"So, Where Are You From?”

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Revelation 1:4b-8

John 18:33-38a

“So, where are you from?”

This has always been a tricky question for me to answer. Up until I was 14, my dad was a Navy nurse and my family had hopped around the East coast every three years, including some time spent on the Naval base in Cuba. Where am I from? Ugh. Next question, please.

This question used to give me anxiety. I remember when I was in the third grade, a classmate asked me that question. “So, where are you from?” Well, we had just moved to Summerville, SC from Newport News, so maybe I was from Virginia? I told my classmate. She said, “Well, where were you born?” Well, Washington, D.C., but that’s just because that’s where the Army hospital was. I’ve never considered myself to be from D.C. But I’m certainly not from South Carolina.

When we moved back to the States after our time in Cuba, explaining where I was from got even more complicated. When my mom registered me at the local middle school in Durham, they automatically put me in remedial English and advanced Spanish even though we tried to explain to them that we weren’t *actually* Cuban.

We were a family without a hometown. Everything would be so much simpler, if we had an easy answer to the question, “where are you from?” So, I started spending time thinking about which places felt most like home to me.

For me, it was Ohio. Ohio was where my grandparents lived, and five of their six children, and all of their children. We went to Ohio every time my dad had leave and it was always like a homecoming. I had three cousins my age, and we ran wild when I was there, riding bikes to the Dairy Isle to get milkshakes, to the playground to ride the merry-go-round until we were sick, and up and down the one street that was paved with bricks that made your bones rattle. I knew every street of Belle Center, Ohio, — better than any of the places we’d actually lived. If home is where the heart is, then my home was definitely in Ohio.

So I started to tell people that I was from Ohio. “Where are you from?” That’s easy! Ohio! That’s my home state. That’s where I’m from. To this day, my grandma loves to tell complete strangers about how I used to say that I was homesick for Ohio, even though I had never lived there. As someone who had spent her entire life in the state of Ohio, she couldn’t understand my no-hometown dilemma.

Being able to explain where you are from is important for a person’s identity. It’s one of the first points of connection that we make when we meet a new person. It’s often our go-to conversation started. Asking a person where they are from is often the way we begin to form opinions about someone. Oh, you’re from Michigan? It was nice to meet you. Good-bye.

“Where are you from?” is the big question on Christ the King Sunday. In today’s Gospel text, Pilate implicitly asks Jesus this question, trying to get at who exactly this Jesus-person is. Who is he, and why do his people want him dead? He begins to question Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Are you a King? And if you are a king, where exactly is your kingdom? For Pilate, this is all about politics, and he needs an answer from Jesus.

Jesus, never one to take the easy way out, answers Pilate’s questions with questions of his own, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” Pilate replies with even more questions. We’re watching a game of 20 questions and holding our breath to see who will lose.

John’s account of Jesus before Pilate is unique to the other gospels in that Jesus interacts way more with Pilate in this Gospel than he does in the other ones. In the Synoptic Gospels, Pilate asks, “Are you King of the Jews” and Jesus responds with a perhaps-terse, “You say so.” And that is that. Jesus is silent from then on. In the Gospel of John Jesus is far more loquacious. We have a back and forth between Jesus and Pilate that is far more elaborate than the other portrayals.

Why is this? Why does John’s Jesus elaborate on where his kingdom is from and what it means to be a part of it?

For John, Jesus is the Word made flesh. John tells us that in Jesus, God came down and pitched his tent among us. When Jesus tells Pilate, “My kingdom is not from this world,” he’s not talking about a location, but an origin. Jesus has come from God, not some other land or country, to be with and among us.

And who is God with us? A God who turns water into wine, who has conversations in broad daylight with divorced Samaritan women, who restores sight, feeds the hungry, and can bring the dead back to the living.

When Pilate asks Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?” if Jesus’ answer is “yes,” and his ministry among his people is evidence of Jesus’ power, then my goodness, is he a danger to the status quo that both Pilate and the high priests want to protect.

It may seem strange to have this text be our lectionary passage for the Sunday before the Advent season begins. It feels like it’s been misplaced. We probably feel it would fit in better during Holy Week. But I love that this is our text today. Because today is the last Sunday of the liturgical year — Christ the King Sunday. And this text points to the implications of proclaiming Christ to be our King.

Christ the King Sunday, or the Feast of Christ the King was first instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925 to celebrate the kingship of Christ as a way of combating the destructive forces of the age. When we think back to the state the world was in, in the aftermath of the War to End All Wars and as tensions continued to build leading up to World War II, a desire to proclaim Christ king of all, makes complete sense. Pope Pius wanted to assert that when all else seems to be failing apart around us or when political systems seem to be tools of evil but manage to win every time, even still, Christ always has been, and always will be King and Lord of all.

