

November 25, 2018 – Revelation 1:4b-8 & John 18:33-37

Americans love the British monarchy. Now more than ever. We've always had a fascination with them, but the addition of American actress Meghan Markle to the royal family has taken it to a new extreme for many people.

It's easy to see why. We as a culture have an obsession with celebrities anyway. Their fame. Their money. Their lifestyles. The British royals have all of that in spades. Before the Kardashians were famous for being famous, there was the royal family. Famous for being famous.

What's kind of ironic, though, is that the British royal family today is basically powerless. They can influence public opinion, but that's about it. Compared to the British kings and queens of old – compared to someone like Henry VIII or Mary I, who were well-known for the many executions they ordered – the British monarchy today is a shadow of its former self.

Of course, even those great kings and queens had to answer to the people, to the power of parliament. And before parliament, to the power of the pope. No, to find someone with true, absolute power, you have to go back even further... to the Caesars of ancient Rome.

Augustus. Tiberius. Caligula. Claudius. Nero. Now these were true, absolute rulers. Men who ruled with an iron fist. Even when they went completely insane, people followed their maniacal orders to the letter. Because you don't ever question the authority of Caesar.

It's into this empire that Jesus is born. We all know the opening of Luke 2: "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world." Caesar Augustus issues a decree, and it happens. No matter how inconvenient it is for the empire.

Augustus would die in 14AD and be replaced by his adopted son, Tiberius. And it would be Tiberius Caesar who would place a prefect to rule as governor over the province of Judea named Pontius Pilate. Pilate would govern Judea for a total of 10 years.

Which is kind of significant. Because most governors of that sort only held that position for 3-4 years. Especially in a place like Judea, which was known for its revolts and riots and other disturbances that would typically result in a governor being replaced.

Pilate was able to keep that position for as long as he did because he was a masterful politician. The man knew exactly how to get what he wanted. He knew how to flatter people and how to intimidate them. How to impress the people and how to scare them into complete submission.

And it's this master politician who must judge the charges against Jesus. And Pilate just can't understand this guy. In many ways, Jesus is the exact opposite of Pilate. Pilate rules entirely by his political savvy and the threat of violence and death. He has an utterly worldly message to his subjects.

Whereas, Jesus? Jesus rules with miracles. Real miracles. Miracles that heal and restore and free from bondage. But his message shows no political skill whatsoever. Not once does Jesus ever tell anyone what they actually want to hear. He only ever gives them the truth.

You could not find two men who were more different. Politics and pain versus grace and truth. A worldly king versus a heavenly king. Death versus life.

Who would win? Well, I think we already know the answer. Of course, Pilate thought he won. The chief priests thought they won. The people shouting for his crucifixion thought they won. They all thought that death can defeat anything. Anyone. Any king, human or divine. Just kill him and the problem goes away. Just kill him and you've won by default.

But that doesn't work when the king you're trying to kill is Lord over all creation. That doesn't work when the king you're trying to kill created both life and death. Created heaven, hell, the earth, and all that is within them. That doesn't work when the king you're trying to kill is the ruler of all kings on earth.

And so, Jesus triumphed. On Easter morning, he became the firstborn of the dead. The first of many brothers to be resurrected to eternal life. Because he was the faithful witness to the truth.

To truth that God has had mercy on those whom he created and sent his only Son to die for the sins of world. That whoever believes in him might not perish but have everlasting life. Jesus triumphed, freed us from our sins by his blood, made us a kingdom and priests to his God and Father, and now rules with dominion forever and ever.

You and I know this. I know you do. So why is it that we still stand before Jesus like Pilate? Expecting a king of this world? Expecting to be in a kingdom of this world? Because we do. We absolutely do.

Last Sunday evening, we approved a new church budget for 2019. It is the smallest budget we've had in years. Mostly because it doesn't need to include the expenses for Josh Cromley's position any longer. God has seen fit to call Josh elsewhere. And I'm very happy for him, his family, and his new ministry there.

But here's the thing: as of January 1<sup>st</sup>, we have a gaping hole in our youth ministry here at Immanuel. We also have a budget that's still more than we can afford, even with Josh gone. And we have a congregation that is terrified of the future.

Because we don't have the money we once had. We don't have cultural influence we once had. We don't have the support of the government that we once had. Everything feels like it has changed. And we have no future.

But guess what? Money and influence and power are the tools of worldly kings. They're the tools of Pilate and Caesar. We serve in the kingdom of the Alpha and Omega. The beginning and end. The one who was and who is and who is to come.

We serve the Truth. And we listen to His voice. And it's terrifying, because listening to his voice and following his voice and going where he leads often leads straight through the cross. But it is straight through the cross that we are made part of an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away. A kingdom that will not be destroyed.

So if we know that's what's coming, why is it so terrifying? We don't live as those who put their trust in worldly kings. We don't serve God as those who fight with worldly tools. Our salvation doesn't rest in our human strength to keep Jesus from being delivered over to the Jews, as He said to Pilate.

Our salvation rests in knowing that Christ is coming soon. And every possession we own is worthless compared to the truth he gives us in the Gospel. And by Baptism our names are written in his book of life. And by his blood we are freed from our sins.

Even the sins of worry and doubt. Even the sins of clinging to worldly kings when our heavenly king calls to us with the truth. We are freed from our sins so that when he does come with the clouds and every eye sees him, even those who pierced him, we are not among those tribes of the earth who wail on account of him.

No. We are not among those tribes of the earth at all. We are the kingdom of God. We are his priests, standing in his presence in his Temple. We are servants of the Truth and we listen to his voice. Knowing that the Truth is that we are forgiven.

Pilate met Jesus and he couldn't understand him. Neither do we. Not when we look at Jesus as king of this earth. Not when we look at the kingdom of God as an earthly kingdom.

It's only when we see ourselves from a different perspective... when we see ourselves as that criminal on the cross next to Jesus. Knowing that we are sinners, justly judged for our crimes. That only death awaits us and no power of this earth can save us. Only then do we look to Jesus and ask, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Remember me when you come into a kingdom not of death, but of life. A kingdom of hope and a future. A kingdom that shall not pass away. Only when we – as individuals and as a congregation – look straight into the eyes of death and see the Lord of life triumphing over all, do we hear those blessed words: today you will be with me in paradise. Amen.