

“King of Kings”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
Christ the King Sunday
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Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 9:2-7

²The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. ³You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. ⁴For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. ⁵For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. ⁶For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

New Testament Reading: John 18:33-37

³³Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” ³⁴Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” ³⁵Pilate 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?” ³⁶Jesus 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.” ³⁷Pilate 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.”



Sermon: “King of Kings”

Believe it or not, today is one of the toughest days on the church calendar. Tucked neatly between celebrations of Thanksgiving and the start of Advent, is Christ the King Sunday; a day when we celebrate Jesus Christ as King as head of the church and king of our lives. It’s a stiff challenge that calls us to serious reflection on what it means to be a Christian disciple, sandwiched between two holidays that have come to signify joyful consumption and gleeful celebration. You see, to proclaim that Christ is our King, means signing on to the things he stood for, valuing the tenets he espoused, and working for the Kingdom he proclaimed.

In our age of representative democracy, it is hard for us to think in terms of following the absolute rule of Kings anymore. Our nation has not been ruled by a King since George III was sent packing way back in the 18th century. In fact, as a nation, we are defined by that act of rebellion.

We don’t care much for kings because we like to be self-determined. We like to make our own decisions about who is in charge and what they will do as it affects us personally. And so we like to vote, and as a society, we tend to vote for people who we think will make things better.

Which puts an emphasis on campaign promises. One of the things I’ve always found curious about presidential campaigns is the promises candidates make about what they will do once they get into office. In 2008, then *candidate* Obama promised to close down the military prison at Guantanamo Bay. Almost two years after he left office, that prison remains open. Obama needed the support and cooperation of Congress to close that detention facility.¹

In 2015, then candidate Trump pledged to round up and deport 11 million illegal immigrants if he was elected. Though he has tried to curb immigration as president, both illegal and otherwise, he has not fulfilled that particular promise. Doing so would be practically impossible and prohibitively expensive.²

The problem is that presidents, no matter what they might think, don't have absolute authority. When this country was founded, we specifically chose to be a democracy rather than a monarchy, in part so that one person could not become a dictator. And that fierce desire of the people to have a say in their own government is part of what makes this country what it is.

Jesus makes no such grandiose promises. He tells us that the Kingdom of God will be better than what we have now, and he tells us that in God we have been given eternal life. But other than that... in terms of tangible benefits *here and now* or policies and ideas that will make a nation great in an unstable geo-political climate, not so much.

In fact, Jesus would have a hard time getting elected in our system as it exists today. Because even though he can offer quite a bit (what with the eternal life and all), he demands an awful lot too and his policy positions seem to be out of line with what the general population seems to be comfortable with.

For instance, Jesus said "Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you."³ It's clear that Jesus is in favor of welfare and government handouts. He's just going to throw your hard-earned tax dollars away.

Jesus said "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged"⁴ So Jesus must be soft on crime.

When asked about paying taxes, Jesus said he was in favor of it. "Give... to the emperor the things that are the emperor's," he said, "and to God the things that are God's."⁵ So, if he is elected, Jesus will probably raise your taxes.

What about defense? We need a strong leader who will fight the war on terror. We need lots of guns and billions of dollars for the military. But Jesus said, "Love your enemies"⁶ and "Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also..."⁷

Welp, if Jesus is elected, we'd better all start learning to speak Russian... or Chinese.

The things Jesus stood for, the qualities and characteristics of the Kingdom of God, often stand in direct opposition to what we actually do as a nation. And therein lies our challenge.

In the passage from John I just read, when Pilate asks Jesus if he is "King of the Jews" he's not just asking if Jesus has ceremonial or symbolic significance to the Jews. Pilate is the Governor of Judea. He holds political power over the Jews. Pilate is asking if Jesus' is trying to lay claim to *that* power for himself. He is asking if Jesus is a threat.

And while Jesus is not a threat to lead an armed revolt to overthrow Caesar and assume the throne, he *does* pose a threat to Rome because he threatens to change the hearts and minds of the people that Rome controls; he threatens to turn their loyalty away from Caesar and his kingdom, towards God and God's Kingdom.

You see, Jesus comes, at least in part, to challenge the world and the way we see it. We have come to value wealth and our society has shown a distressing willingness to tolerate bad behavior in exchange for economic prosperity. But Jesus was not a man of wealth. He had essentially the clothes on his back. Luke tells us, that when Jesus was executed, roman soldiers gambled for his simple robes,⁸ and when he was buried his body was wrapped in a plain linen cloth that wasn't his and buried in a tomb he didn't own.⁹

We value comfort, and big homes with lots of amenities. But in Luke 9:58, Jesus says "foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head."

Our society values having a good reputation and behaving in such a way that people think well of you. We value being popular. It was true in high school and it's still true in adulthood. We struggle with saying what we believe and sharing our

faith because we don't want people to think we're "Jesus freaks" or something worse. But Luke tells us that when Jesus was arrested for saying what he believed, all of his friends scattered, and none would even admit to knowing who Jesus was.

