

On this Thanksgiving weekend, we may have reflected on and given thanks for all the blessings in our lives. Some of the best blessings are the unexpected ones. Unexpected blessings are surprises, miracles, things we never thought would happen. Things we never thought could happen. Things that just seem to fall in our laps, by no effort of our own. These blessings could only come from God.

These are the blessings I'm most thankful for. Logan was an unexpected blessing, and we can't imagine life without him. Being appointed here last year was definitely unexpected because I didn't think I would be appointed anywhere, and it has been a tremendous blessing for me and our family to be here. And, many of you know that we recently moved. We weren't even looking when the house of our dreams fell into our laps. God surprises us when we least expect it.

I invite you to take a moment to tell the person sitting next to you one unexpected blessing that you are thankful for.

It may be unexpected to have this passage listed in the lectionary as one of the last scripture passages of the Christian year. We started so long ago, on the first day of Advent, and we have come full circle to the celebration of the Reign of Christ, which today is known as Christ the King Sunday. All year "we have witnessed the wonderful birth, the great healing moments, the teachings that have sustained people throughout the centuries. We cried in sorrow at the Crucifixion and rejoiced with absolute joy on the sunrise of Easter when Jesus conquered our greatest fear, death. We celebrated the good news of the disciples as they risked everything to finally proclaim

the good news to all people."¹ All of this was unexpected.

And, in this passage, we see an unexpected conversation between Pilate and Jesus. Jesus has been turned over to the Roman authority in the region by his own people. The religious leaders could not defile themselves as Passover was coming, yet they thought someone had to do something. This person, a member of their own faith, was making a mockery of everything they have known about God and their faith. They were in jeopardy of losing their power, so this was a calculated political move. They wanted to get rid of Jesus, but if the "government" did the dirty work, then people would not turn on them. Pilate really didn't want to be involved in this. He saw this clearly as a religious issue, not a government issue. Yet, there was an uprising in his area, and he had to show Caesar that he was capable of keeping things under control.

We witness this unexpected conversation between Pilate and Jesus. We know what Pilate is capable of – he eventually orders Jesus to be flogged and killed – but in this conversation, there is gentle questioning. "Are you the King of the Jews," he asks (v.33). I think we have all asked that question, or at some point, we will.

And, then there is a bit of mental gymnastics in this conversation as Jesus answers with a question. Don't you just hate when people do that? They get-out of answering the question by asking another question. Jesus wasn't trying to dodge the question. He knew that Pilate, as we all do, had to come to the answer himself. "Jesus, are you King? Who are you, really?" We all ask.

¹<https://www.ministrymatters.com/worship/entry/3255/worship-connection-november-25-2018>

The term “King,” may seem irrelevant today because we live in a democracy, not a monarchy. Yet, if we view it as a political term, it retains great relevancy. So often the issues and circumstances surrounding our decisions are political in nature. And, often, our final analysis boils down to the choice between Jesus and Caesar. Will I live in this kingdom of the world or the kingdom of God? Will I live by the rules of this world – playing it safe, looking out for number one, doing whatever it takes to get ahead, even if that means harming others? Or, will I live by God’s rules -- putting others first, becoming last, helping others, and taking risks to love God and others with all of our being?

Jesus tells us that he’s not like the world’s king. His kingdom plays by different rules. And, we know what the rules are, if we listen for Jesus’ voice. He said, “Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice” (v. 37). Pilate is trying to find the truth during his questioning, and Pilate is listening. He found nothing wrong in Jesus because Jesus was speaking truth. Yet, Pilate feels he has no choice.

The role of Pilate represents that person or institution confronted with a difficult decision who has instincts in one direction but is pressured by the circumstances to move reluctantly in the opposite direction. The religious leaders rob Pilate of his power and box him in a corner, so he yields to them. He even tries to put the judgment back into the people’s hands to pardon Jesus, but they also fail him. Pilate did not have the courage to stand up to the adversary. Pilate chose Caesar.

We all know how this story ends, but the real unexpected blessing is that death is not the end. Jesus conquers death and proves that he is King. He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He reigns in our hearts and lives. We can choose to listen for the

truth, and make Jesus our King. We choose to live “not of this world.” We choose Jesus over Caesar.

When we listen for Jesus’ voice, unexpected blessings happen. We tap into the power of the resurrection, the ultimate unexpected blessing. When we have the courage to live “not of this world,” we experience all the miracles and surprises that seem to fall into our laps. Even when difficult times come, we can see God’s fingerprint working in our lives. I invite you to make that choice this morning. Choose Jesus. Open yourself to the unexpected. Amen.