

Sermon for Sunday, November 25, 2012 John 18: 33-37 "The Cost of Kingship"

Last week, Doug and I went to see the new movie "Lincoln." Daniel Day-Lewis was superb as the president who guided the nation through the bloody Civil War and forced through - by hook or by crook - the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, forever banning the institution of slavery in these United States. Some of his closest aides and cabinet members told him that this task of passing the amendment was foolhardy - he had emancipated the slaves as part of his war powers. Why risk the political capital it would cost to make this a part of the constitution? Lincoln had just won re-election, and had sufficient coattails in the election to cause the defeat of a number of members of congress who were of the opposition party, but his own party had varying views on the subject of slavery, and it was unclear whether he would have the votes to pass it.

And there Lincoln sat, wearied by the four years of war, in a room filled with the latest invention - gas lamps lighting the room! - and lavish furniture and fabrics, and men dressed in fine suits with silk cravats around their necks. In a nearby room, his wife Mary, still grieving the loss of their child Willie, sat, in satins and lace and bows and jet beads, a portrait of luxury in the midst of pain.

His advisors told him the political task ahead was too difficult. And this tired, aching man, always one to lighten the mood and turn a heart by a funny story or a gentle quip, suddenly was enraged, and cried out that it must be done, slammming his fist on the table. The end of the war was at hand, and if the amendment was not passed prior to that event, it would never be passed, and the deaths of so many young men and boys would be in vain. If what he had made the rule by war powers - the emancipation of the slaves - was not made the rule for peacetime, people of color would once again be sucked into the mire of servitude.

And those around him, shocked by that sudden change in demeanor in the president who never seemed to be out of control of his emotions, shifted gears and found ways to make it so. They were not always noble ways - the promise of patronage jobs to lame-duck congressmen who had nothing politically to lose, gentle persuasion, a wee bit of coercion - but the end result was what Lincoln had insisted upon, and what those who were victims of slavery had prayed for: a 13th amendment that said slavery was abolished.

In the midst of this political battle in Washington, Lincoln visited other battlegrounds. Terrible places, with the dead still sprawled without dignity on the grass and muck. The lines in Lincoln's face deepened, and the sadness was evident, as he sat with General Ulysses Grant and said "We have allowed each other to do horrific things, have we not?" And then Lincoln returned to Washington on a finer horse than he would have ridden as a country lawyer in Springfield Illinois, to a finer house that he might have imagined as a country boy growing up in a log cabin, to the difficult work of making a recalcitrant group of politicians give him what he insisted upon.

It's not easy to be president. If you look at before and after photos of the past several presidents, you see the toll it takes. They get wrinkles and gray hair. Eisenhower had no hair to turn gray, but he had a heart attack. President Obama's hair is rapidly turning from black to gray. Ulysses Grant told Lincoln that he had aged ten years in the final year of his life. It is miserably hard, unrelenting work. Whatever party you are, whether your party controls the Congress or not, whether it is peacetime or wartime, it is hard work. You may get to live in an extraordinarily gorgeous house. You may have all sorts of wonderful people working for you. You may be someone who is viewed as important and powerful, but no one will know all that is required of you as a leader, as the leader of the free world. No one can know, because so much is necessarily kept secret.

When we think of presidents or kings, we think of the privileges that go with the position. A phrase from a Mel Brooks movie came into the lexicon three decades ago, and we still believe it: "It's good to be king!" Those words were spoken in the movie by Louis XVI, who presided over a ridiculously extravagant court. For him it was good to be king, until, of course, he was beheaded.

Over the past several months, we have been listening to the Gospel of Mark, and one of the key themes in Mark is that being a disciple of Jesus Christ is hard work - there is a cost to discipleship. Jesus continually warns the twelve that this is a path full of hard work and danger.

The disciples keep focusing on how Jesus is to be King, and that certainly is on the mind of Pilate in today's gospel passage, as he questions Jesus about his kingship. Jesus' words - "my kingdom is not of this world" - allays the suspicions of Pilate and the fears of the Roman empire that this man is a political rabble-rouser. It does little, though, to calm the religious leadership, who recognize that Jesus is something else entirely. Not a political king, but theological King. Not one looking to overturn the Roman Empire, but one who wants to overturn the traditional understandings of who is in charge when it comes to relationship with the One God. Jesus tells Pilate that he is the King of Truth. Pilate might have looked at this Jesus, standing beaten and ragged before the might of the Roman Empire, and said dismissively, "This is a king? No, not really." But the religious leaders see exactly what is going on, and want to make Jesus pay the price for threatening their ordered world. The cost has been great, and will be greater, in the days to come in Jesus' story.

Suddenly we are not looking at the cost of discipleship. We are looking at the cost of kingship. It isn't about the glory. It is about the responsibility and the pain and the challenge of doing what must be done for the people, no matter what. The disciples may think that it is good to be King, and that Jesus should be King, but they don't really understand what being a King is.

And that is why, even though it seems an odd thing for us to do, on the brink of Advent, of the season of waiting for the infant Christ, we are talking about Christ the King.

It is like the story of Lincoln in the movie. We know how it ends. We know that the 13th amendment passed. We know that it was a great moral and political victory. We also know that Lincoln was assassinated. But the arc of history, as Dr. Martin Luther King, said, is long. To know about Lincoln, the story only makes sense because we know how it ends. But to understand the larger story, why a Lincoln was so important to the nation, we need to know what happened to him in the whole arc of his life, indeed in the whole arc of the life of this nation.

It is the same with this King who leads at great personal cost. To understand the beginning of the story, which we will recall in the next few weeks, we must remember the end of the story, at least the end of Jesus' human existence on earth. Then we can look at the whole arc of the story of Jesus' life and death and have it be a complete picture.

Perhaps it is the best possible preparation for the beginning of the story, to see the end first. We wait in hope for the newborn King, the one who will change everything. We watch for the star, the marker of a new day. But from that very moment, from the moment when Gabriel told Mary what was to come, the end of the story, the cost of that life, of that Kingship, is both the shadow and the light. To be born into the promise of Kingship is not all about power and strength – it is about the pain that is an inevitable and necessary part of the story. We can't appreciate the bitter irony beneath the sweetness of Advent and Christmas – and we **MUST** acknowledge it - unless we know where it is all going to end up, in a tapestry of joy and pain and power and death and resurrection.

Disciples? If we are his disciples, there will be a cost. But it is worth it, because the cost of Kingship was so very high, but so gracefully accepted, by Christ our King.

Amen.