

**Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704**

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**In God's House**  
John 18:36

In my sermon last week I spoke of my recent trip to Germany where I saw people celebrating the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the collapse of the Berlin Wall. That was an event which has radically changed the way Germans see themselves. A member of the congregation responded to the sermon by bringing me an article by George Packer in *The New Yorker* which helped me to better appreciate the significance of what happened in Germany in 1989. Packer writes:

The British writer Timothy Garton Ash has called 1989 the best year in European history. It delivered the Continent from its worst century—the new democratic European unity that began in 1989 was built on fifty million graves. The chain reaction of nonviolent civic movements in Poland, Hungary, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia seemed like a miracle at the time, and it still does. Anyone who grew up knowing nothing but the Cold War could scarcely imagine that the world wasn't eternally locked in permafrost.

The wall came down not because Ronald Reagan stood up and demanded it but because on the evening November 9<sup>th</sup>, at a televised press conference in East Berlin, a Party hack named Günter Schabowski flubbed a question about the regime's new, liberalized travel regulations. Asked when they took effect, Schabowski shrugged, scratched his head, checked some papers, and said, "Immediately," sending thousands of East Berliners to the wall in a human tide that the German Democratic Republic could not control (*The New Yorker*, "The Talk of the Town," pages 21-22)."

The miracle of 1989 was that the world was changed by a movement which flowed from the bottom up. The people at the top who thought they were in control were caught off guard by the determined effort of ordinary people to bring change to their lives. Europe's finest moment came when leaders were forced to step aside.

It is this dynamic which lies at the heart of the exchange between Pilate and Jesus in the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of John. There is one crucial question that Pilate is determined to press when Jesus is hauled before him. He wants to know if Jesus aspires to be a king. He is concerned that Jesus may be a leader of an insurgency against the Roman occupation. It is Pilate's job to use the military forces under his command to root out the zealots who resist Roman rule. If Jesus is one of them, Pilate will have no mercy in sentencing him.

The reply that Jesus gives is less than satisfactory from Pilate's perspective. The safe reply for Jesus would have been a simple "no." That is what Pilate wanted to hear. That is an answer that could have given Pilate a way to avoid condemning Jesus to die on the cross. But Jesus refuses to tell Pilate what he wants to hear. Jesus also refuses to tell the zealots what they want to hear. He is not prepared to be a king like David, who will lead an army to throw the Romans out. Jesus' answer to Pilate's question is "yes and no." It all depends on what you mean by the word "king." Jesus will not be a king in the conventional sense. He says to Pilate, "My kingdom is not from this world..." (John 18:36)."

Jesus' kingdom is different because he came to enable people to change their lives and their world from the bottom up. He came to empower people not rulers. Pilate could not begin to understand Jesus' response to his question. But these words of Jesus resonated in the hearts and minds of the Scots who propelled their country into the Reformation in the 1550s.

The usual storyline of the Scottish Reformation is that it was all about John Knox. It is often assumed that Knox was the driving force behind the Scottish Reformation. He is usually seen as the kind of revolutionary figure that Pilate feared. But the truth is much more complex than that. Scots with Protestant leanings had been engaged in a popular rebellion in Scotland throughout the decade of the 1550s while Knox was a refugee on the continent of Europe. The historian Diarmaid MacCulloch has written that the source of this rebellion is a mystery. No one knows why the Reformation gained traction so quickly in Scotland. It cannot be traced to John Knox, who was far away from the action. MacCulloch describes Knox' discovery of the effectiveness of this growing rebellion in the following words:

...during Knox' absence in the 1550s popular fervor had built up in certain parts of the kingdom in a manner that frankly astonished him. On a brief visit back to Scotland in 1555-1556, he wrote to his English mother-in-law and intimate confidante Elizabeth Bowes: "If I had not seen it with my eyes in my own country, I could not have believed it...Yea, Mother, their fervency doth so ravish me, that I cannot but accuse and condemn my slothful coldness (*The Reformation: A History*, page 293).

Three years later Knox would return to Scotland to become the leader of this spiritual movement which he did not create. Scotland was changed from the bottom up by people who understood that Jesus was a different kind of king; a king who gives power away rather than gathering it to himself. These rebels saw clearly that Jesus came to bring an end to kingship as the world had known it. Unlike their English neighbors, the Scots never again granted absolute power to their monarchs. They expected their kings and queens to be accountable to the gospel and to the people.

The truth is that Jesus was far more dangerous than Pilate dared imagine. To listen to his voice is to know that we do not have to live behind the walls constructed by the powers of this world. Jesus invites us to live in a different kind of house. Or in the words from the Scottish Psalter that we will be singing today:

Goodness and mercy all my life  
Shall surely follow me;  
And in God's house forever more  
My dwelling place shall be.

(The Lord's My Shepherd, I'll Not Want, *Scottish Psalter*, 1650)