

### John 18:33-37

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?"

Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

Here ends the reading.

### Revelation 1:4b-8

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen.

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

The Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

Aren't underdog stories the best? Bob Cratchit and Tiny Tim, David and Goliath, the American middle class.

One thing that's interesting about the underdog stories we love, is that we don't want the underdog to just "make it" or "survive", we want them to WIN. It's not about overcoming adversity to get an opportunity, it's about beating the odds and DESTROYING YOUR ENEMIES.

What about the football movie Rudy?

It's about Rudy Reuttiger, whose dream is not only to attend Notre Dame, but to play football for the Fighting Irish. Against all odds, he makes the practice squad only to be denied the chance to dress by the new coach.

After quitting the team, all the rest of the seniors protested and threatened to hold out from the last game of the season against Georgia Tech—including All-American captain of the team, Roland Steele. So coach Dan Devine relents and lets Rudy suit up for the last game. Hooray!

Now that would have been a great true story, but it's not enough to be made into a sweet MOVIE. Remember... we want the underdog to WIN, not just suit up and play.

So, in the movie, with just minutes remaining and Notre Dame up 17-3, Coach Devine sends all remaining seniors onto the field—all the seniors except, you guessed it, Rudy. At 5-foot-nothing and weighing in at a buck-fifty, would Rudy even survive a hit by those living refrigerators of Georgia Tech's offensive line?

Within seconds, everyone realizes what has happened. The stadium begins to reverberate with what has become a timeless scene: RUDY! RUDY! RUDY!

What happens next has to be one of the greatest underdog sequences of all time. The movie ends with the Notre Dame offense going against the game plan, scoring a touchdown, which gives Georgia Tech one last possession and the Fighting Irish defense runs onto the field. Just before the ball is snapped, Rudy runs onto the field.

On the last play of the game, Rudy doesn't just "play well". He doesn't just "cover his guy" and survive. On the last play of the game, Rudy beats his man and SACKS the Georgia Tech quarterback. Joyous chaos ensues. Rudy is carried off the field.

Have you ever thought that the Bible was written by the underdog?

The Hebrew people, though chosen by God to be a blessing to all nations, are oppressed and extorted by foreign powers all throughout their existence. Their temple is destroyed and they are enslaved at various times for generations.

In the gospel of John, the underdog seems clear as Jesus is questioned by the powerful figure of Pontius Pilate. Despite the lengthy dialogue, Jesus is at his mercy.

The underdog story continues as Jesus is handed over to the Judean authorities to be crucified as they see fit, in those dark moments of the gospel when Jesus cries out to God the Father before giving up his spirit.

DEEP BREATH.

One might assume that the arc of the biblical underdog story reaches its zenith on that Easter morning when the angel greets the women with those timeless words of victory: He is not here!

Or when Jesus himself appears to his distraught followers: Peace be with you!

But I propose that the climax of the story isn't until the end of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, starting with our last reading for today. As we heard: Look! He is coming with the clouds! Every eye will see him!

Revelation, chapter 9, says:

Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.

See, we don't want the underdog to just *survive*. We want them to WIN.

The Jews of Judea *really* wanted the Messiah to come. By the time Jesus was born, the Jewish people had spent generations hoping and expecting the Messiah to come with vengeance and victory.

But as Jesus' ministry unfolds, it becomes clear that things are not what they had expected. Jesus was not going to be the warrior king longed for by generations of Jews. Imagine the let-down when everything else seemed to line up but then Jesus starts telling people why he must start walking toward Jerusalem—to die.

Two and a half stars. Do not recommend.

Enter the Book of Revelation. In a scene that epitomizes any underdog story, Jesus the meek servant of God who washed feet and had no place to rest his head, returns to earth not with a stole but with a sword.

Jesus the wise rabbi who wore sandals and calmly reasoned with his enemies as they plotted to kill him, return to earth with an army of angels to destroy evil-doers and reward the righteous. To set up the Reign of Christ.

This kind of imagery from the Book of Revelation touches on a part of our humanity that is irresistible: our desire for evil to be vanquished and justice to be served. For us, the Reign of Christ means victory for us, the righteous.

But what kind of victory is it, really? And what kind of reign? The Reign of Christ does not begin when Christ returns to earth. The Reign of Christ began already, not with a sword but with a swaddled infant. It began not with a battle but with a baby.

The Reign of Christ is not about the Risen Lord coming to earth on a battle stallion to wage war with an army of men. The Reign of Christ began when Jesus appeared to the women first, or before that when Jesus rescued the woman from the angry mob about to stone her, or before that when Jesus ministers to the woman at the well, or between the lines all throughout the gospels when Jesus, despite the best efforts of the male authors themselves, lifts up women in dialogue, includes them in teachings, and calls them disciples.

Victory under the Reign of Christ is not about winning some game or destroying one's enemies. According to the gospels, the Reign of Christ is about walking with the poor and oppressed, and *loving* one's enemies.

In the passage from John's gospel, Jesus drops a CRAZY convicting line in his response to Pilate, that kind of flies under the radar. But it's just a devastating blow to his followers:

Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

Just brutal.

I think his words are so convicting because of what his followers would have expected if things had turned out differently. Jesus knew their hearts. He knew that if they had fought for him and had succeeded in rescuing him from his captors, there would have been some expectations.

Would they have expected to be carried off the field in celebration? Would they have expected the reign of Christ the King to have included wealth and prosperity for them?

How would the disciples have reacted if, after rescuing him from the Romans, Jesus turns to them and says, "Well done, my good and faithful servant. Now, put down your sword and follow me. Leave everything behind, take only your tunic. Our ministry among the poor and vulnerable must continue"?

When we think about the Reign of Christ, what does it look like? Where are we in that image? Are we being carried off the field on account of our righteousness and heroic faith? Are we being congratulated because we made the team? Are we always the underdog just waiting to be vindicated?

Or, when we think about the Reign of Christ, are we leaving behind our expectations, walking with Jesus, and following him to serve the poor and vulnerable? The Reign of Christ has always meant God's justice, not ours.