This is what was so dangerous for Pilate. If Jesus is Lord, then Caesar isn’t. If Jesus is Lord, then all the systems that the Roman government has put in place to make sure that the people who are oppressed continue to be oppressed and that the ones on top stay on top, those systems are meaningless and will fall.

Christ the King Sunday is a reminder to us, citizens of the Kingdom of God, that we belong to a God who is above all else, God with and for us. But that’s not where the story ends. This might mean taking a stand against policies we see in place in our nation which are contrary to the Christ’s Kingdom and to the examples Christ set during his earthly ministry. It forces us to take a step back and view our country’s decisions through the lens of Christ’s ministry and teachings. Being a citizen of the kingdom might require us to lead our lives in ways that are far different from those around us.

Eric Liddell, a famous runner and athlete depicted in the film, *Chariots of Fire*, was faced with an incredible dilemma at the Paris Olympics in 1924. Liddell was the son of Scottish missionaries, and as an athlete, he traveled around Great Britain, competing in races, but also challenging the crowds who had gathered to see him run to consider themselves in their own long race of faith, with Christ giving them the power to see their races through to the end. Liddell was conflicted by a desire to spread the Word of God to the nations and by a desire to use his God-given gift of running and to run for Great Britain. When Liddell arrived in Paris for the Olympics, he learned that the qualifying heat would be held on a Sunday.

As a devout Christian, Liddell knew that he couldn’t possibly run on the Sabbath. In the film depiction of this internal struggle, it climaxes with Liddell standing before the British Olympic Association which includes the Prince of Wales and other high-ranking officials in the British government. The committee tries to convince Liddell to change his mind. One member says to him, “…we’re appealing to your beliefs...in your country and your king. Your loyalty to them.” Another member jumps in saying, “In my day, it was king first, God after.” Liddell is adamant though, that he will not break the sabbath. He ends the discussion with a final, “God knows I love my country…but I cannot make that sacrifice.”

If Christ is the King, we are Christ’s subjects. And like all loyal subjects, we are bound to the laws and expectations of Christ the King. We are called to live our lives accordingly. This doesn’t meant that we can’t be loyal citizens to the United States or Australia or any other country in which we find ourselves. But it does mean that being a part of the Kingdom of God requires something of us.

The ministry group that I meet with twice each year, had the opportunity to sit down with songwriter David Lamotte in Montreat last year. Lamotte spoke with us about a hero narrative vs. a movement narrative in moments of change, particularly in light of the early Christian church.

He explained that the early Christian church was caught in a struggle between choosing which narrative their Christian movement would follow. If it was the hero narrative, then, like a superhero, Jesus came swooping down to earth to save everyone and all we, the bystanders, do is stand back and cheer him on. Jesus does all the work and we are merely observers and recipients of it.

But, if the early Church were to follow the movement narrative, then Jesus came to earth, not only to save it, but to start a movement, a chain reaction of love, generosity, and challenging the powers and systems in place to be sure that everyone is treated like a beloved child of God. We are called to be a part of the movement narrative. We are called to join Christ, at work in his kingdom.

Today is the last day of the liturgical year. Next Sunday, when we come to church, we will be in a new year, a new season. The paraments will be purple or blue (I’m honestly not sure which yet!), we’ll put up our Advent wreath, and we’ll start to see pops of green, red, and white, throughout our church and in our homes.

The leftovers from Thursday have been put away, and it’s so tempting to jump forward to the Advent and Christmas seasons. But today, Christ the King Sunday, we pause. We remember what the Christian narrative all points to — the waiting and anticipation of Advent, the contemplation of Lent, the passion and drama of Holy Week, the joyous celebration and “Alleluias!” of Easter, all of these point to Jesus Christ, King of Kings, Savior, and Lord of All.

It’s New Year’s Eve. With all new year celebrations comes the classic tradition of making a new year’s resolution. My challenge to you is to make a new \*liturgical\* year’s resolution to lead your life with the knowledge that Christ is King of All and then ask yourself a few questions.

How will you, in the coming liturgical year, show others that Christ is King of all? How will you work to continue (with God’s help) the hard work that we are called to do? How will you make sure that the love of God is known throughout this land and all other ones as well?

Happy Liturgical New Year’s, my friends. We’ve all got work to do.

All praise be to God.

Amen.