



## Give Us A King!

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sean Lanigan  
Feast of Christ the King ~ November 25, 2018*

### **Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14**

As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne, his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence. A thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him. The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened. As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

### **Psalm 93**

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| 1 | God is Sovereign, clothed in splendid apparel; *<br>God is robed in majesty and is girded with strength. | the waters have lifted up their voice; *<br>the waters have lifted up their pounding waves. |   |
| 2 | God has made the whole world so sure *<br>that it cannot be moved;                                       | 5   | Mightier than the sound of many waters,<br>mightier than the breakers of the sea, *<br>mightier is the Holy One who dwells on high. |
| 3 | Ever since the world began,<br>your throne has been established; *<br>you are from everlasting.          | 6   | Your testimonies are very sure, *<br>and holiness adorns your house, O God,<br>for ever and for evermore.                           |
| 4 | The waters have lifted up, O God,  |   |   |

### **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.

### **John 18:33-37**

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."

It's strange how liturgical time works. Today is the last Sunday of the church year. We will start a new church year next Sunday, with the first Sunday of Advent. Advent marks the beginning of a whole new cycle, another year in which we will tell the story all over again.

Today, this last Sunday of the year, is traditionally called Christ the King Sunday. Now, I'm not sure what sorts of images those words might bring to your mind. My mind's eye sees larger-than-life stained glass windows depicting Jesus adorned with a golden crown and scepter. Decked out like any proper king of yore: resplendent in lusciously draping robes, surveying his dominion.

But of course, these images are most certainly all wrong, theologically speaking, no matter how much they have been enshrined and elevated by the canon of art history. These images speak of our aspirations, not of God's. We miss the point of Christ's kingship, if we insist on bedazzling it, outfitting him with symbols and accoutrements of worldly power. Indeed, the question of Christ the King Sunday is this: will we choose the kingdom of the world, or will we choose the kingdom of God?

You see, Christ the King prefaces the Advent season with a reminder of where the story will end. Because it ends with a decision, of course. Our decision. Our answer to the question: is Jesus king, or is he not?

Is\_\_Jesus\_\_king?

Many of us will instinctively want to say no. We're enchanted by power, but simultaneously troubled by images of worldly power run amok. We're confused about how to transpose the easily corruptible symbols of worldly power into the religious realm. We're made anxious by religion's seeming insistence on borrowing the oppressive language of Empire. Is there nowhere safe from worldly power games? Even the church? This is supposed to be a space set apart, isn't it? A refuge from the eternal wrangling of the powers that be. A sanctum for the soul. Or is it?

As far as I can tell, we deceive ourselves if we think of the church as somewhere separate. As an escape, immune to the powers. As a place more concerned with the soul than without our mundane bodily lives. Because the God we meet in Jesus is interested in far more, I think, than just our so-called "spiritual lives."

The God we meet in Jesus is, in fact, interested in our whole lives, our whole selves: body, mind, and spirit—the whole kit-and-caboodle. And, as God only knows: the competition for our allegiance can be incredibly fierce.

From time immemorial, we humans have been swayed to-and-fro by worldly powers. These days, we have become beholden to the technocracy that both shapes our desires and sells us infinite promises of fulfilling them. We reserve our "spiritual lives" for God, of course, but just about everything else we hand over to the market. Buy low, sell high. Everything at a price. Everything commodified. The highest bidder always wins.

And I don't think God is much satisfied with this arrangement. Not because God is jealous or power-hungry or greedy. But rather, because God has much bigger, better plans for this world.

Most of us haven't quite bought into these plans, though. Passages like Isaiah 55 sound like pie-in-the-sky to us, most days. We can scarcely imagine that texts like these are describing what's really real... instead, we pervert these fundamental conditions to our own ends and strive to sustain the illusion that our distortion is "reality."

Hear again from the prophet Isaiah:

Come, all you who are thirsty,  
come to the waters;  
and you who have no money,  
come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk  
without money and without cost.  
Why spend money on what is not bread,  
and your labor on what does not satisfy?  
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,  
and you will delight in the richest of fare.  
Give ear and come to me;  
listen, that you may live.<sup>1</sup>

But we have trouble listening...trouble catching the vision. God is not a realistic enough economist for our tastes. So we want to segment our lives. To keep some parts for ourselves, away from the God who seems to want

everything. The God who wants to be King... and not of our hearts, only.

