul in early October. While there have been many questions surrounding Mr. Khashoggi's murder, what is not disputed is that he was a highly respected reporter for *the Washington Post*, who wrote articles critical of the Saudi royal family. When Jamal Khashoggi went to the Saudi Consulate to pick up papers for his upcoming wedding, his fiancée waited outside. It has been established that as soon as he entered the consulate, Mr. Khashoggi was seized, tortured, murdered, and his body dismembered. In a statement from the Central Intelligence Agency, that organization has concluded that Mr. Khashoggi was killed on orders from the Saudi Arabian Crown Prince, Mohammed Bin Salmon, also known as "MBS." In his response to the murder, the President has said that regardless of the circumstances of the killing, we do not want any harm to come to the longstanding financial partnership between the United States and Saudi Arabia.

The killing of Jamal Khashoggi, a United States citizen, has been described as "butchery." Many possible responses by our country have been suggested: from sanctions to breaking off of diplomatic relations to sending an envoy to speak with MBS's father, the King. The question I am left with is this: What is the value of a human life?

That is also the question that haunts me with regard to the second issue: the caravan from Central America that is slowly making its way to the southwestern border of the United States. While it has been described as "an invasion," it would appear that this rag-tag group of exhausted, scared and hungry people—many of them parents, children and unaccompanied minors-- is a good deal less than that. Because the earliest refugees were desperate to leave the persecution, violence and poverty of their homeland, they began their long walk out of San Pedro Sula, Honduras, on October 12th. A month later, the 5,000- member caravan reached the Mexican capital. The immigrants have traveled together because of safety concerns—as they can easily become rape or kidnapping victims. Despite the calls of the administration to stay in place, still the refugees come—totaling now over 97,000 in 2018—nearly a 2,000% increase from ten years ago (Maya Rhodan, "Give Me Shelter," *Time*, Nov. 26—Dec. 3, 2018).

On October 16th, the Commander-In-Chief ordered 7,000 active duty troops to defend border communities from the caravan. Without training or proper equipment, the army's 104th engineering division out of Ft. Hood, is now welding razor wire to the top of the twenty-foot border fence in downtown Nogales, Arizona. This addition has depressed the local residents who say it makes them feel like they are living in a prison. There is little for most troops to do, however, while they remain away from their families during the holidays. Meanwhile, the cost of this deployment continues to mount and is estimated to be more than \$220 million (W. J. Hennigan, "The Long Walk," Time. Nov. 26—Dec. 3, 2018).

Today's scripture is a hard one to preach on, and it is even harder to live out. Perhaps you do not share my concerns about both of these situations, but nevertheless the question remains: how are we as Christians to respond? Yes, we can strive to be truth tellers, like little Rosalie Elliott. Certainly we can contact our elected representatives in Congress. And to be sure, you and I can pray. In the case of the caravan, there are addresses of organizations where clothing and food stuffs and money may be sent.

In the past several weeks, I have struggled about whether or not I needed to send myself. I spoke with a few friends with whom I am involved in a group called Dignity for All. I told them I really wanted to go to the border to be part of a ministry of presence there. We UCC's are a people of "extravagant welcome." That is really what I wanted to do—to extend an open and affirming hand to these incoming brothers and sisters; and so I researched that possibility. And yes, there is an urgent need for Spanish-speaking clergy and lawyers and translators who can counsel and assist applicants for asylum. There is also a need for others to serve in guest houses and hostels to prepare these refugees room, in this season of the Christ Child. There are LGBTQ organizations operating at the border hoping to ease the fear and terror on the part of those who have fled for their lives with only the clothes on their backs.

The reality of the situation on the ground is supremely difficult. And there is a host of dilemmas to try to solve. Where do you go to make the most difference? What about practicality? If you fly to El Paso or any cities on the border, you are on your own. How sensible is it to navigate a rented vehicle in a strange city already crowded with refugees and first responders? As a non-Spanish speaker, is showing up honestly more of a hindrance than a help? And what about my first responsibility—which is to you good people and my family in this Advent Season? So after weighing all of the alternatives, I prayerfully decided that I cannot physically leave Maine for the border at this time; but still I am torn. And that is the way it often is—a line of demarcation between the head and the heart.

Once again I am left with the thought that I lifted up at the beginning of the sermon: God "asks us to look deeply into who we are and what we have become, and to try to live into what we can and should be" (Townes). May God bless us all--individually and collectively--as we seek to find the Kingdom of Jesus that is not of this world and his truth that is out of this world!

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