

**God's GPS**  
**A Sermon by Louise Westfall**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**Cleveland Heights, Ohio**  
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**Text: John 18:31-37**

Members of Hudson Presbyterian Church and Stow Presbyterian Church in Summit County recently voted to leave the Presbyterian Church (USA). While their pastors cited an array of issues, from homosexuality to biblical interpretation, they boiled it down to one primary charge: they believe the denomination has abandoned its commitment to the lordship of Jesus Christ. I can't imagine a more serious charge. To govern our lives according to the rule of Christ is the reason we are church. Our leaders—elders, deacons, and ministers—promise to live, serve, and govern "in obedience to Jesus Christ." The only theological affirmation you have to make to join Fairmount as a member is to say that Jesus Christ is your lord and savior. But what does that mean? I always tell the confirmation class and membership class participants that it takes a lifetime and a faith community to help figure that out. So I marvel that imperfect pastors and congregations could claim they understand perfectly what it means to proclaim Jesus as Lord. To place ultimate authority in human words written in an ancient, pre-scientific context belies the power of the Holy Spirit speaking today through diverse people and perspectives, and seems extraordinarily arrogant. Jesus Christ may be the same "yesterday, today, and forever," but the world God created is dynamic, ever-changing, unfolding, and of amazing grace. The Presbyterian Church *is* certain of its Lord, but believes that the church in every generation must seek guidance from that Lord, listening and discerning God's will in the face of new realities.

The church year closes out with something called "Christ the King" or "Reign of Christ" Sunday. We've come full circle from Advent, which begins next week. Here on the church's "new year's eve" we look into the future and celebrate the Lord who

is already there. Human history and the church's history are bounded by the One who is "the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end." Christ rules over all. We sing all these great, triumphant hymns painting images of a redeemed creation singing and dancing around the divine throne; sorrow and sighing and mourning and death are no more, for the former things have passed away and only glorious, unending life remains.

In the meantime, however.... death in its many guises shows no sign of giving up. The world does not seem to reflect the reign of Christ. Wars and rumors of wars rule the day. The intricate interdependence of the earth has been brutally assaulted by our "king of the hill" mentality. Individually, we spend considerable effort securing our lives against capricious fate and pretend we are in control.

Last week we spoke of the sovereignty of God, how the world is held closely and forever in God's hands. Today we want to ask how that sovereign rule is expressed in our lives. How do we chart a life course guided by divine will? What does it mean to you and me to say that Christ rules our lives? The morning text is an excerpt from the interrogation of Jesus by Governor Pilate. The wildly popular teacher had been arrested by the religious leaders, but brought before the ruling *civil* authority because the synagogue was not permitted to impose a death sentence. Here Pilate questions Jesus, attempting to understand in what sense he is "the King of the Jews." Then as now, the central question concerns Jesus' identity. Who is he...to you? Listen for God's Word in the reading from the gospel according to John, in the eighteenth chapter at the thirty-third verse. [JOHN 18:33-38]

Several years ago I was a speaker at a conference in south Georgia. I flew into Atlanta and then took a small plane from there to Albany—pronounced "Al-bany." However, when I checked into the tiny regional airport for the return flight, I was dismayed to learn the single daily flight to Atlanta had been cancelled. No way did I want to miss my connecting flight

home, with Sunday morning responsibilities looming large. So I rented a car, and since I was in unfamiliar territory without benefit of Mapquest, asked for one with a GPS guidance system. I sort of got the concept of satellite tracking, but had never used the automobile navigational variety, and was in for a pleasant surprise. The GPS steered me directly to the rental car return at Hartsfield International Airport. Even when I exited before I should have, the calm, non-judgmental female voice of the GPS assured me she was “re-calculating,” and actually led me on some surface roads safely back to the interstate. “You have arrived,” the GPS announced as I pulled into the drop-off garage. And I felt I had!

O, for a GPS to navigate life’s highways and byways! But in fact God has built one into each human soul: a compass, a “north star”, a spiritual map by which to chart our course. Why don’t we use it? Perhaps, not unlike Pilate, our notions of power and control silence the still, small voice within. Our immersion in the kingdoms of this world—and the way power is obtained and wielded in them—block out the spiritual guidance system God created.

The gospel writer confronts us with this truth through irony. Pilate imagined he held all the cards. He had the full authority of Rome behind him, and later reminds Jesus that he has the power to release him...or crucify him. Jesus counters with claims that his kingdom is not from this world; his authority is exercised in a completely different way. And when all is said and done, it is Jesus who overturns Pilate’s power to put him to death. Pilate is remembered as the earthly ruler under whom Jesus suffered, while Jesus is worshiped as the living God.

Of course, this drama is played out again and again in every generation, the true power of God’s Kingdom always distinguished from the illusory power of human empires. And we are continually confronted with a choice between the two. When Pilate inquires of Jesus “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus’ response is another question, intended to reveal Pilate’s own commitment. Who do you say that I am? The religious

leaders are subsequently faced with the same choice and reply “We have no king but Caesar” [John 19:15]. Then and now, truth gets sacrificed on the altar of expediency, for the sake of security, to maintain the status quo and fulfill the golden rule—the one that says those who have the gold, rule.

Little wonder that we drift so far from the path that leads to real life. Yeats’ poem got it right: things fall apart and the Center does not hold---but only because we have replaced the Center through which all things hold together, with poor and ineffective substitutes. Friends, today is a good day to reclaim our internal GPS, the Center that will navigate us unflinchingly toward God and the kingdom of love and light.

By God’s grace, the journey before us can be re-calculated at the very places we have gotten lost. We can resume our journey headed in the right direction. Of course, this works only as we become aware that we don’t know the way! Many of us (and not just men) would rather wander interminably than ask for directions. It’s that control thing—we want it, and think it will be our salvation. To each of us, what Christ primarily asks is that we listen. That we stop our ceaseless activity for even a moment and hear the divine voice inside, offering guidance and direction that really will save us and help our lives to be as rich and full as God intended.

A church member recently told me about an experience she had that gave her new insight on a particular situation in her life about which she was concerned and was struggling to resolve. One morning on her way to work, on a whim she stopped here at church and went into the sanctuary, simply to sit. She didn’t pray with words—her head had been full of words for weeks---instead she sat and listened. Some time later, she returned to her busy life, renewed and spiritually strengthened. I wonder what would happen if each of us tried that—here in the sanctuary we share, or perhaps in another place where we can silence the powers and authorities of this world and listen for the voice of Christ. God’s GPS will guide us faithfully through life’s maze. But don’t think it’s only good

in times of trouble and perplexity, when we need a mid-course correction. God's GPS is for all time. Jesus Christ makes the trip itself a journey of joy.

The great 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian and ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr died before global navigation systems were an everyday reality. Still he understood the profound human need for divine guidance and truth. His words clearly identify the spiritual source of fulfillment:

*Nothing worth doing can be achieved in a lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone. Therefore we are saved by love.*

...and they call the church to claim and proclaim the One whose great love for all people ignites faith, produces hope, and guides us safely home.

NOW TO THE ONE WHO IS ABLE TO KEEP US FROM FALLING,  
THE GREAT SHEPHERD OF THE SHEEP, MAKE YOU COMPLETE IN  
EVERYTHING GOOD, THROUGH JESUS CHRIST TO WHOM BE  
GLORY FOREVER AND EVER. AMEN.

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