For millennia, we humans have been hard-hearted to God's vision of a peaceable, reconciled, flourishing creation. So in God's good time, in God's continuing efforts to woo us into new life, God came among us in Jesus.

Now, in communities like ours, we spend a lot of time looking at Jesus' life, at how he treated others. We take him as a role model, an exemplar. But we are, nevertheless, quite loathe to crown him as king, because his kingship would necessarily call into question all of our other allegiances and assumptions. His kingship would destabilize our presumptions about the very nature of reality. We would, on the whole, rather that Jesus be a really good guy than the Alpha and Omega, "who is and who was and who is to come."

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Now, as a brief aside, let me note that you may be surprised, or even annoyed, by my use of the patriarchal, imperialist language of kingship. This kind of language that is being given less and less of a prominent place in our liturgy here at St. Peter's, and I think that's a good thing. But I've retained this language today because I think that discarding language before deconstructing it often does us a disservice. For those of us who wish to reconfigure power, therefore, I think it is necessary to understand deeply both how language has worked to perpetuate the status quo as well as how it can be used to disrupt it. I am hoping that by playing with the word "king" today, new valences and significations might emerge among us, to help us in our work of imagining a more just world into being.

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So now, back to Jesus, and to how we make sense of him. His life—a life lived for others—is so very important to keep at the forefront. But so are his death, resurrection, and ascension, which we so often contain to Lent, Holy Week, and Easter. Indeed, Jesus' overcoming of death is at the very core of our Christian faith because it so radically reconfigures our assumptions. It demonstrates that what we have always taken to be the rules may not actually be the rules at all. Jesus' resurrection is a referendum on death, revealing that death is not the ultimate power in the universe. That death is not the final word.

But if death is not the Alpha and Omega, then who or what is? Who rules? Who is king?

We know, theologically speaking, that Jesus is the answer. But what does this answer really mean? And what good does it do? In a world where royalty has mostly become a quaint antiquity, why does it matter who we designate theologically as king or queen?

It matters, I think, because we will always choose a king. Because we will *always* allow something or someone to rule. Because we feel disoriented when someone's not in charge. This need for a ruler is so very primal in us. And we may think we've outgrown it as a people. That we're far too modern and sophisticated to crave a king. That we'd never be like our Israelite ancestors, who in the Book of Samuel, proclaimed:

"We are determined to have a king over us, so that we may be like other nations, and so that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles."<sup>iii</sup>

But are we? Are we so far beyond a king?

Psychologist Erich Fromm, writes, in his 1941 book *Escape from Freedom*, that:

"Modern man still is anxious and tempted to surrender his freedom to dictators of all kinds, or to lose it by transforming himself into a small cog in the machine, well-fed, and well-clothed, yet not a free man, but an automaton."<sup>iii</sup>

But why?

Fromm argues:

"Modern man, freed from the bonds of pre-individualistic society, which simultaneously gave him security and limited him, has not [yet] gained freedom in the positive sense of the realization of his individual self. [...] Freedom, though it has brought him independence and rationality, has made him isolated and, thereby, anxious and powerless. This isolation is unbearable and the alternatives he is confronted with are either to escape from the burden of his freedom into new dependencies and submission, or to advance to the full realization of positive freedom which is based upon the uniqueness and individuality of man."<sup>iv</sup>

This "positive freedom" to which Fromm is pointing has a great deal in common, I think, with the "new life" into which Jesus invites us and with Jesus' announcement of the dawning of God's kingdom, that intensely peaceable

realm wherein such flourishing is possible. We need a different kind of king, then, to protect *this* kind of kingdom.

Indeed:

If Christ is King, then Christ is king of God's healing reign of peace and justice. If Christ is King, then Christ is a king who protects and guarantees our freedom: our freedom to dream beyond present rules and realities and into God's good future, where hope is no longer held "hostage to the rules of cause and effect."<sup>v</sup>

Indeed:

If Christ is King, then Christ is a king who deconstructs kingship. And if we are citizens of Christ's upside-down kingdom, then we are citizens who deconstruct citizenship. We live as "restless strangers and foreigners" in the midst of this world's powers and principalities, heralds of the coming of God's kingdom.<sup>vi</sup> We are citizens of a kingdom that is still being born.

Let us hasten its arrival, then,  
through lives of peace and justice.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Isaiah 55:1-3

<sup>ii</sup> 1 Samuel 8:19-20

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.brainpickings.org/2018/04/17/erich-fromm-escape-from-freedom/>

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.ivpress.com/reconciling-all-things>, page 96

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid. Page 97