



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"Poles Apart" - Hope Restored Sermon Series

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Mark 15:1-5: As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led Him away, and handed Him over to Pilate. 2 Pilate asked Him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" He answered him, "You say so." 3 Then the chief priests accused Him of many things. 4 Pilate asked Him again, "Have You no answer? See how many charges they bring against You." 5 But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

John 18:33-38: 33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" 34 Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about Me?" 35 Pilate 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?" 36 Jesus 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." 37 Pilate 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." 38 Pilate asked Him, "What is truth?"

I remember many years ago as a brand new missionary to Thailand, my wife and I went on a date night to a movie. Since we barely spoke Thai we were very fortunate to live near a theater that showed western movies in English

As we sat there with our popcorn waiting for the show to begin a solemn tune began to play over the sound system. Then suddenly everyone jumped up. Now as Americans, when anyone jumps up in a theater very quickly the first thing you think of is 'we need to get out of here! There is going to be a problem.'

But just then on the movie screen, a montage of the Thai king started to roll. We then looked at the people wondering what to do. So we got up looking, I'm sure, a bit awkward and clueless. As we watched this montage showing the various things the king did for the people of Thailand with this beautiful song playing in the background,

I began to see why this man, this king meant so much to so many.

He's deceased now, but at that time to say the Thai people loved their king would be a gross understatement. He was widely seen as a wise, kind and caring father of their nation, as well as the representation of the best of who they were, the best of their Thai values.

As an American, it can be hard to imagine living in a kingdom even though as Christians, that's exactly where we live: In the kingdom of God with Jesus as our King. In fact, as you will see the issue of Him being King, is the issue that convicted Him to death on the cross.

Yet if we are honest, it is not easily grasped to have Jesus as King. In fact, I wonder if sometimes we are poles apart from its meaning. So today I want to focus on what does it mean to have Jesus as king?

As I mentioned a few moments ago, this scene takes place after Jesus was arrested and brought before the High Priest and The Sanhedrin, which was a council of Jewish religious leaders.

A few weeks ago we saw that in this interrogation Jesus, for the most part, remained quiet despite a barrage of false accusations. That is until He was directly asked if He is the Christ, the Messianic King, the Son of the Living God, to which He makes it most clear: "I am." With this, the Jewish council goes bananas and they and the temple guards begin to spit on and beat Jesus. Our passages today picks up from that point. Because Jesus' claim is considered a transgression worthy of execution they take Him to the guy who can actually carry out a death sentence, namely Pontius Pilate, the chief Roman Official in Judea at the time.

From several historical sources outside the Bible, we know that Pilate's administration was marked by bribes, savagery, and frequent executions without trial. One time he even took money from the Jewish temple treasury. In Luke 13 we read that he once killed Jewish worshippers within the temple as they were making sacrificial offerings. So if I'm on the Sanhedrin and I want to get somebody bumped off, I'm thinking this is the perfect guy we want to do our dirty work.

In the gospel of Luke's retelling of this moment, we see some of the accusations they tell to Pilate about Jesus. Luke 23:2: *"We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king."* As you will see, it's that "claiming to be King" language that Pilate particularly focuses in on.

Keep in mind here that this is all taking place during Passover week when there are an extra 200,000 people or so in the city of Jerusalem. For an entire week, they are celebrating their version of Independence Day. As you can imagine, Jewish hopes and conversations and talk for a future deliverance from their current problems likely ran high during this season.

Thus, for Pilate and Rome such a patriotic week with a mass of people, mixed with some guy claiming to be King, could create a lot of problems; a problem whose only solution is but one thing, crucifixion.

The Sanhedrin and all those Jewish leaders mentioned in our verses today know that full well. They know the fear and paranoia by Roman Leadership about potential Jewish uprisings and I think this is exactly why they take Jesus to Pilate at this time.

As I said, of all the many accusations they make about Jesus, Pilate zeros in on the issue of Jesus being a King and this is where for me it gets a little interesting.

In Mark 15:2 Pilate asked Jesus, *"Are You the King of the Jews?"* And Jesus' answer is tough to translate and interpret in English. In some Bible translations it says Jesus answered, *"You say so."* So is that a definitive 'yes'? A sort of 'yes'? What exactly is that?

