

CHRIST THE KING, B
Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14
Psalm 93
Revelation 1:4b-8
JOHN 18:3-37

Melinda J. Wagner
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
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A couple years ago we had the opportunity to see a fantastic production of *West Side Story* at Portland Center Stage. We were simply swept away in its beauty – the amazing voices, that vibrant musical score, the story of two young people from opposite sides of a gang war whose love caused them to defy all the rules. I'd forgotten how soaring the play's first act is – with that incredible duet between Tony and Maria, she's up on the fire escape, he's below in the alley, the dim streetlights glowing warm with their dreams of "Tonight, tonight, won't be just any night..." And even as you're caught up in their dream, of course you know it won't end happily. The second act is brutally short and sad, Tony dying in Maria's arms. Their tender and naïve love is no match for the ruthless forces pressing on them. The curtain falls with just a glimmer of hope that someone will have learned something from this terrible loss.

West Side Story is based on the classic story of *Romeo and Juliet*. It's a story that has been retold and recast many times across the generations, because it gets at something we long for. That the old, violent cycles and patterns will end. That human relationships will be reshaped in the direction of love. That someone will have the courage to break out of old, oppressive patterns and scripts for the sake of letting something new emerge.

Still today, people live out their lives in roles that are prescribed for them – as parents and children, employers and employees, teachers and students, interviewers and jobseekers, law enforcement and citizens, rulers and subjects, and so on. But the scripts that are written for us are not always loving ones. They don't always permit human beings to flourish and become what God created us to be. These scripts can be marred by manipulation and coercion and injustice, even violence.

And there is that longing in us: Couldn't it be different?

Jesus Christ recasts our roles in the direction of love.

The scene played out in our gospel reading is as dramatic and masterful as anything in Shakespeare. It's the showdown between Jesus and Pilate, just before Jesus is sent to the cross.

Everyone knew what was supposed to happen at that trial. It was nothing like a modern trial, there was no question of Jesus being found innocent. This proceeding was strictly for accusing and naming punishment.

And all the power was on the side of Pontius Pilate. He was the local representative of Rome, the greatest world power of the time. So it should have been an open and shut case, the strong arm of Rome crashing down.

But Jesus changed the script. Jesus cracked things open.

Notice how Jesus asks almost as many questions as Pilate does. “Are you the king of the Jews?” (Pilate)

“Do you ask on your own, or did others tell you about me?” (Jesus)

The balance of power shifts, until the questioner himself is being questioned. The judge himself is being judged by someone far more skillful at assessing character. Jesus changes the script, so what should have been a simple showdown between winner and loser, becomes instead an encounter that opens up more questions, opens up more dimensions.

Pilate — “So you *are* a king?”

Jesus - “*You* say I am a king... My kingdom is not from this world...”

Never a simple answer from Jesus. As if to say, I’m up to something different here, Pilate, wouldn’t you like to learn more? Jesus means to draw Pilate and all of us into reflecting on who he really is. A king not from this world. A king who doesn’t rule by force or violence, not for personal power but a higher purpose.

And we begin to realize that Jesus isn’t in this conversation to defend himself or to win some kind of battle of wits. Jesus is here to draw people into the truth of God. This is what Jesus is *always* about. Drawing people into relationship with God. Drawing us and all people into God’s kingdom. Even Pilate. To Jesus, Pilate isn’t just an oppressor, he’s a child in need of relationship with his heavenly parent.

All the way through this exchange, Pilate believes he is in charge, but we can see that Jesus is really the one in charge, the one driving the interrogation. And finally Jesus takes it where he wants it to go.

Jesus makes Pilate an offer. An offer of new life.

“Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice,” Jesus says. As if to say, It’s not too late for you, Pilate, or for anyone. You can listen to my voice now. You can belong to God’s truth.

Pilate's response is flippant: "What *is* 'truth'?" Dismissing both Jesus and the promise he brings.

Pilate rejected the offer Jesus made, but we don't have to. Because we can see what Pilate couldn't.

We see that he was never in control, Jesus was.

We see that Pilate's power, or any oppressor's power, is no kind of power in comparison with the redeeming, transforming power of Christ, king of the universe.

We see that no earthly ruler will ever rule with the wisdom or might of God in Christ, and that the magnificence and mercy of God is the one thing worth bowing down to.

Pilate knows nothing, finally. But Jesus knows the truth of how the universe really works. Christ knows that in God's high purpose, creation is not fashioned to work by manipulation or coercion or intimidation or violence. Christ knows that this universe is founded upon love. That into its very fibers and substance is woven-- love. Love is such an innate component of the reality of how things are, that love begs to find expression through us, every day, in every conversation and every relationship.

St. Ignatius taught that you will never see a person truly until you see them through the eyes of love. Even as Jesus saw Pilate. Even as Jesus sees us.

Jesus Christ fulfills all the hopes expressed in *Romeo and Juliet* and so many stories we human beings tell. Because even though Pilate won't let himself be swayed by Jesus, God refuses to let Pilate's judgment stand. The resurrection is God's answer to our deepest longing. It is God's way of rewriting the scripts, altering the roles, always in the direction of love. Not romantic love like *West Side Story* or *Romeo and Juliet*, but self-giving love, the eternal, transforming, resilient love that's expressed in Christ.

When we worship Christ as king, as ruler of the universe, we are aligning ourselves with this resilient love. And Christ is the only ruler we would want, because he knows how the universe is created to be. He knows that love is woven into the world's essence. Christ was there at the start of creation. Christ will come again at the end of all time to gather us in. In the meantime he rules our hearts, our minds, our priorities, our relationships, our actions, until at last he rules all in all.

Amen.