

11-21-21

Christ the King

John 18:33-37

Baptism: Cole and Avery Jackson

New Members: Tommy and Debbi Brock

Born for This!

I have known a few people in my life who seem to have been born for exactly what they were doing with their life. I hope you have, too. I hope some of you are that kind of people, people who have found the peace that comes with knowing you're doing what you were put here to do, even when it comes at a cost.

You've heard me talk about Dean Morrow, one of my Seminary professors several times before. He's the one who taught me to teach you that God is alive and active, saying and doing things in the world, among other things! I cannot imagine Dean Morrow being anything other than a Seminary professor and a Dean. He grew up in a small town and an even smaller little Presbyterian Church in the mountains of Northwest Arkansas in the 1920's. A professor and a dean were not what little boys in those parts aspired to be in those days. But, from the earliest days, Dean Morrow was aware of God's hand on him, and that hand guided him to see things and know things that others in his community didn't see. While a part of his mind and heart always resided in Russellville, Arkansas he knew he was cut out for something bigger. He was able to obtain an education that many in his day couldn't, culminating in a PhD from Vanderbilt, and then he launched off on a career of ministry and teaching that sustained him until his death. Dean Morrow never quite fit into the world. Oh, he drove cars on the interstate and managed to buy groceries and do all the things all the rest of us do, but his academic inclinations always made him a little different from the rest of us. Brilliant. Scholarly. He just seemed to have been

made for the path he followed. Generations of preachers learned how to do what we do from him. And we're grateful that he didn't give in to the pressure he must have faced from family and community to conform to more realistic expectations. It was as if he knew who he was supposed to be and what he was supposed to do—and he did it.

Another person I think of this way is someone I don't know personally, but whose work I have come to appreciate. His name is Ola Gejilo. He's our Blake's age. Lives in Norway, which is about as far away from what we know as it can be. I don't know anything about him personally. He is a composer. If you come hear us sing in Hattiesburg in a couple of weeks, you'll hear two of his Christmas pieces. Absolutely beautiful. His music looks deceptively simple on the page. When you first pick it up, you think, "Finally something easy to sing, something we won't have to work so hard on." Boy is that ever wrong. He can do more with fewer notes than just about any composer I know. I have no understanding, but great appreciation, for those who can compose music. I've been trying to write two hymns to fit two tunes that keep rolling around in my head for more than ten years and have never gotten them from my head to paper. Maybe someday. I have great appreciation, of course, for those who can play and sing what others write, but to be able to take ideas out of the air and make them fit into lines and spaces and come out as music is a process I doubt I'll ever fully understand, even if I ever get those two hymns written. I think you have to be born to do that. I guess the fundamentals of that can be taught, but there has to be something else at work there. This young Norwegian went to school and excelled, but that something else is definitely at work in his work. Every time I sing something he's written, I am thankful that he didn't become a fisherman or a skier or whatever else little boys can grow up to be in Norway. This is what he was born to do.

I hope hearing about these two from much different backgrounds and places is making your mind race to people you know who were born to do whatever it is you know them to do.

Of course, there are those who are not. I may find out that I'm one of those if I don't ever get those two hymns written. As much as I learned from Dean Morrow, I had other teachers who were simply not cut out to teach. And generations of students have paid the price for their shortcoming. The worst teaching experience I ever had was when another Dean asked me to teach writing to a bunch of engineering students. Liberal arts folks and engineering folks don't speak the same language, and when they try to limit that language to words and forms, it can be disastrous. It was. That Dean and I mutually decided that we wouldn't try that again. I was not born to teach engineers. And they were not born to learn from me.

The encounter we have with Jesus is not a happy, feel-good story. It comes from the story of Jesus' being hauled before Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea as a part of the process that led to Jesus' death. We talk about this story every time we say the Creed: He suffered under Pontius Pilate! That may sound like a strange story for us to hear today. It's Thanksgiving season. We're about to launch off onto that crazy holiday season that will pull us all in all the same directions that it does every year. And today is that Sunday in the Church Year we call Christ the King, the day we wrap up one year of preaching and teaching before we launch off into another one when Advent starts next week. King of Kings and Lord of Lords. This sounds like it ought to be a day for some much more ceremonial story. But the story we find ourselves in the midst of is this painful encounter with Pilate, the one who holds Jesus' life in his hands.

Pilate doesn't really have a dog in this fight. He probably wouldn't even be there if it weren't Passover time. Being the Governor of Judea was not a plum diplomatic assignment. Think about being offered your choice between Ambassador to Monaco or some other beautiful place along the Mediterranean or Ambassador to Siberia where the snow might melt for a few days in July. Pilate was on the Siberian end of that. He spent most of his time in Rome. He wasn't born to spend much time among the rabble out in Judea. But it was Passover, and that was one of

those times that the Jews all gathered there, so he had to make a grand appearance to let them all know who was in charge. Wouldn't you know it? This uprising over this itinerant preacher that some were tired of hearing had to break out while he was there. He didn't much care what he preached or how people responded to it or didn't. The whole Hebrew faith business sounded pretty primitive to him and to most everyone else he knew. But here he was, and this conflict was not going away until he did something about it. So he hauled Jesus before him and went through the motions of trying to do something about it.

But there was something about this guy Jesus. Even standing there before Pilate who held the power of life and death over him, Jesus continued to teach and to engage in conversation that was different than you might expect from a condemned man. The Hebrews had accused Jesus of claiming to be a King. The Jews didn't like living under the rule of the Emperor. They claimed no king but this God of theirs. That's what they seemed to be so upset about. If Jesus was claiming to be a King, that didn't seem to fit into their system very well. So Pilate thought he could put all this aside if he could just figure out what everyone was so upset about.

