

Keeping Christ at the center of our hearts

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,
at the nine o'clock service, November 22, 2009: the Last Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on John 18:33-37.*

Some years ago, I was the instigator and one of the organizers of a two-week hiking trip around Israel and Palestine. I'd visited the Holy Land a couple of times before on the kind of trips where you spend a lot of time in buses. Fascinating as I found the history—past and present—of that place, I longed to do more than view the land through a bus window. I was powerfully drawn to the land itself and wanted to be *on* the land, to experience the terrain firsthand—from the sandy, rocky beaches of the Mediterranean Sea, up into the steep hills of Galilee, out to the lush valleys of farmland. I wanted to swim in the Sea of Galilee, to climb up the mountain where the Transfiguration supposedly happened, to explore the caves where Saul and David played hide-and-seek, to float in the Dead Sea. I wanted to hike up the ancient fortress of Masada at sunrise and sleep in the Negev desert under the stars.

Careful what you pray for.

I got my wish—and more. We also swam in a “life-changingly cold” pool in the upper Golan Heights, hiked through strangely tropical vines and rushing waters around Caesarea Philippi, got a baptism of sorts in the Jordan River when our kayaks overturned. We stood on a windy isolated peak in the desert where caravans had arrived from the East, bearing silks and spices, perhaps where the wise men had first seen the star. Some of us snorkeled in the Red Sea, not far from where the Israelites wandered in the wilderness.

Was this a fabulous opportunity to know in a tangible, visceral way the land of our spiritual ancestors, the land that Jesus lived and died in? Yes. But lest it sound too idyllic, too Sierra-Club-meets-the-Bible, I'd like to share some other

realities of the adventure.

Though the trip was advertised as “strenuous,” and clearly said people needed to be able to hike up to 12 miles a day carrying a pack, people of various fitness levels showed up—people from all over the country who didn't know each other. On our first day out, one person stumbled and fell backward from the weight of all the water we had to carry, and lay there on her backpack, arms and legs waving, like an overturned turtle, unable to get up. Our campsites turned out to be “primitive”—read: no “facilities,” not even running water. In the first days of our hike, people in our group would take off up the trail without looking to see if anyone behind them needed help, or if anyone was even still behind them. People would climb steep hills and rocks without giving a thought—or a hand—to help the person clambering up behind them. The group quickly collected one sprained ankle, blisters, frayed tempers, complaints about almost everything, tears, and one out-and-out shouting match. I thought of running away more than once.

We were a group of strangers—an un-holy group trying to explore the Holy Land, all just probably trying to get closer to Jesus in our own ways. Were the disciples much different when they started out? I bet not.

Somehow that long hike—its heights and its depths and surprises, and the tough terrain in between—feels to me a bit like where we are this Sunday.

This Sunday is the last Sunday in the long green season of Pentecost, which started on Pentecost Sunday, back at the end of May. This long green season—summer, fall, work, vacations or stay-cations if we were lucky, back to school, back to the fall whirlwind of activity.

In the world, wars have dragged on. The health care debate has opened up. Jobs have been lost and we've said good-bye to beloved colleagues. Some great new jobs have been found. People we love have died. Wonderful new little people have been born. Certainly—almost everywhere, including this community of St. Bartholomew's—the terrain of this year has been marked by economic struggle. Think about the terrain of your own life from the end of May until now. What has your own terrain been like?

This is the last Sunday after Pentecost. Next Sunday begins the season of Advent. This Last Sunday of Pentecost feels to me like having made it to the top of a mountain after having hiked uphill over hard terrain. Now we're standing on top of a mountain; we've made it. We stand here looking off the other side, into Advent—into what we hope may be a quieter, gentler Advent.

So it seems appropriate to me that we have this passage from John today, this brief interview between Jesus and Pilate. These 18th and 19th chapters of John are considered to be the pinnacle, the mountaintop, of John's Gospel. The arrest, trial and death of Jesus are what the whole Gospel of John has been building toward. Because it's in these events that John makes it become crystal clear who Jesus is and what his life and death were for. And the centerpiece—the top of the top—of these chapters is the trial before Pilate.

In these few sentences from John's Gospel that we hear today, Jesus is on trial before Pilate. They talk back and forth about whether Jesus is a king, specifically "King of the Jews." Pilate is incredulous and disdainful: "Are YOU the king of the Jews?" Jesus surely doesn't look much like a king at that point. Jesus tells Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world," i.e. I'm not your standard kind of king. "So you ARE a king?" Can't blame Pilate for being confused.

Today, this last Sunday after Pentecost, is sometimes called "Christ the King" Sunday. You can see why. There is a lot of "king" and "kingdom" language in our readings and in our music. There are also several references to "the

Jews" in these verses from John (and in fact the whole Gospel of John). I need to say a word about that before saying more about the king language. John's speaking of "the Jews" sounds sharp and negative to our ears. In fact, the entire Gospel of John has been called anti-Semitic. As you hear John's references to "the Jews," please keep in mind that John's community was one of several Jewish groups vying for control in the chaotic period following the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. And when we read the Gospel according to John straight through, we find that John uses the term "the Jews" to refer to those who don't accept the revelation of God in Jesus. "The Jews" are John's way of naming those who reject Jesus.

Back to "Christ the King" Sunday and the king language. That is not language that we are familiar or comfortable with. Most of us here have not had the experience of living under a king's rule. Historically, we have rejected that. It's been said that to be an American is to have a problem with authority. We don't relate to king language or concepts. But on the other hand, perhaps we don't bring to it all the baggage that those who have been subjects would.

It quickly became apparent on our hike that not everyone could keep up on the trip as it had been designed. So the leaders called a late-night campfire session and redesigned the trip. On the fly we created less strenuous options, to make it possible for all to participate in ways that were safe and meaningful for them.

As we continued on our way, I noticed that people began to look out for each other, to take care of each other. When they climbed steep rocks, the first ones up would wait and help pull those behind them up. Those in the middle of the pack would make sure the last ones were with us before moving on. As we hiked the terrain, this group of strangers became a community—the strong and the halt and the lame alike. (By the end of the trip we'd gathered a broken ankle, too.) On the last night of the trip, we all gathered around another campfire, this time to write and sing together a song memorializing our great adventure, and to eat

and drink together.

As we here at St. Bart's have hiked together over the rough terrain of this Pentecost season, I think we've become even more of a community, too. Over these last hard months—and maybe because of them—I've seen people who were strangers begin to notice each other and to care for each other. I've seen people help each other over steep rocks and watch out for each other along the way. As our own Pentecost trip is ending, we gather around our own version of the campfire to sing the songs of our journey and to eat and drink together. A community.

I hope you'll attend the Rector's Forum after this service. Because there you'll see an unusual art image that will be "building" here at St. Bart's during Advent. Each Sunday another piece of

the image will appear around the edge. Finally, at the end of Advent, an image will appear in the center. That center image is Jesus the Christ. Christ at the center of Advent.

Christ at the center. When you hear "Christ the King," think of that image of Christ at the center . . . of Advent and not just of Advent, but the center of each season of the year, each day of the year.

I think that's how we're asked to understand Christ as King—by struggling to keep Christ at the center of our lives each day. By keeping Christ at the center of this community. By keeping Christ at the center of our hearts. That's how Jesus the Christ is truly king.

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