

THE REIGN OF CHRIST – November 21, 2021
Reflections on the Texts – *Green Blades Rising* newsletter
Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14; Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37

Jesus' encounter with Pontius Pilate here reminds me of something Yale campus pastor William Sloan Coffin once said, "*Truth is above harmony*. Those who fear disorder more than injustice invariably produce more of both." The truths of Jesus – his confusing parables, his welcome of unclean people, his care for the poor and marginalized, his turning over the tables of the moneychangers at the temple – all of these truths were difficult to handle. In some ways they produced disharmony – certainly for the religious authorities and eventually jeopardizing his personal safety. And yet *Jesus was willing to risk this disharmony in order to bear witness to the truth* – not simply a truth about people who were being neglected or a truth about the injustices of the powerful – but also the truth about God, that God's justice, God's love will prevail in the end. As we reflect on the reign of Christ in a world impacted by climate change and a pandemic, polarization and skepticism, he reminds us that *truth* is at the center of his purpose. This is why I was born, he says, this is why I came, "*to bear witness to the truth*." And the truth of Christ rises above the apparent harmony or disharmony that continues to characterize our lives today.

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to hear Lisa Harper from Washington DC speak about the concept of *shalom*, and its implications for public policy and our life together. She unpacked the concept of shalom with three other words from Genesis. First was the word *good* – which God announces of creation at the beginning, it was *very good* – it was overflowing, abundantly, forcefully good, she said. And goodness here was not that good resided in a thing itself, but in Hebrew *the good existed between things*; the *relationships* between all parts of creation are very good, God says, working together holistically to bless the whole creation. We kept that in mind with the second and third terms she described – *image of God* and *dominion*. Being created in the image, or literally the *ikon*, of God, she said means humans are created to be *markers of where God rules*, in contrast to where other rulers oppress. We are given dominion in the same breath as we are made in the image of God. And that word dominion in Hebrew did not mean not governmental rule, not obliteration or "treading down," but *tending the good*, maintaining *the wellness of those relationships* between things. I used to dislike that word dominion, but Lisa Harper helped deepen its meaning for me. Dominion was not only like stewardship but it meant *exercising agency in God's image* – and every human being is created to do so, she said. To be human is to exercise dominion, agency that reflects God's image. But the problem is – and here's the connection with the intersection of the climate crisis and inequity – that poverty and oppression shrink the capacity of some people to exercise their agency, their dominion, to lead, to create, to dream and pursue that dream, she said. *Poverty and oppression minimize the image of God on earth*, she said, the capacity for people to live to their full potential, to exercise agency as bearers of God's image. We see it in racial injustices, in the refugee crisis where people risk personal disharmony to flee oppression, and in some of the response in our own country to it that is stirring up xenophobia, fear of the other. But *when shalom is absent*, Lisa Harper asked us, how can we as people of faith *push* policy leaders to honor the image of God?

The word *dominion* occurs in our first two readings. Daniel says dominion belongs to the Son of Man who becomes God's agent, but in order to get the full effect of the contrast, we looked at the verses right before this. There, Daniel describes a vision of four beasts that arise out of the sea. These aren't fantasies but caricatures of military superpowers of his day, which

dominated everyone with violence and like a political cartoonist, he says *they were beastly*. But now in these verses, instead of seeing another beast, he sees “one like a human being” – it is to this one God gives *everlasting dominion*. This is good news for the people in Daniel’s day and at the time of the Book of Revelation, when God’s people were also being oppressed – that with the Son of Man, with the coming of Jesus Christ, it was no longer the same story of beastly rulers but *finally a humane one*, finally one truly in God’s image, a just and compassionate ruler, *a reconciler of the goodness of relationships*.

Some describe the prophetic role of God’s people as *speaking truth to power*. Like Nathan confronting King David with his sin, or Moses telling Pharaoh, “Let my people go,” or Rosa Parks refusing to move from her spot on the bus, speaking truth to power is *pushes* the powers that be with an *alternative reality* – of a justice and an equality and a compassion that may not be visible now but is rooted in God’s intentions. Yet at the same time this prophetic tradition is *speaking truth to the powerless*, affirming that God’s reality includes them as valued participants. It is the voice of the good shepherd, who welcomes us in love and calls us to new life, who enables us to participate in his dominion.

But as Pilate is finding himself pushed by Jesus and by the crowd, the sad truth they reveal is that rather than let ourselves be guided by God’s reality, we often end up listening more to *other voices*. By the end of the debate, Pilate has washed his hands of Jesus’ death and the chief priests have declared they have no king but the emperor. But the story isn’t over – God’s reality has the last word. In the resurrection the way, truth, and life of Jesus is *vindicated*, how he confronted the powers of this world and valued the powerless. So, looking back before his death and resurrection, as Jesus stands trial here, it is really he who is *putting his audience on trial*, and that includes *us*. How far have we bought into the kingdoms of this world that oppress others, including the earth and sea and all their creatures? When have we washed our hands of responsibility at the expense of the innocent one who suffers in our midst?

In a time when we may still question what truth is, may we remember that in Jesus *God’s truth questions us*. Where is the image of God being diminished? Where is shalom absent? How can we who are made in God’s image become markers of where Christ reigns? What truth to the powerful are we willing to risk speaking? What truth to the powerless of the earth are we willing to embody in our solidarity and collaboration? When the disharmony in our lives or in the world may make it hard for us to handle the truth, may we remember the one in whose hands we remain, now and forever. “I may not know the whole truth,” I recall a seminary president once saying, “but I know the one who is the truth.” Thanks be to God. Amen.

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