

Sermon Nov. 22, 2015 "Two Passports" John 18:33-38a Mark 12:13-17

Migrants, people trying to find a new home. Terrifying conditions, with many dying. No one certain where they would end up.

The images of the refugees from Syria come to mind, as borders close and more and more countries and - over here - states declare that those refugees are not welcome.

But the first were other refugees, a few centuries ago... These people landed on Plymouth Rock, and had huge challenges ahead of them. On what we call now the first Thanksgiving, they gave thanks even in the midst of cold and uncertainty and death.

Listen to what William Bradford, leader of the Pilgrims, wrote about that group's initial experience in this land, and what sustained them.

"The season was winter, and they that know the winters of that country know them to be sharp and violent, and subject to cruel and fierce storms, dangerous to travel to known places, much more so to search an unknown coast. Besides, what could they see but a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beast and wild men and what multitudes there might be of them they knew not. Neither could they, as it were, go up to Pisgah to view from this wilderness a more good country to feed their hopes.

"For summer being done, the whole country represented a wild and savage hue. If they looked behind them, there lay a mighty ocean which they had passed and was now a main bar and gulf to separate them from all civil parts of the world. What could now sustain them but the Spirit of God, and God's grace." ( from *History of Plymouth Plantation*)

Half of the original group of Pilgrims died that winter, but we are here because even so, they were sustained. And our nation is here because of arms that welcomed immigrants from all over throughout the years. That's why we are here.

I have a passport. I am a citizen of the United States of America and proud to be an American. Next week when we hear from missionary Laura Smith about the hardships the people of Venezuela face when they try to go grocery shopping, I will remember taking my long shopping list to the grocery store yesterday and feeling irritated about all the people and long lines as I stood with my overflowing basket of all kinds of food. So many choices we have in this country! Such abundance!! I stood in line and tried to give thanks for the tremendous blessings we have here.

This week passports have received a lot of attention, most recently because of the fact that the terrorists who devastated Paris (and the western world) a week ago Friday had real and apparently fake passports. It has been reported now that the terrorists were NOT from Syria at all, but that at least one had a fake Syrian passport, probably intended to stir fear among countries who were planning on receiving refugees from Syria. This plot worked, for our Congress and state governors and many people throughout our nation bought into it, and now, if they get their way, it will be even more difficult for refugees desperate to find a place to live to get into our country.

So I find myself somewhat concerned about my passport today, because our reactions of fear are causing us to forget our TRUE passport, Jesus, who has claimed us as belonging to the Kingdom of God. Throughout the Bible, God has asked God's people to love and trust God and to love other people. Now this does not mean that we should open our doors to terrorists; I am as afraid of bombs and massacres and planes crashing and perhaps chemical warfare as any of you. But we must NOT forget to Whom we really belong and what our Lord Jesus has asked us to do: "Pray for your enemies; love your neighbors..." "I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was in prison and you visited me, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.." (Matthew 25:35) *pause*

When Jesus was dragged before the Roman leader, Pilate, he told Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world... If we follow Jesus, OUR primary citizenship must not be of this world, either. We are to live out Jesus' love IN this world, but we must remember that we finally answer to and belong to God. If we do this, we cannot allow ourselves to be dictated by fear or by anger or by retaliation. In the long run, those things will not give us life.

This Sunday is known as Christ the King Sunday. The idea is that we should let Jesus Christ be king over our lives. In our Gospel lesson today, the Jewish leaders, wanting to rid themselves of Jesus, trumped up charges that he was setting himself up as king to go against the ruling Romans. Not having authority to execute Jesus themselves, they hoped to persuade Rome to do their dirty work for them. Their best bet was to persuade Pilate that Jesus intended to set himself up as king -- as a rival to Rome.

But Pilate was no fool. When he first encountered Jesus, he asked, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus made it clear that he considered himself to be a king -- but not in a way that Rome need fear. His kingdom was "not of this world," he said.