We seem to value safety and security. I keep hearing that more guns will make us safer, and more stand-your-ground laws and more soldiers and weapons and more modern nuclear missiles. One U.S. Senator, during a discussion about the situation with North Korea, when it was pointed out to him that millions of innocent civilians could die if war broke out on the Korean Peninsula said, "If a million people are going to die, they're going to die over there, not here."¹⁰

But Luke tells us that when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus and one of *his* disciples tried to defend him with a sword, Jesus rebuked him saying that if you live by the sword you will die by the sword¹¹ and instead went peacefully. And when Jesus was hung unjustly on a cross, he responded by praying for his persecutors saying "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."¹²

We say Jesus is our King, but too often the values of our society fall short of the things Jesus valued. Don't get me wrong, it's okay to have wealth. It's okay to protect yourself and your family from danger. It's okay to want to be liked and well thought of. But none of those things is essential to the Kingdom of God.

And that brings us to a point of crisis: we are called to be followers of a king whose values are often very different from the values of the society in which we live. And being a disciple of Christ is not the same as being in the constituency of an elected official. We do not get to dictate to Jesus, we are expected to obey him.

That's the funny thing about Kings; elected officials bend to the will of the people. That is the nature of democracy. But kings, well kings assert *their will* and the people bend to *it*. You see, calling Jesus "King" doesn't define *him*. It defines *us*. Because if we say that Jesus is our King, then we are committing ourselves to being his followers every day and to walking with him every step of the journey. Which is hard.

When I was a kid, my father used to plant a garden. It was a pretty elaborate garden that covered roughly a quarter acre or so. He would till it each spring before he would plant rows of carrots and corn and squash and watermelons. He used a gas-powered roto-tiller that would turn the earth; transforming the land from a hard, crusty surface to soft, loamy soil. One of my clearest memories of childhood is the image of my father, walking behind that tiller, up and down the rows methodically turning the dirt, his shoes leaving large, man-sized prints in the soft earth. My sister and I would make a game out of walking behind him, trying to step exactly in his foot prints.

Now my dad was a tall man, and I was only about 5 or 6 years old, so his stride was naturally longer than I could easily match, so I would literally have to *leap* from footprint to footprint as I struggled to keep up with him and to walk exactly where he walked.

For us it was a game, but it reminds me of what it means to follow Christ. Because to acknowledge Christ as king and to follow him means by definition trying to walk where he walked; to match his stride and to copy his journey; to put our feet in his footprints and to go where he went. Which is no easy thing. Jesus' life was lived on the margins; reaching out to the least and placing no value on the things that our society deems so important: like wealth, power, and privilege.

He was a religious reformer who angered the Temple authorities. He was a deeply faithful man who taught loyalty not to the state, but to the kingdom of God and thus angered the Roman authorities. He was a selfless man who embodied the mercy and steadfast love of God with everything he did, and thus gave his own life as a sacrifice for many. How can we ever hope to reach his footprints with our own, short sinful human stride? Simply put, we do the things he did, we learn the lessons he taught and we live in the manner that he embodied.

We love God. We love our neighbors. We love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. We use the gifts God has given us for the purposes to which God has called us; We feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, and welcome the homeless; we seek to forgive one another and let go of past hurts and old grudges; we work for justice for the oppressed; we cease judging one another; we repent of the things we have done to sin against God and one another. We share the gospel and if necessary, we use words; we take up our crosses daily and we go to work participating in the Kingdom that God is building.

And we know that we will fail sometimes; that we will fall short. Our own steps will frequently land outside those footprints Jesus left for us to follow. The good news is that

- 1.) God is generous with second chances and
- 2.) We don't have to do it alone. God has given us each other and other disciples all over the world to help us.

It would be nice if we could just skip over this observance; if we could go from the gratitude of Thanksgiving to the anticipation of Advent and the joy of Christmas. But in the midst of all that comfort, we find this challenging reminder that we are called to trust and obey and follow Christ, our king.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Washington Post Editorial Board. "The Failure to Close Guantanamo." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 2 Jan. 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/shut-down-guantanamo-mr-trump/2017/01/02/9807ceb4-cea8-11e6-a87f-b917067331bb_story.html?utm_term=.adc0da81e7bd.

² Bennett, Brian. "Can Donald Trump Really Round up and Deport 11 Million People?" *LATimes.com*, Los Angeles Times, 23 Aug. 2016, 7:55 PM, www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-trump-deport-20160822-snap-story.html.

³ Matthew 5:42, NRSV

⁴ Matthew 7:1, NRSV

⁵ Matthew 22:21, NRSV

⁶ Matthew 5:43-44, NRSV

⁷ Matthew 5:38-39, NRSV

⁸ Luke 23:34, NRSV

⁹ John 19:38-42, NRSV

¹⁰ Woodward, Bob. *Fear: Trump in the White House*. Simon & Schuster, 2018.

¹¹ Matthew 26:52, Paraphrased

¹² Luke 23:34, NRSV