

Sermon Bytes: "A King For This Hour" by Debbie Thomas November 20, 2016
Rev. Bill McAuslan, Crossroads United Church

Today I am going to do something that I rarely do. Instead of preaching a sermon that I have written today, I am going to read excerpts from a letter by a black American Christian writer from San Francisco by the name of Debbie Thomas. I do so for two reasons. One, it puts into perspective the events of the past few months in the lives of our neighbours to the south, which is already affecting the whole world in a very negative way, and also it offers us the unique perspective as people of faith on this day in our Christian calendar which we call the Reign of Christ.

A King for this Hour, by Debbie Thomas. Posted 13 November 2016 For Sunday November 20, 2016. Lectionary Readings (Revised Common Lectionary, Year C)

The day after the U.S election, my husband, an emergency room physician, treated an unprecedented number of panic attacks during his eight-hour shift. The patients were all racial minorities and/or women. Around the country, reports of hate crimes have multiplied so much so that all major news organizations have called on the President-Elect to condemn racist, sexist, misogyny and homophobia rants and actions quickly and without qualification. At the time of this writing, he has remained silent.

I am shaken to the core. Sure, I've been disappointed by election results before, but never have I felt so betrayed. I feel as if a tidal wave of hatred has washed over the people I love. I feel as if my country has just shown my brown-skinned body the door. At the same time, I'm aware that I enjoy a great deal of privilege, relative to other people now quaking at the prospect of a Trump presidency. I am a U.S citizen, I live in a progressive part of the country, I'm economically secure, and my religious and sexual identities place me squarely within the majority. It's hard to write in a moment like this. Hard to believe that words matter, hard to place faith in flimsy sentences on a screen. All I want to do right now is act, move, hide, fight, run. Why waste time on words and stories? And yet, what seems clearer by the day is that America has just suffered an epic failure in storytelling. Millions of us — specifically, millions who profess faith in Jesus Christ — have given ourselves over to the wrong story. A comic book story of return to past greatness. A story of conquest. A story of victory at any cost.

In the church - This week, the Church celebrates "Reign of Christ" Sunday. It's a hinge week between the liturgical seasons of Ordinary Time and Advent, a single Sunday when we pause to reflect on the meaning of the Lordship of Christ in our world and in our lives still a novice when it comes to the nuances of the liturgical calendar, when I turned to the lectionary this week, I expected to find passages that sound, well, regal. Something glorious from the Book of Revelation, perhaps, about Jesus on his heavenly throne, decked out in fancy robes and a jeweled crown. Or maybe something grand and prophetic from Isaiah: "A son will be given to us, and the government will rest upon his shoulders." Or at least a shiny moment from one of the Gospels: Jesus transfigured on the mountaintop. Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus emerging from the waters of baptism, heaven thundering in his ears.

But no. I found none of those. What I found was a cross — on a garbage dump outside the ancient city of Jerusalem. A crowd of mockers spewing hatred. A man hanging between thieves, derision in his ears, yet still speaking blessing and promise to one less fortunate. Can we pause for a moment and contemplate the paradox? This is our king. This is our king. If there is any moment in the Christian calendar that must smack all smugness out of me — all arrogance, all hostility, all scorn — surely this one has to be it. Our king - a dead man walking. His chosen path to glory - a cross.

If paradise was anywhere, it was with him only and exactly where his oppressors left him to die. Today. With Me. Paradise. What does it mean in this time and place to honor Christ? What does the cross offer us by way of example, warning, and benediction? What story can we write that will echo our king's?

As I sit with this week's lectionary passages, what strikes me most is what I don't see: I see no path to glory that sidesteps humility, surrender, and sacrificial love. I see no permission to secure my prosperity at the expense of another's suffering. I see no tolerance for the belief that holy ends justify corrupt means. I see no evidence that truth-telling is optional. I see no kingdom which favors the contemptuous over the broken-hearted. And I see no church that thrives when it aligns itself with brute power.

Where does this leave us? Well for one thing it leaves us with a king who makes us uncomfortable.

During this time when millions of American voters decided to "Make America Great Again," as a Christian — as a person of faith, I am wondering what it means to bend the knee to a king who exchanged his crown for a cross. As I engage in strained conversation with Christians who voted differently than I did, I am struggling to honor a sovereign who spoke words of blessing even in his darkest hour. As I hear people calling for a quick return to forgiveness and unity, I am remembering that grace in the Crucified One's kingdom is neither easy nor cheap; it cost the king his life.

When I'm faced with those who tell me to make peace at all costs, I'm trying to hang on to the fact that Jesus died because he made no peace with oppression. When I'm tempted to couch either denial or apathy in some version of "Calm down; God's in control," I'm reminded that Jesus' kingdom is incarnational through and through; it's a cop-out to expect God to act when I will not.

Even as Jesus hung on the cross, he spoke hope to a thief who needed solace. He hung in the gap between one man's derision and another's hunger, absorbing both into his broken body. This is our king.

My prayer for this hard season in America's history is that we will find ways to walk as Jesus walked — to spend ourselves for love of the Other. To listen, to protect, to endure, and to bless.

In my own life right now, I am strengthened by the love of my friends, and by the fierceness with which people of faith are rallying to shield the vulnerable from terror and harm. The truth is, the Church has always proven itself in times of peril. Peril brings forth prophets. It lights holy fires. It teaches us the radical nature of love.

After this Reign of Christ Sunday, we will enter into Advent, a season of waiting, longing, and listening.

Holding firm to our vision of a better kingdom, we will walk into the expectant darkness, waiting for the light to dawn, and straining to hear the first cries of new life. Yes, there are reasons for fear right now. Reasons for anger, reasons for grief.

But we are not a people bereft of hope. We are not abandoned. As we worship here in the hour of in-between: between the Ordinary and the Advent of the incarnation of God - the one who comes, Emmanuel – God with us.