

Rev. Julie Belman
Bethel UMC, November 25, 2018

Revelation 1:4-8

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. ⁷Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. ⁸“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

Invitation to the Reign

I have a confession to make. A few weeks ago, I met someone while out at a social gathering and we discovered we had a mutual friend. This mutual friend is a member at Shandon Methodist, my former appointment. When they asked me how I knew our mutual acquaintance I said, very simply, “Oh, through Shandon Methodist!” and then changed the subject. Later that night, as I was talking about my day with Travis, he stopped me at this point, started laughing out loud and said, “Wait a second, you didn’t tell them you were the *pastor* at Shandon?? That changes the whole story!”

So here’s my confession: When I am with someone that I have just met and the subject of my vocation comes up, I often dance gracefully around the truth in order to avoid uncomfortable conversations where the person awkwardly tries to be on their best behavior and then I even-more awkwardly try to convince them that I am “normal.”

Unfortunately, I am speaking from experience.

Two weeks ago, in our Evangelism and Discipleship training with Rev. Dr. Cathy Jamieson, we talked about being openly Christian in the world and what that means. We discussed how and when and where (and with whom) we talk about our faith in our every days lives. Most – if not all – of us shared that we have, at times, struggled with sharing our faith outside of our church community.

We shared things like: “We do not want people to think we are one of ‘those’ Christians,” Or, “People are so quick to judge, and there are a lot of stereotypes out there about Christians that we do not want to be associated with.” Fair enough. I mean – they were preaching to the choir; I was not arguing with them.

Truth be told, I wrestled with this a lot. As polarizing opinions flood our media and social media channels, I am finding it harder and harder to find a balance between sharing something that is very real to me, while also not wanting to be stereotyped as some extreme nut job. Sometimes I find that it is just easier to have a passive voice and try to let my actions speak for themselves than to open myself up to judgement and ridicule by talking about my Christian faith.

But here is the problem with having a passive voice in today's society: Someone's voice will always be heard. It has to be. And if we let our voice be the passive voice, then we will lose out on the opportunity for *our* voice to be the one that is heard. And my friends, I think *our* voice needs to be heard.

Today is Reign of Christ Sunday. In the Christian Church, Reign of Christ is a feast; a celebration in which we honor the Christ who reigned and the Christ who still reigns in our lives today. Reign of Christ – which is also called Christ the King Sunday – is the last Sunday in the church year. A new liturgical year begins next week with the beginning of Advent and with our preparations for Jesus' birth.

So before we get swept up in the craziness of Christmas, we celebrate Christ's Reign: We pause today and give thanks for the ways that Jesus has worked in our lives this year; We celebrate a Gospel that is still very much alive and at work today. And we share that Good News with a world that so desperately needs to hear it.

This morning we heard a reading from the book of Revelation, which is the last book of the bible. While the book of Revelation is, in many ways, a book about the end of time, it is also a letter that was written to ordinary people, like us, 2,000 years ago. The author – a man named John – wrote this letter to seven Christian congregations in Asia living in distress and corruption. He offered a vision of what Christ's reign could look like in this world, and how redemptive that would be from the world that they were living in.

It was then and still is today a bold proclamation that Christ is the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end! A strong reminder that Christ can and *should* reign over all other things in our lives.

So how does Christ reign in our lives? Today is a wonderful opportunity to not only think about the ways that we are living under the reign of Christ, but also about the ways that we will respond to living under this reign, and the ways that we will share that reign with others.

I think many of us struggle with this. We do not want people to think that we are crazy, but at the same time we are growing tired of the world that we are living in. We are tired of the negativity, the violence and the stress. We are tired of struggling. We are tired of feeling

overwhelmed. We not only need God in our lives, but we also feel as though the world needs God. We want to share God's hope, peace, joy and love in a world that so desperately needs it, but we do not want to be judged and ridiculed along the way.

So... here is what I am starting to realize: We have a choice. We can choose to feel awkward when the subject of faith comes up, we can choose to not say anything and we can choose to let someone else's voice be heard. We can choose to air on the side of not being judged or ridiculed And we can choose to further distance ourselves from the extreme voices that are creating negative stereotypes.

Or we can choose to share our faith. Unapologetically.

The book of Revelation talks about the utopia that can be achieved if God can encompass the world that we are living in, and be part of the lives that we are leading. We need to let God into our lives so that God can encompass the world. So part of living under Christ's reign means not only allowing God to come into our midst, but also being unapologetically open to others about how God is working in our lives.

Think about the foundational core of our beliefs as Christians: We are free because of the life that Jesus led. John wrote in Revelation: *And from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness ... to him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood.*

My friends, the story of our faith is a great story to tell! We are unconditionally loved and forgiven by God. This is the Good News! We are redeemed by the living waters of baptism and sustained by bread and wine served at the table of extravagant welcome. We are never alone because God is always with us. And in those moments when God's presence is just not enough to hold us together, our community of faith stands with us. This is why we come together. This is what it means to live under Christ's reign.

It is not about extreme stereotypes, it is about grace.

It is not about polarizing viewpoints; it is about God's love.

And this is the Good News that needs to be shared with the world.

This is the Good News that God is *calling* us to share with the world!

We may not be able to control certain things that happen in our lives, and in the world around us, but we CAN control how we choose to react to them. We can decide what Christ's reign will look like in our lives. We do not have to be afraid. We can let our voices be heard. We can be confident in what we believe and we can share that belief with others. We can change the Christian stereotype.

My friends, as we move into the coming week, still on a “thanksgiving high”, I encourage you to give thanks for the ways that Christ reigns in your life. Give thanks for your faith, Give thanks for this church And give thanks for the cloud of witnesses who walk with you along your journey through life. Give thanks for the Good News that you have been called to share And for the courage and strength you will be given to share that news with others.

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. Let your life be filled with God. And do not be afraid to share that with the world. Thanks be to God! Amen.

LET US PRAY: Holy God, We come before you acknowledging you as King of our lives and inviting you to reign supreme in our world. You came preaching a kingdom of love. And yet, our world is full of hatred. You called yourself the prince of peace, and yet wars and rumors of wars are all around. You came with a promise that your kingdom would bring the wiping away of every tear, the end of suffering and heartache. We seem overwhelmed by the poverty and brokenness that surround us. You came saying that your kingdom had come near, but it seems as if your coming has been delayed and the world you described is a fantasy. So teach us, holy God, to have no king but you. Teach us to build the New Jerusalem. Teach us to establish your reign of love in all our living and doing. Make us citizens indeed of your kingdom that is not of this world. Strengthen us and empower us to be salt and light, agents of reconciliation and redemption. We give ourselves entirely to you. Have your way. Be our King. May your Kingdom come. May your kingdom come in us. May your Kingdom come through us. This we pray in the name of your son, Christ our King, Amen.