What Pilate couldn't see, what the Jewish leaders couldn't see, and what even the disciples couldn't see, was that Jesus *was* a king. He would rule over more people than Pilate, or Herod, or even Caesar. None of them could imagine that billions of people would call Jesus Lord. They couldn't know that people in unknown lands on far-away continents would build great churches in honor of Jesus, and hospitals, and orphanages, and schools. None of them could foresee that men and women all over the world would fall on their knees to worship Jesus. They could not envision that Jesus' reign would really begin with his crucifixion, and that his suffering and death would save the world. And if we had been there, we probably would not have seen it either. We live in the land of "biggest and best," but Jesus did his work by becoming "littlest and least." It went against everything that Pilate knew -- and it goes against everything that we know, too. (Much of this borrowed and edited from Richard Donovan, Sermonwriter)

Today, if we want to see the power of Rome or any of the ancient civilizations that ruled the world in centuries past, we must look at the ruins and imagine the glory. But if we want to see the power of Jesus, we have only to look at the countless men and women, alive today, whose lives have been changed and restored because Jesus is King in their lives.

It is said that Bobby Richardson, who was second baseman for the New York Yankees, prayed the following prayer some years ago at a Fellowship of Christian Athletes meeting. Someone in the

group made a note of it, and it became a classic. Richardson prayed: "Dear God, *your* will -- nothing more -- nothing less -- nothing else." If you need a formula to change your life, this is a good start. Pray this prayer daily, and then try to live it. "Dear God, *your* will -- nothing more -- nothing less -- nothing else." (Donovan)

Your will, Lord; be my King.

Jesus Christ is a different kind of king. He came in order to make it possible for us not to perish, whether we live or die here on earth, to have everlasting, forever, life in his kingdom. A different kind of king. Jesus has given us an assignment, to love God and love others, but he never leaves us alone; Jesus is with each of us every day, to the end of time.

Here is a story of some Christians who let Jesus be king of their lives in a very hard time. When the Nazi army invaded Holland, the Postma family, Sietske that daughter, her younger brother, and their father, Djoerd, who was a woodworker, lived in a small country village. Though they were not politically active, this Calvinist family was shocked by those in their town who viewed the Nazi control as a desirable thing and even more shocked by those who enlisted in the German army or became supporters of the Nazi party.

At first, the Germans did not interfere much in the lives of the people of Holland. But as the war continued, the Nazis instituted their cruel program of Jewish identification, deportation, and eventual extermination.

One day when the Postma family walked into their little town, they found that a sign had been posted which read, "DOGS AND JEWS FORBIDDEN." Word quickly spread that anyone who tried to stand in the way of the Nazis' efforts to eliminate the Jews would suffer the same fate as the Jews. Devout Christians, Sietske and her family prayed for God to intervene in the situation.

On a chilly March evening in 1943, the pastor of a local church came to the house of the Postma family, asking them to take in a Jew. The Jewish woman would need to be hidden, not only from the Gestapo, but from the Postmas' neighbors. The request was dangerous, for if the Jew were found, the family would probably be killed.

Without hesitation Djoerd Postma said, "Yes." Because this family said yes, 22 year-old Nurit Hegt lived with them until the fall of Germany in 1945, and the only surviving member of her family. Because of their brave faith, the Postmas were memorialized in Israel by the planting of Tree E-37 on the Avenue of Righteousness in the city of Jerusalem. (Told by Wayne Rice in *Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks 4*, and also Peter Hellman, *When Courage Was Stronger than Fear*).

Here we are, Christians blessed to live in this incredible nation so full of blessings and opportunities. Here we are, men and women who have said YES to Jesus, and who - every day - must decide whether he really is the king and guide and true passport of our lives.

I am not sure as to the origin of the piece I am about to share, but I have heard it at Thanksgiving

services and believe that it communicates truth and reasonable challenge for those of us who seek to serve God's kingdom:

"Giving thanks is celebrating a good harvest,  
being thankful is seeing to it that everyone is fed.

Giving thanks is celebrating our free country,  
being thankful is being a discerning citizen and taking part in the election process.

Giving thanks is giving money to the church,  
being thankful is using all our resources as stewards of the Lord.

Giving thanks is praising God for the children given us,  
being thankful is raising them up to know and serve God.

Giving thanks is loving our spouse when things are going well, being thankful is loving our spouse when things are not going well.

Giving thanks is praising God from whom all blessings flow,  
Being thankful is praising God anyway.

Here we are Christians, people whose final passport is Jesus Christ, leading us into the kingdom of God, for ever. Because of him, we can face whatever today, tomorrow or any day may bring, for he is our King, our Savior, our Shepherd, our Redeemer. May our lives reflect and proclaim our Thanksgiving. Amen.