Almost all the scholars I read on this passage agree that while the answer is affirmative in substance, it seems somewhat

qualified or guarded, almost a bit cryptic. So why say it like that? Why not just put it straight up to Pilate as He did with the Sanhedrin when Jesus was asked if He was the Christ (the whole definitive 'I am' thing). Scholars agree that Jesus is likely a bit guarded in his language here because Pilate's concept of what it means to be king and what Jesus means by it is poles apart.

Think about it, Pilate knew only one kind of kingship his whole life as a Roman citizen: The kind of kingship that was to be feared. The kind of kingship that was power hungry. The kind of kingship that was obtained and maintained by political conniving, intrigue and brutal force. That is the kind of kingship Pilate understood.

The category of king who would say things like: 'turn the other cheek', 'pray for those who persecute you' or 'those who live by the sword will die by the sword,' that category of King probably never existed in Pilate's mind and I believe Jesus knew that and so He was careful not to let Pilate think He was like any other king he heard of.

This is why perhaps Jesus adds something to the conversation as recorded in the Gospel of John. Right after Pilate's question of, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' John 18:36-37 tells us that Jesus said, *"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."*

In other words, 'Pilate, My kingdom is nothing like what you think of as Kingdom. If My kingdom, My way of reigning was like this world, then you would see violence, but it is nothing like this world.'

Jesus then clarifies it further by saying, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason, I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to Me." I find that fascinating because this kind of answer is something far different than what Pilate would have seen or experienced from any other Roman or foreign king.

The sense is clear; Jesus' kingship has a different origin, which means it has a very different goal and was of a vastly different character from this world's kingdoms. He wasn't after domination by brute force. He didn't use political intrigue to bring about His ends. Instead, He invited people to experience, understand and know the truth of God through His wisdom and His actions. He invited them to experience the deepest truths of human reality and existence. And physical force is of little use to that kind of end.

Unfortunately, Pilate by this point in his life is so cynical he just responds with, 'What is truth?'

Now I should point out when Jesus says, "*My kingdom is not from this world,*" it does not mean 'My kingdom is in some far, far away place and My goal

is to get everyone here into that place way over there."

No, His ministry is all about getting that kingdom into this world. His kingdom may not be *from* this world, but it is *fully for* this world. Jesus' plan is not simply to provide some sort of Spiritual Escape Route from this ugly world, but His plan is to provide a means, through which, the purposes, power, values, and character and truth of the Kingdom of God are brought to bear, in real and concrete terms, on the people and cultures and creation of this world so as to transform it into what God intended. That's what Jesus wanted Pilate and the world to understand.

Think about it, Jesus is no threat to anybody if He is just about some far off place in the clouds. However, He is a threat because He was all about the here and now.

Perhaps this all may sound like splendid and heady theology, but how does that affect me, and the way I live, here and now? Here is where I want to pause and drill down on a few important things.

With all this King talk it got me thinking, do I as Joe American truly grasp the concept of what it means to have Jesus as my King? We sing songs like crazy about God as king. In fact, our service today is full of such wonderful songs, but what does all that imply in practical ways for our lives?

Here is where living in a country where there was a real

king helped me a bit to understand its implications. Again I'm *not* talking about the kind of Royal that ends up on the cover of the National Inquirer or on Entertainment Tonight. I'm not talking celebrity; I'm talking noble dignity. I'm talking about a person, who out of their wisdom, honor, compassion, and leadership could literally save people from dying and change the welfare of his people.

As a side note, interestingly the Thai King was also the only king ever to have been born in the United States. He was born in Boston while his father was studying Public health at Harvard Medical School.

Now as I said, the king was highly revered by the Thai people. In every house I visited, in every business, I went to, in every taxi I sat in, on every bus I ever boarded I always saw a picture of the king. Although the Thai king was by no means perfect and was not above criticism, he did many things to improve the lives of Thai people.

For example, He sponsored thousands of royal projects aimed at alleviating poverty. He pioneered and patented cloud-seeding technologies that brought rain over drought-stricken farmlands. He is also helped to quell opium growing among hill tribes by introducing alternative farming opportunities.

