

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Sara Dorrien-Christians
Sunday, November 21, 2021

Revelation 1:4-8

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

Look! He is coming in the clouds.

A few days after 9/11 2001, I was sitting with a friend in my kitchen on 121 Arbor St. We were in high school, unaware that this event would define our generation as other tragic events defined others, but certainly aware enough, feeling its weight. We were baking cookies, our backpacks flung mindlessly on the floor. It was the start of the weekend.

After we put the cookies in the oven and set the timer we sat at the counter, talking. (We could easily talk for hours the way teenage girls do.) That day we shared our “where were you” stories— the first of many times we would do that—

“I was in Spanish class, and suddenly the Dean of Students came over the loud speaker.. I’m sorry to interrupt, he said, but I feel you should know what is going in your country right now...”

“I was in science class, and we had just come back to the classroom from a bathroom break. The teacher asked us to gather round and invited us to pray...”

We told our stories, a few days young, nodding knowingly at their similarities and making room for their differences.

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I was ready to move on but my friend then rather casually but seriously said, *“I just wish Jesus would come back now. Why can’t he just come back now?”*

I nodded in knowing agreement, but inwardly was shocked. My own Christian tradition didn’t stress the second coming of Christ; it wasn’t a pillar of my adolescent belief system; in truth, I couldn’t really recall ever hearing about it in a sermon.

But I was mostly startled by the first, involuntary thought that crossed my mind in response to my friend’s pronouncement: I didn’t want Jesus “to come back now.”

Mind you, I didn’t really know what his coming back would mean, exactly, but I knew it would change life as I knew it and life as I knew it really wasn’t that bad. It was full of activities and intrigue and drama. There were auditions to conquer and boys to flirt with and plans for the future to make and cookies to bake.

And on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.

The poetry in the Book of Revelation tells the truth. Christ’s second coming, like his first, won’t leave anyone or anything untouched. And with its joy will come grief. Despite all our hemming and hawing, most of us in this sanctuary like things the way that they are. I don’t know that I am any more ready now than I was as a teenager with lots of plans in the making.

Give me Jesus — or give me everything else that my life is built upon —

That’s a match.

So what is it that makes Christ’s second coming a mournful event?

The Apostle John insists it has something to do with seeing. Jesus Christ, the ruler of the kings of the earth (yes) the firstborn of the dead (yes) is also the first “the faithful witness.” And it seems we are called to do the same: “Look! He is coming in the clouds. Every eye shall see him.”

As we head into the season of Advent we head into the season of lights. Lights on our houses. Lights on our Christmas trees. Lights that flicker as candles that smell of vanilla rum burn. Lights at the zoo. My family visited last night.

The light is an appropriate reminder that Christ — the light of the world — is coming. It’s a light that shines in the darkness. It is one of our more comforting metaphors, and it is the way Jesus of Nazareth described himself, at least according to the Gospel of John.

But as one of our favorite Roman catholic theologians reminds us, “light is not so much what you directly see as that by which you see everything else.”

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Richard Rohr speaks truth. Light illumines all that it touches. Around a campfire it casts the faces of those we love most in a comforting glow, but it also exposes that which we'd rather not see.

“Seeing” clearly may not seem like one of Jesus’ more challenging demands on the surface, but on closer look, it may just be the invitation that all the others spring from. To see clearly is discomfoting; and worse, it often compels us to act.

Just last Thursday I was present at our More Than A Meal ministry, in the “to-go” fashion we’ve been offering it in since March of 2020, and a man motioned me over to him and said, “Ma’am, I’ve been sleeping under archway for a months now, but yesterday morning I was chased off. Please, ma’am, I have nowhere to go.”

Like so many others— and these are the lucky ones— he had been approved for subsidized housing but was still waiting. In the meantime, the nights were getting colder.

“Ma’am,” he pleaded, “it was early in the morning and it was raining hard. Why did you have to do that? I’ve been respectful of your property. I haven’t caused any problems. I had nowhere to go. If I can’t be here where can I go?”

I felt dressed down, somewhat defensive, searching for excuses as he continued to speak...softly but deliberately. His face was kindly and behind his eyes I saw pain, and a thousand stories. Was the light of Christ illuminating this man, standing as he was right in front of me, a person with significant power in this institution that he had come to seeking refuge, only to be chased away like he was subhuman, into the cold rain?

Our guard, I knew, was only doing his job that morning— at least as it had been explained to him by the security company that we contract with —

That was the refuge I wanted to seek in this conversation. It’s not really *my* fault, sir. It’s not the fault of this church that I love.

I stammered.

Seeing clearly is discomfoting; and worse, it often compels us to act. Three days and lots of other things ticked off my to-do list later, I’m still wondering what I need to do about it. What *we* need to do about it.

Jesus Christ, the light of the world...not so much what we directly see, but that by which we see everything else.

