

“READY, SET, SHIFT”
SCRIPTURE: GOSPEL OF JOHN 18:33-37
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
Sunday, November 21, 2021, Christ the King Sunday
The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor

John 18:33-37

18:33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

18:34 Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?"

18:35 Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?"

18:36 Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the religious authorities. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

18:37 Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

Are you ready?

Being ready means you are prepared. You are in the state you need to be in for a particular activity.

Are you ready to hear the gospel speak to us today--to witness the kind of power Jesus embodied to tell us the truth about ourselves?

Are you in a suitable state to start this activity together?

I actually want you to really give this question some space in your body--this has been an intense week. And now you and I are here together in a community that says we believe in some pretty profound things together.

(Show uploaded slide of GCPC mission statement)

Let's read that together.

At GCPC our faith calls us to practice...

Theological CURIOSITY

Moral COURAGE

Abundant COMPASSION

Beloved COMMUNITY

**With God's help, we are seeking our transformation and the healing of
the world.**

We believe in practicing together so that we can change together.

We believe in mutual liberation and radical love. We believe in a better world. So, after this week, are you ready to be here in this space of yearning, of longing, of commitment, and of practice?

(Take slide down)

Let's pause for a moment. And feel where we are bracing ourselves, feel where we are resistant, skeptical, distracted, comfortable with the ways things are, threatened, afraid, tired.

Let your body tell you where you are today.

(pause)

I know a lot of people who are ready for things to change. Do you? I know a lot of people who are sick and tired of being sick and tired. I know a lot of people

who are angry, who are numb from too much stress and trauma, who are in a constant state of hyper-vigilance, who are done with being polite or “seeing both sides” or “trusting the process” or “accepting the verdict” or trying to act like everything is ok when everything is not ok.

Maybe you are that kind of ready.

The truth is that not enough of us humans are that kind of ready. If we were, we wouldn't be gathering today with another narrative of state sanctioned violence, of white sprawl and white violence, of American vigilante justice being not only tolerated but valorized.

But here we are again. So, that's why I just have to ask. ARE YOU READY to hear what the gospel has to say to us today? Because I can tell you right now, it's not going to be an easy word or an appeasing word or maybe even a pleasing word, especially for people who are comfortable with the way things are in the world.

The gospel is something you have to have the ears to hear--the heart to receive--a body restless enough to be ready to hear its life-giving, life-changing invitation. And the gospel is about what's happening now--right now.

So let's set the stage--

Where we are right now is past, present, and future. Time standing still and time marching on.

Jesus facing down Pilate. The crowds calling for blood.

Pilate, an opportunist. Pilate, a caricature of a human being afraid of his own shadow--a preview for how white power in America will learn to perpetuate itself about 1500 years later. Power hoarding, either/or thinking, systemic gaslighting, individualism, commodification of human lives, terror, violence.

Jesus, an icon of humanity fully alive and in love with God's blueprint for how to be in right relationship. He never flinches when it comes to moments like these--moments of truth, moments so risky, so on the razor's edge.

The stage is set here for Jesus' unlawful execution--he will be put to death because men with formal power decide over and over again that he is too much trouble. People with the power to kill decide that maintaining their power is more important than standing up against the state-sanctioned killing of a man who committed no crime.

How many times have we executed Jesus? How many times has the state sanctioned the decision to silence him, to erase him, to steal his name and use it to prop up the power that he lived to disrupt?

The irony of the whole "Christ the King" Sunday thing is that Jesus is actually saying something extremely disruptive here about the whole King thing--he is as anti-King as you can get.

Maybe we already know that part--that he's a different kind of king--a new kind of king. But it's a mistake to use that word for him--because we're still too in love with the dominating king to be able to really believe in a trustworthy kind of king.

Jesus says he doesn't need or want that designation. He's saying that he knows the people he loves the most have abandoned him and that they can't see that the disruption he embodies is their saving grace.

Jesus is not hoarding power, he is delegitimizing the very power that Pilate and the religious authorities are selling their souls to protect.

This moment between Pilate and Jesus was long ago and far away, and right here, right now.

Jesus isn't playing Pilate's game--but Pilate is unwilling to do the right thing. He'd rather do the wrong thing and retain his social position, maintain his formal power, stay in the political good graces of his constituents--no matter how twisted they are, no matter how grotesque their scape-goating of Jesus is.

What's the point of standing up, when going along with the harm has more pay offs? You can justify lots of things if you can convince the world that you are defending yourself.

