

Are You the King?

November 21, 2021

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

John 18:33-37

So, Christ the King Sunday.

I always think that this is a really interesting Sunday in the church year. So, for those of you who aren't "church nerds" like me and you're thinking "what are you talking about, Christ the King Sunday?" It's Thanksgiving Sunday! And why in the world are we reading about Jesus and Pontius Pilate in November? Don't we usually read that in the spring when we are getting close to Easter?

Well, yes. We do. Christ the King Sunday is usually celebrated on the very last Sunday of the church year.

So, you all know that we have a calendar year, that starts on January 1.

We also have an academic year, which starts somewhere between mid-August and early-September, and that runs through late May or early June.

But the church also has its own calendar. And the church year starts with the season of Advent – which we will celebrate beginning next week. That really makes a lot of sense, because Advent is that time when we start looking ahead to the place where it all began – the birth of Christ. The birth of our entire faith. Our way of being. Of course, our calendar should start at the beginning.

And if our church calendar starts at the beginning, it also ends at the end. Throughout the year we hear the stories of our faith; the stories of Jesus; the stories of the Old Testament that point us to Christ; we are reminded of who we are as people – both the good and the bad – and who this God is who chooses to be in relationship with us. We learn the history of our faith as we discover something about the people and the cultures and the traditions in both the Old and New Testaments and we are reminded that even though the world has changed profoundly between then and now, we as people really haven't changed all that much. We learn what God expects of us – studying the teachings of Jesus, and the teachings of the prophets, and the teachings of people like the Apostle Paul. We learn, through Jesus's parables a little bit about the kingdom of God – the kingdom of which God has made us all a part.

And then, on this last Sunday of the church year, we round it all out by celebrating the one final thing that will last – that will endure for all eternity: that Christ is King. That Jesus will reign forever, and ever, and ever.

So, if we start the year by looking at where it all began, we end the year by looking ahead to where it all ends – and it ends with God seated on the throne in a kingdom that has no end.

So. Christ the King Sunday. This is an interesting day, particularly for us as Americans. Because we don't have much frame of reference for what it's like to have a king. Our whole country was founded in the first place because we didn't *want* a king. Or at least, we didn't want King George III as our king – which is understandable. Because that guy was crazy. *[Insert Hamilton clip?]*

We wanted freedom. We wanted independence. We didn't want some power-craving lunatic telling us what we could and could not do. We didn't want a king telling us who to worship, or how. We didn't want family lineage deciding who our leaders would be. We wanted the freedom to choose our own leaders. And then to vote them out of office if they turned out to be a train wreck.

I have to laugh a little bit – way back in the Old Testament, in the book of 1 Samuel, the one thing Israel wanted, more than anything else, was a king. “But ALL the cool kids have kings!” they whined to God, even after God tried to tell them, “no, you really don't want a king. You're better off without one. And if you get one, you are going to regret it.” But nevertheless, true to form, the people didn't listen. God finally relented and gave them a king, and lo and behold, they spent the rest of their history regretting it.

Fast forward about a thousand years and the Israelite people – now known as the Jewish community – have seen up close what can happen when you are ruled by a king. For a king, at least here on earth, there are two things that are of utmost importance: power and security. You want to expand your kingdom, and you want to *keep* your kingdom. You want to conquer others, and not be conquered. And so, as we saw last week when we were talking about all of the different emperors in ancient Rome, it is very tempting and normal for a king to rule by domination, and intimidation, and force, and threat. And when a king starts to go a little bit cuckoo, or get a little bit too power hungry, sometimes this intimidation and threat of domination can start to get leveled not just at other countries, but against one's own people. We saw that with King George III – which is one reason the colonists finally said “enough is enough”, we saw it last week with the emperor Nero who set fire to his own city because he wanted a bigger castle. And we saw it waaaaay back as early as the book of Exodus when the Egyptian Pharaoh got scared, and instead of making the Hebrew people his allies, he decided to eliminate them as a threat, and make them his slaves instead. And we're not even going to talk about the series of train wrecks that Israel had for their kings over the years.

Throughout pretty much all of scripture, the pictures that we get of kings are pictures of power-hungry maniacs, or of self-centered toddlers stuck in grown-up's bodies. Even at its best, the picture is *never* pretty.

Which is why it is so fascinating to me that throughout the gospels the idea of Jesus as king comes up, over and over and over and over again.

From the moment of his birth, when the star appears in the sky and the three magi follow the star, looking for the newborn king and whoops! They end up at the castle of King Herod who had no clue that there was an infant out there somewhere who intended to overthrow him, and so he sends his cronies out to put an end to that threat.