Today we celebrate the Reign of Christ— also known as Christ the King Sunday. The last day of the liturgical year, the day we stop, look around, take stock of where we’ve been over the past 12 months. Is Christ the Lord of this place? Is Christ the Lord of my life? Is Christ’s reign what we hope and dream and work for?

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Christ the King Sunday is a fairly recent addition to the church calendar. It was introduced by the Pope 1925 to draw attention to what he considered the destructive forces of the modern world—namely, the dehumanizing and totalitarian ideologies of communism in Russia, and especially of fascism in Italy and Spain, and the rise of naziism in Germany.

96 years later, it is a still a day to pause and to check our allegiances. To name the destructive forces at work in our world. To imagine what a world governed by Christ's reign would look like. And yes, to acknowledge the ways we will grieve when that reign is consummate.

Seeing is the thing. To see clearly — every pain, every tear, every micro and macroagression, every injustice and systemic flaw and empty belly is the call —As important as every pledge made, every bit of soup ladled, every vote cast, every check written.

I was scrolling through my phone just this past week when I came across a story in the Daily Memphian about five Houston High juniors who staged an event called “Bus Day.” On November 13th, these five students, who had never ridden a bus before, rode a MATA bus from Germantown to Downtown Memphis. It took them 2 hours, a trip that takes about 30 in a car. What they saw— and what they were calling others to see— was disparity.

The seeing was the thing. Look at how hard it is to get around in our city. Look at these bus riders who are trying to provide for themselves and their families. Look at these people— commuting when they should be sleeping, skipping doctor's appointments because there aren't enough hours in the day, arriving late to work when the bus doesn't run on time, losing the job, getting sick, paying the utility bill with the grocery money, ending up in the line for the food bank at Idlewild church, still not making the rent, calling the church when the eviction and along with it the lifelong challenge of securing housing again is threatened. These teenagers are calling us to see the cyclical nature of poverty, the insidiousness of it — which makes people who make it out the exception rather than the rule. They are calling us to see.

But what if we don't? What if we don't see? That was a question a colleague asked me in earnestness last week **after** the Presbytery of the Midsouth had met in this sanctuary and passed an Anti-Racism statement that was years in the making but **not before** some had lined up at the microphones to oppose it. They didn't think it was necessary.

But what if you don't see it? She asked. Like what if you can't see it?

It being racism, the history and the legacy and the present of racism, and the church's responsibility to call it out, hold it up, grieve it, condemn it, and love it out.

What if you don't see it?

It's an urgent question. To be perfectly plain, it is a question that feels eery this morning, the first Sunday after a verdict was rendered in the Rittenhouse case in Kenosha, Wisconsin. There's a lot I don't know— about our legal system and about the handling of the case by the prosecution. But I do know that in Black churches across North America, this is the only thing to talk about this

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morning; I do know that Rittenhouse — an 18-year-old from Illinois, crossed state lines with an AR-15 style weapon, designating himself a protector of private property in the wake of unrest following the police shooting of Jacob Blake. I do know legal experts aren't surprised by the Rittenhouse acquittal. I do know it's pretty easy to argue self-defense in a state that has baptized it. I do know the judge told the jurors that the system worked. I do know that in whatever transpired on the ground between Black Lives Matter protestors and a lone ranger teenager from Illinois, one man is permanently injured, two men are dead, and one man who hurt and killed is walking free. And I know I worry about the message it sends. I know that as a mother raising a little boy—a little white boy—I'm gonna need a little more help than that.

What if you don't see it? My colleague asked.

To that question and others like it the Book of Revelation communicates a promise to us this morning, and all those who have ears to hear:

“Every eye will see him; even those who pierced him.”

Every eye WILL see him.”

Surely it will be a time of mourning, every tribe of the earth will wail— because Christ's very presence and power will render the tribes themselves obsolete— the very lives we lead and the things we fiercely protect and prioritize will be turned upside down. Christ— the King, the firstborn of the dead, the faithful witness to God's justice and God's peace and God's love— *the one through which we see everything else* — will come and we WILL see him. We won't be able to help seeing.

One of you sent me a text yesterday. You said “Every year, Sara. I am desperate to make Christ King. I have no trouble hoping that he will one day be King...but tomorrow we affirm “Christ IS King”— present tense—and that is hard for me. Every year it is a puzzle that turns over in my mind. There are rough edges that I can't make smooth with thinking. How something can be “already” but also “not yet.” A lot of people are feeling more “not yet” than “already” this year and if you're paying attention to what is happening in the world and to your neighbors, then who can blame you?

Without dismissing the tension — because that kind of tension is holy—

I think a sign of the “already” is those kids out in Germantown spending a chunk of their Saturday on a MATA bus so they could see. I think “the already” is the desperation itself, the paying attention, the compassion. Christ IS King — and so we question all of our designs, our policies and procedures, our values. Christ IS King — and so we love each other, and we pray for those who are harder to love.

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And we hope — a hope nurtured by the revelation that every eye WILL see him, nurtured by the revelation that our Lord God is the beginning and the end, the holder of it all — who was, who is, and who is to come. Amen and Amen.