The stage is set over and over again--all those centuries ago and just two days ago and a few days from now. And over and over again.

Kenosha, Wisconsin, Brunswick, GA. Charlottesville, VA.

(scroll through images #1-#13 in media uploads; they are all labeled with Image # 11-21-21 and name)

Ahmaud Arbery

Joseph Rosenbaum

Anthony Huber

Heather Heyer

Kyle Rittenhouse

Gregory McMichael

Travis McMichael

Roddie Bryan

Richard Spencer

Christopher Cantwell

George Floyd

Jacob Blake

James Fields

The 1st amendment

The 2nd amendment

Self-defense

A jury of our peers

Technicalities

The letter of the law

Ready, set, shift

Our relationship to power, our relationship to self-defense, our relationship to death itself is shifting as we discern the mind and manner of Christ together.

If you are following Jesus then that means you want the world to change--it means you believe the world can change. It means you believe that you are on a journey of healing your deepest wounds so that the world's deepest wounds can heal.

Finding our common humanity in the heartbreak of oppression is hard to do in a way that truly makes the world better. There are so many ways to bypass the collective work we really need to do to heal.

Jesus models for us a way of honoring all humanity that can feel impossible to us--he tells the truth and he is willing to die for the truth, and he sees each and every one of us in all our beauty and in all our woundedness. And most importantly, he resists the temptation to defend himself.

And he sees the world we have built, the world that has formed all of us to maintain what it is--a twisted, self-replicating cycle of thinking we've found our way when we really have not found our way at all.

It's these moments of truth that need to grab hold of us, Grace Covenant.

We may have learned enough about white supremacy in America to not be surprised by the fact that Kyle Rittenhouse had a jury of 11 white people and one person of color. We may have learned enough about how white supremacy culture works in America to know that the law was on Kyle Rittenhouse's side, or that self-defense is the white man's silver bullet.

We may have learned enough about the way white supremacy works to be willing to see how it occupies each of us, our mind and body and spirit. You and I may have learned to be able to spot some of the ways it shows up in us in times like these.

We may have learned enough to recognize the mental gymnastics internalized white supremacy does to justify, to explain away, to distance ourselves, to rage against the systems and structures without risking our own social capital, to feel like giving up when you just caught up to the reality that's been true for generations.

But this moment between Jesus and Pilate--it calls to us today to cut through the delusion that grips all of us who have been socialized by Western culture--to wake up from the fever dream that cast a spell over God's people and told us we know justice when we see it.

This moment between Jesus and Pilate tries to break that spell we're under and open our lives up to a seismic shift.

It is so long ago and it is now--that the world is both turning against itself and turning toward truth.

Jesus stands in front of the powers and principalities and washes away the pretense of technicalities and laws, labels and excuses to dominate. He washes away the fear that creates grasping for superiority and marginalization.

For a moment he clears the fog of acquiescence and duty, respectability and piety. He stands there and tells it plain.

"If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the religious authorities."

Over and over Pilate tries to hand Jesus the keys to the kingdom of domination and superiority and self-defense. And over and over Jesus stands in the clarity of his life's purpose. And the gulf between them is the absurdity we call justice, we call law and order.

Find yourself in that moment.

And find yourself in the one we are living right now.

This is not an either/or moment. And neither was that one.

Jesus stood not over and against Pilate, but squarely in the chimerical world of Pilate's self-preservation and self-defense. Jesus showed him the absurdity of his questions and the reality of his culpability--the truth is that when

moments of truth arrive in our lives, we meet the moment ready to protect what matters most to us.

And what matters most to humans these days and what mattered most to humans that day back when Pilate chose self-defense over truth--what matters most then and now is what needs to change way down deep in our souls.

Pilate was another cog in the wheels of so-called justice turning to authorize and justify a state sanctioned, extra-judicial lynching of a Black man who told the system and all those deployed to maintain that system that they, that we, need to change.

We collectively kill a part of ourselves every time we repeat this way of solving the problems we are afraid to admit we have.

The Holy Shift of our time is that these systems are crumbling--as they have through the ages. They are crumbling from the weight of our own self-preservation, our own self-defense. As we pick up the pieces together--let us find the collective will not to rebuild, but to imagine a world all of us can trust with our whole selves.

If we want the world to change, Grace Covenant, then we have to be ready, we have to set our eyes on Jesus, and then we can shift our collective soul toward the restorative justice and beloved community that we've needed all along.

Thanks be to God.