To John chapter 6, after Jesus had fed the 5,000, and the people are happy and excited, but Jesus has to go hide out in the mountains to get out of dodge because he has received word that the people were about to come and take him by force to *make him king*.

I don't know how they thought *that* was going to go, but Jesus didn't want to have any part in it.

To the story of Jesus's triumphal entry – at the beginning of that last week of his life when he and the disciples ride into Jerusalem and the people lay their cloaks down in front of him and wave palm branches, hailing him as they would hail a king. And then, the moment Jesus gets off of that donkey and away from the crowds he is probably as grumpy as we have ever seen him and he proceeds to march straight into the temple, drives out the moneychangers, and then a few hours later he curses a fig tree, just for good measure. I wonder if maybe he didn't like the fact that the crowds were hailing him as king?

And then, the story that we read today. It's a few days later. Jesus has been arrested, and he is standing before Pontius Pilate, who is questioning him. Pilate has already asked the Jewish leaders what charge they are bringing him up on, and they don't have an answer for him – because they don't have a good charge. "Just trust us," they say to Pilate. And even though Pilate is skeptical, he agrees to try him.

And so the first thing that he asks Jesus is very direct, and to-the-point: "Are you the king of the Jews?"

And just like the Jewish leaders didn't answer Pilate's question, neither will Jesus. He doesn't say yes; he doesn't say no. All he says is "my kingdom is not of this world."

Or maybe, a better translation of that would be "My kingdom is not this type of kingdom; my kingdom is not like this; my kingdom is not what you'd understand to be familiar as a kingdom. If it was, my followers would be fighting to keep me in power, because that's how you keep a kingdom in this world: You fight. You intimidate. You force. You threaten. But that is not what my kingdom is about."

So now, Pilate's confused. "So, you are a king?"

“Your words, not mine,” Jesus says to him. “Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

So, let’s unpack this a little bit.

“You can call me a king,” Jesus is saying, “but if you do, you are going to have to turn your understanding of what a king is, upside-down.” I am not here to intimidate, or force, or dominate, or coerce anybody. I am not here to gain power at all costs. I’m not here to gain wealth, or accolades, and I’m sure not here for a fancy palace. The devil already offered me all those things, and I turned them down.

Here’s why I’m here: I’m here so that the blind might see. And the deaf might hear. And so that the lame might leap for joy. I’m here so that those who find themselves trapped in a life of brokenness and pain and sin and hopelessness might be set free. I’m here to comfort those who never got a fair shake at life. I’m here to give hope to the poor, and a cup of cold water to those who thirst for something more. I’m here so that those who think they already know and understand everything there is to know about God, might be left scratching their heads, and so that those who are afraid that nobody – including God – would want them, might discover a love like no other.

I am here to lead wayward sons back to their father. To go find that one sheep among the 99 who has gone missing. I’m here to throw an extravagant party when the child who was lost, is found again. I’ve come to sit at the table with tax collectors, and prostitutes, and to drive the religious leaders bonkers with questions. I’ve come that *someone* might see and notice the poor widow who has just given everything she has.

I’ve come so that all might be fed, and none will go hungry. I’ve come to calm the storms and silence the raging seas; to help those who follow me to find peace in the storms of life.

Is that what a king does? Because that’s what the kingdom of heaven is all about.

Friends, we in the United States might not live in a kingdom today. We left kings behind 250 years ago. But what kings and kingdoms have historically stood for – power, and wealth, and security – these aren’t actually kingdom issues. These are human issues, that we all wrestle with, even to this day. We still find ourselves tempted to believe that our power and our security come from us being the biggest and strongest kids on the playground. From being the smartest, or the most industrious, or the most creative, or the hardest working.

But for us as citizens of the Kingdom of God, Jesus is calling us to a different way. A way that is frankly baffling to somebody like Pilate – that would be baffling to King George III, or Nero, or Pharaoh, or most of our politicians today. Jesus tells us that in the kingdom

of God, our hope, our promise, our security, our power comes not from what we can build or who we can control. But from what God has promised. Our strength is in God alone. Our hope is not in what we can do, but in what God does in and through us. We don't place our hope in a God who sits bejeweled on a throne, but in a God who came to earth and was born in a stable, lived as a peasant, died as a criminal, and rose again that all of us messy people might have a place in the kingdom that has no end.

And this is why I think it is so appropriate that Christ the King Sunday falls also on Thanksgiving week. Because we have a God – a king – a ruler – who is both merciful and just. Who sees and knows every single one of us. Who enters into our lives and our stories and journeys through life with us. A God of healing, and wholeness; forgiveness and hope. A God who lifts us up in our brokenness, breaks our chains, and sets us free.

And THAT, my friends, is reason enough to give thanks.