

Isaiah 45: 1-7
Psalm 96:1-9, (10-13)
Matthew 22: 15-22

Rev. Laura Palmer
St. Peter's Glenside
October 18, 2020

TWO KINGDOMS

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable to thee, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer, AMEN.

Good morning.

Back in the day, when I was a TV producer, almost twenty years ago, I went to Texas to interview a developmentally disabled man on death row, Johnny Paul Penry for ABC's "Nightline."

His case was being heard in the Supreme Court for the second time. He'd been on death row for two decades. The issue was not his guilt. He raped and murdered a beautiful young newlywed in Texas whose brother was an NFL football player which brought even more publicity to the awful crime. The issue was that Penry had a documented IQ of between 50-70. As a child, he'd been tortured and brutalized by his severely mentally ill mother. As one of his lawyers said to me, "To say had a traumatic childhood was like saying Hitler was a little outside the mainstream.

Losing in the Supreme Court the first time meant that this country would continue to execute the mentally retarded, the term used then. Winning the second time could reverse that precedent and mean Penry would spend the rest of his life in prison. No one believed he should ever be freed.

Arriving in Texas, I rented a car at the airport and drove towards the prison. This was before WAZE and iPhones, so when I needed directions, I stopped at a convenience store and asked the young woman behind the register-- in very short shorts and a very tight tee shirt-- how to get to the prison. Without missing a beat or even looking up at me she said, "Which one, we got six."

I drove a little farther and turned off the main highway and traveled along a rural road which suddenly opened up into a huge space and there it was— a long low building—a where 450 inmates, who'd been sentenced to death, were waiting for the state of Texas to kill them, one of whom I would soon meet.

I was staggered by the enormity of the prison and while trying to take it all in, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony began playing on my rental car's radio. I was hearing the triumphant "Ode to Joy" as I was staring at a warehouse of death.

I pulled over. It was too much. I didn't have words to make sense of it.

But now I do. Because in my kitchen on Friday when I was thinking of what to write for today, Beethoven's glorious Ninth Symphony came streaming through the radio which stopped me in my tracks. I remembered that powerful time in Texas.

"Render to Cesear, that which is Casear's, and render to God that which is God's."

Two kingdoms. You and I both choose every day of our lives to whom we give our allegiance, to whom do we belong?

When he said those words, Jesus was being deliberately enigmatic. Not to be coy or create a teachable moment, but to save his life. He knew a trap had been set for him and he was not about to walk into it. He had just entered Jerusalem earlier in the week and a few days before, had turned over the tables of the money changers in the Temple in furor for what it had become, a direct challenge to the religious and political authorities. The knives were out for him. In a few more days, he crowds that had cheered his entry into Jerusalem at the start of the week would be screaming for his death.

But that day at least, for Jesus, was a win.

The tax in question was one Jews had to pay to the Roman Emperor who was controlling the forces that occupied Israel and oppressed the Jews. Had Jesus sided with the Jews, he would have been a dead man walking. Had he sided with the Emperor, he could not have been the son of God because he'd have been aligned with an engine of oppression, making a mockery of his ministry.

Richard Rohr, a Catholic priest and Franciscan friar, who runs the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico, made an important point in one of his daily emails this week which helps frame this scripture.

Rohr writes:

Jesus' social program, as far as I can see, is a *quiet refusal to participate in almost all external power structures or domination systems*. His primary action is a very simple lifestyle, which kept him from being constantly co-opted by those very structures, which I (and Paul) would call the "sin system."

His three-year ministry, in effect, offers *free healing and healthcare* for any who want them. He consistently treats women with a dignity and equality that is almost unknown in an entirely patriarchal culture. At the end of his life, Jesus surrenders to the punitive systems of both empire and religion by letting them judge, torture, and murder him. He is finally a full victim of the systems that he refused to worship.

Revelatory to me in Rohr's brief commentary, was this point:

"Jesus is always *forgiving individual sinners*," Rohr writes, "which was a problem for the righteous from the beginning. In contrast, I do not once see him "forgiving" the sins of systems and empires. Instead, he just makes them show themselves and name themselves—as did Desmond Tutu in South Africa and Martin Luther King, Jr. in America.

And I would add as did John Lewis and as the "Black Lives Matter" movement continue to do.

The election is in 15 days. Think about how each candidate and think about the systems of government each might lead. Think of the two kingdoms: one of oppression, fear, and injustice, and death. And the other, where Jesus stood, a kingdom of mercy, compassion, justice and *belonging*. We have seen what happens when a leader makes America hate again and refuses to condemn the evil of white supremacy and police violence and is unable to even say the names

of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and Jacob Blake. Nor is he able to condemn the extremist conspiracy theories of Q'Anon which the FBI describes as a domestic terrorist threat. And those migrant kids in cages? Whose kingdom was that?

As the pandemic accelerates again, the holidays are in jeopardy. This year, there will be close to 300,000 Americans who will never sit at a Thanksgiving table again or sing "Silent Night" because Covid-19 silenced their lives. How many deaths would have been spared if we'd a leader who was unwilling to sacrifice American lives for his re-election? He has said who he is. Now we must say who we are.

We are baptized into God's kingdom. And throughout our lives and every Sunday in church pray for "thy kingdom come." And we're not talking about "The Magic Kingdom" a place of fantasy and make believe. We're praying for the realization of God's kingdom, often forgetting that we are the midwives who will bring it into being.

Johnny Paul Penry will spend the rest of his life in prison. But because Sandra Day O'Connor voted with the majority in his case, we, as a nation, no longer execute the developmentally disabled. It was a landmark ruling that came 22 years after the crime, but still, a good day for God's kingdom.

Beethoven was deaf when he wrote his Ninth Symphony. He could not hear the overwhelming roar of the applause in the concert hall when it was first performed.

That day in Texas, and last Friday in my kitchen, I was deaf, too. The horror of death row and the dread, fear, and anxiety of the upcoming election and the very real potential for violence, have made God feel not so much distant, as silent.

And yet, it is in that silent darkness, God broke through with "An Ode to Joy." And he's probably gotten used to not hearing much applause for him from those he created.

So perhaps this Election Day, there will be a standing ovation for justice, mercy, love, compassion, and truth as we usher in a better version of God's kingdom on earth. AMEN