For these and many other reasons, he was widely seen as a wise, kind and caring father of their nation and a representation of the best of Thai society and what Thailand stood for.

It was crucial to have someone like that because the government of Thailand has for decades struggled with corruption, but it was the king who was to stand above all of that. He was the one who's going to provide glory, honor, and dignity to a nation that seemed so rife with sin, struggle, poverty, and corruption. Sounds almost a bit biblical, doesn't it?

Now although by law he didn't have direct power to make laws or sway elections and things of that nature, he still would wisely and skillfully step into the socio-political arena when the government became abusive. One such instance happened just two weeks before my family and I moved there to become missionaries.

It was 1992 and as often happens in Thai elections someone became Prime Minister who was not even elected by the people! The government appointed a general to be Prime Minister and, of course, the people protested this travesty of democracy, but this time it was particularly bloody.

Up to 200,000 people demonstrated in central Bangkok during the protests. The military crackdown resulted in 3,500 arrests. There were hundreds of injuries, 52 officially confirmed deaths and about 1,700 people labeled as 'missing.' Many of those arrested allegedly experienced torture. It was a mess.

As this played out on TV the king summoned the two generals who headed the two warring

factions to his palace. Now when you enter to see the king on an official visit you don't just walk in and say to the king 'hey how's it going?' These men, these very, very powerful men, had to crawl several feet as they approached him.

(The congregation was showed a picture of the King and the generals at his feet)

And when you are before this king in this kind of very formal manner your first act is not to speak. It is to listen and listen they did.

In his words to them, you will hear that the king knew the country didn't exist for him or for these leaders, but for the good of the people. See if his words have any relevance to our cultural situation today.

In his words to the men, the king said this: "The Nation belongs to everyone, not to one or two specific people. The problems exist (in our country) because we don't talk to each other and resolve them together..."

People can lose their minds when they resort to violence. Eventually, they don't know why they fight each other or even the problems they need to resolve. They merely know that they must overcome each other and they must be the only winner. This in no way leads to real victory, but only danger. There will only be losers, only losers. Those who confront each other will all be the losers and the loser of the losers will be the Nation... For what purpose are you telling

yourself that you're 'the winner' when you end up standing upon ruins and debris?"

Do you hear wisdom there? Do you see how, like Jesus, this king tried to lead these men to a better place through the truth, lead them by the substance of something undeniably greater and more noble? Can you also hear how he was speaking with real authority without having to be an authoritarian?

How did this all turn out? After this little speech, the two generals were then dismissed and they slowly made their way out of the room. And then, without one more shot fired, without one more protest, without one more angry word ever shouted among the people, the fighting ceased, the standoff ended and peace and hope were restored to the people.

That scene and those words cemented the king's legacy as the great and noble father of Thailand. As one Thai writer expressed, 'It made the Thais believe that when things were spiraling into chaos, there was someone who could bring peace and order to our lives.' Do such qualities sound familiar to another King we all know?

So why do I share this story? I share it because it challenges me in many ways as an American Christian. For example, it got me thinking do I see *King Jesus* as having *that kind* of authority in my life? Not just "an authority," but THE Authority that has the final word? Or do I see His words in many cases as optional?

And if I do see them as optional, does it cut away at peace and hope that can be restored through Christians in my culture today? Think about it, if those generals saw the Thai king's words as optional the outcome would have been far more ugly, wouldn't it? Did you ever think about how much of hope for our culture rides, not on the victory of political ideologies, but on *Christians* living obediently to the words of our King?

When the King of Thailand told the generals this needs to end, they didn't try to debate it. No one responded with, 'You know, let me think about that and I'll get back to you.' Or even the more pseudo-spiritual, 'let me pray about it first.' No, they simply obeyed the word of the king and the violence ended immediately and hope was restored.

So my question is, when you encounter the Scriptures, particularly the words of Jesus, how do you hold them? Are they something like leather seats in a new car, a nice option if you're into it? Or do His words carry the weight and the gravitas of a Divine King behind it? Do we, like Pilate, have a view of Kingship that is sometimes poles apart from really grasping the King that Jesus truly is? Do we like Pilate use the right nomenclature (like in our praise songs and prayers), but are poles apart in understanding the *implications* of that authority?

For example, in my heart of hearts, is what Jesus says about dealing with enemies often poles

apart from what I actually think, say, or do in the real world? In my heart of hearts, is what Jesus says about blessing those who hate us often poles apart from the way I actually live? In our heart of hearts, is what Jesus says about taking care of the marginal, the stranger, the foreigner, or making disciples, etc. often poles apart from what actually happens in my life? And are His words on the tough issues of our society, words that perhaps even contradict our preferred political ideologies, words we commit to? Or are they words we find optional?

Simply put, are we on the same page or poles apart from King Jesus? What is the cost to our communities, to our witness as Christians, to our kingdom impact if we are indeed poles apart from the King?

Let me share one more story about living in a kingdom. A few years into our time in Thailand my family and I were living in a province way up north. We heard news that the favorite princess of the people was going to come visit our small town. She was perhaps second only to her father as to what she did for the poor of her land. Thus, the people really adored her.

So I asked my then 6-year-old daughter if she wanted to see a real princess and of course she said yes! We waited by the roadside with many other Thai people hoping to get a glimpse of their beloved Thai princess. Finally as her car came down that street all the people immediately dropped to their knees - except me!

Now I have to tell you, that as an American, I really struggled with that. Seriously I was deeply conflicted. I was really thinking, "*Hey, I'm an American. I don't bow before anybody.*"

Looking back at it I never realized how much of my American ethos and values literally and physically stiffened my legs!

It's amazing how we don't know how much culture shapes us until the deep values of that culture are challenged. It gets me thinking, how much of our American or political paradigms infuse, shape, and perhaps even dictate our response to the King Of Kings?

Anyway, after getting a stern look from one of the military guys (who is holding an M-16) I thought it was in my best interest to swallow my American pride and got down on my knees.

What was interesting to experience, was when the car door opened and just the foot and the leg of the princess emerged, the entire crowd *gasped* in unison. It was like all the oxygen had just got sucked out of the immediate area.

So why I do I share that story? Does your view and experience of God the King ever leave you *breathless*?

For those of you who have studied and practiced Christian contemplation you know that contemplation is really that experience where you are wordless before God.

You are wordless because you are experiencing something so profound that there are no more words worthy to be said. The only appropriate thing is the breathless silence of awe.

One of the things that left me in awe as I reflected over these passages we read today was something I never really caught before. In our story today Jesus, the Creator of the Universe, stands before a cynical, jaded, brutal, and corrupt pagan man, Pontius Pilate. Yet, I realize now that the King of Kings actually attempts to evangelize Pilate, inviting him to the truth of God. I say that because He could have stayed silent before Pilate as He did before with the Sanhedrin but instead it seemed that He wanted Pilate to understand something about Him. He wanted Pilate to know the truth. He wanted this for Pilate because I believe He loved Pilate.

In other words, even then, even in that crazy moment, Jesus was still loving on this pagan man who would soon pronounce a death sentence over Him. Folks, when I consider that, when I try to grasp what is going on here, it takes my breath away.

I don't think I'm off with my speculations here because of what happens as Jesus hung in agony on the cross. Luke 23:34 tells us that in that moment Jesus says, *'Father forgive them for they know not what they do.'* In other words, *'Forgive these brutal, blind, hate-filled people who put Me here.'* What kind of love is that? What kind of grace is *that*? I literally have no words

for it! I only have but the breathless silence of awe. Do you know that kind of Royal, Kingly grace for your life today?

In response to this message we will once again sing of our King and about the amazing love He has for us. As you sing or just silently listen, I ask you to consider: Are you on the same page with that King or poles apart in some areas of your life? What may need some realignment in your life today? And if you don't know Jesus as Lord, as King, would you consider giving your life to *this kind* of King today - the kind of King that has enough love and grace for even the most brutal, corrupt, and hateful people of this world.

That is the King we worship. That is the King, the only King, which will restore hope to this broken, beaten and sinful world. Would you give your life to Him today? What is Jesus the King saying to you this morning?

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Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org
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