But Jesus knew that he hadn't come to dodge conflict with Pilate or with anyone else. He had come to testify to the Truth. That is what he was born to do, and that is what he had spent his life doing.

You see where it got him. And you know where this story is headed. We'll hit it a glancing blow today and begin to tell his story all over again next Sunday as we set out on our Advent journey and begin to prepare ourselves for the birth of this Jesus in a few weeks. Sometime during that season, we may pause long enough to think about why this child was born, but we don't usually think much about the events we encounter today and especially not those painful events that come after it while we think about that sweet little Jesus boy. I remember a Christmas luncheon a few years back. It was pretty much what we expect those things to be. Lots of good food. Lots of celebrating.

Christmas decorations on the tables. A good time. Then the entertainment for the day got up. He was a singer. But someone had apparently not given him much guidance about the day. We were treated to twenty minutes of bloody Jesus on the cross songs. Everybody in the room grew more and more uncomfortable. It wasn't just the singing, which wasn't very good. It was the juxtaposition of images—Baby Jesus and the Cross don't usually reside in the same parts of our minds, let alone our hearts.

Looking back, that was probably more helpful than any of us thought at the time. That cross and the Resurrection that followed it was exactly why that baby was born. Jesus himself told Pilate, "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the Truth." And the truth to which he came to testify is that all was not well between God and us. His faithful life and witness. His unjust death. And his glorious Resurrection—all that was to call us to a new Truth, that God's anger was not the final Word, that God wants us to know joy and peace, and that God sent Jesus into the world to bear the unbearable load of our sin so that those gifts of joy and peace can be ours. He was born for this. And so were we!

We have a lot to celebrate today. Thanksgiving is Thursday, and many of us are anticipating gathering with family and friends to acknowledge all we have to be thankful for. Christ the King give us opportunity to add the Lordship of Jesus in our lives to that long list of things for which we give thanks. As if all that is not enough, we have the joy of celebrating baptism with two of our young people and membership in the Church with them and their grandparents. This is the kind of day the Church is made for! Celebration is what we do best, and we certainly have much to celebrate today. Tommy and Debbi and Cole and Avery have lived and worshiped and learned and served among us for a long time. Many of you probably thought they had been members for a long time. Cole and Avery have grown up among us. Here and their home is where they have learned what it means to be faithful. As I have met with them and talked about what all that

means, I am convinced that they know as much about what they're doing as kids their age can know. This is one of those days they were born for. There will be others as they grow and discover God's gifts in their lives. As they choose careers and the paths to get them there. As they choose friends and eventually mates to join them on that journey. Today they will stand among us and tell us and the world that they believe that this Jesus who came to save the world is their Savior. There is a lot about being a twin that I don't know since I'm not one. These two share things many of us don't. So it's appropriate that they make this commitment together. But, believe me, each of them knows who Jesus is and what he means to them. If you ask them, they'll tell you!

Debbi and Tommy came into our lives several years ago. They both come from church backgrounds that are different from ours in some ways. But they will tell you that this is what they were born for. This is the place they are called to serve and to grow and to invite others to join them on this journey that requires much, but offers even more.

There is, indeed, much to celebrate. This kind of celebration is what the Church was born for. It is what we do best. Finding and sharing God's grace is what we were born for. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Prayers of the People

God who deserves and prompts our thanks, you offer us more love than we can imagine and more grace than we can comprehend. In Jesus Christ, you have shown us both who you and who we can be. In him you meet us where we are and love us as we are, but you love us too much to leave us there. So in this season for giving thanks, let us begin by giving you thanks for your great and matchless love for us and for all people. Sometimes we think we can wrap our minds around your love for us. We're not bad people. But then we think about how we struggle to love ourselves and one another, and we marvel that

you love us and all people! We are thankful for this day and for this season that calls us to ponder and to give thanks for the many gifts that make up our lives. You bring good things into our lives. You offer us the Bread of Life through your Word and at your Table. You sustain us and feed our deepest hungers. You are with us all along our way. We give you thanks for the abundance of your faithfulness to us, and we pray for the faith and the courage to be faithful to you in all of our lives.

Even as we pause to reflect on our blessings, we know that there is much that is not right among and within us. Disease and death and pain and confusion continue to hold too much power over us. Our days are marked by too much uncertainty, too much despair. We know many who need healing, and we pray that it will come. We are too easily overwhelmed by the needs around and among us. Some are waiting for words and actions to encourage them, and we are so busy we forget to speak or share them. Some are waiting to be assured that what we believe is the Truth and that it matters, and we neglect to show them by our witness. We come today thankful that you hear our prayers and that you know what we need to be your people in the world. We thank you for the success of our efforts to raise funds for our Mission Partners, and we thank you for helping us be open to new ways to advance your kingdom. We pray for our nation, our state, our community and their leaders, including some of us. We pray for the Church both here and everywhere. We pray that you would renew our commitment to seeing your kingdom come and your will be done. We pray that you would continue to bless our efforts to serve and to grow that kingdom here while we wait for it come in Heaven. We pray for this congregation as it anticipates a time of transition, we pray for its life and its work and its efforts to follow Jesus. We thank you for these who officially become part of us today and for others who contemplate the same commitment. We pray all these things in the name of Jesus our Savior, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, but our Savior, who showed us a way to travel that leads to us and who taught us to pray when he said: