

## SINGING IN THE REIGN

A Sermon Preached by  
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Texts: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 23  
Luke 23:33-43

Corporations occasionally have trouble with the translation of their advertising slogans into foreign languages, and have to rethink or reword what it is they want to say within different specific cultures. The English metaphors and idioms often create embarrassing and harmful misinterpretations and translations that produce unintended marketing consequences.

This same confusion happens in other ways, including within our faith. One prime example: the idea of king and kingdom. In our culture kings are from another time, a fairy tale time, or locked into the historical past, distant from our time of representative democracies, or they represent political anachronisms, such as the British monarchy, or they bring forth pictures of modern day monarchical tyranny and repression.

Yet, today we celebrate a special Sunday, set apart as it is to represent the end of the Liturgical Year, to symbolize the culminating of the biblical message the Church has preached throughout the previous twelve months since last Advent began; and the name of this Sunday is “Christ the King.” On this Sunday we celebrate a time apart from time, an event outside of history, yet already begun within history: the fulfillment of God's plan for redemption and re-creation, the full emergence of the kingdom of God with Christ as King. This Sunday also marks the final installment in the sermon series I've been preaching this fall on the Great Ends of the Church, as recorded in the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The last Great End is *The Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world*.

Unfortunately, this important event in the Liturgical Year and this final Great End of the Church can suffer the same fate as the advertising slogans mentioned earlier. Misrepresentation, misunderstanding, a confusion of cross-cultural images are all likely to occur, causing what exactly has happened, which is a general ignoring of the affirmation which lies behind Christ the King Sunday and a dismissal or theological confusion about how the Church is to display the Kingdom of Heaven to the world. Simply put, if we have no experience being ruled by a King, even a good king, and if we cannot, or will not, bring ourselves to believe that at some time in the future we will be ruled by a King, and thus dwell in a kingdom, then both the symbolic and literal wealth of these important liturgical and theological images will be lost to us.

In order to reclaim them I want to make two suggestions: look at the kingdom, and look at the king.

A decade or so ago, when I was serving in Warren, Ohio, our congregation welcomed an Ecumenical Parish Associate onto our program staff. She was part of a Synod program which brought church people from other countries to serve and share with particular congregations throughout the Synod for several months. Our visitor's name was Leila Diab, and we learned that she was not only from the country of Jordan, she was from the Kingdom of Jordan, and that she had both a King, King Hussein, and a Queen, Queen Noor. Consequently, the normal state of affairs in our world is that when we hear of kings and queens and kingdoms, we are immediately presented with a physical place, a country with boundaries and borders, and with rulers who rule over the affairs of their finite kingdoms, but over no one else.

If we apply those limitations to the kingdom of God, even to refer to it as the "Kingdom of Heaven," we limit its limitless scope. Better to refer to the kingdom of God as the *Reign of God*. The word "reign" carries with it no geographical dimensions, no boundaries, no understandings of a place somewhere with gates and walls and buildings and places where the people live and where the king lives. It is also a gender-neutral term, which fits nicely into our particular time of such sensitivities.

When Jesus spoke of the kingdom he was not speaking of a place, nor of a political entity, nor of any particular group of special or favored people. He was speaking of the rule of God, that special redemption of Creation where the prerogatives of God are restored, where brokenness and fragmentation are healed, where death is banished, and where those who dwell under the reign of God are whole, and fulfilled, and full of joy, as God intended.

The biblical witness is that Christ came into the world to begin the accomplishment of this particular end. In fact, all the Gospels agree on the point that the major emphasis, the central focus of Jesus' preaching was the imminence of the kingdom or the reign of God. The biblical affirmation is that the reign of God began with the event of God coming into the world in Jesus of Nazareth, and moves along towards eventual completion. Thus, we close this Liturgical Year with Christ the King Sunday, which lifts up that ultimate fulfillment of God's design, and next week we begin a new Liturgical Year with Advent, the waiting for the fulfillment of God's promises through a Messiah, through its actual fulfillment as the Messiah is enthroned as king, when we celebrate Christ the King Sunday next year at this time. This movement from promise to fulfillment, from the visionary hope for the Messiah to come again to the celebration of that hope realized should be so important to us that as we conduct our lives of faith, we remain constantly aware that it is that conduct, that display of the values we believe to be inherent within the Reign of God which exhibits the features of that reign to the world, thus fulfilling the sixth Great End of the Church.

Therefore, we will do ourselves service if we try to imagine the kingdom of heaven not as a place governed, and therefore limited, by time and space, but as a reign, a condition of life and relationship, a fulfillment of God's design in creation.

Having now looked at the kingdom, let us consider the king. It would help if we would view the idea of king in ways more applicable to our unique identity as people used to governing themselves. In order to do this, I encourage you to look at Jesus, our King, the one we call “Lord” when we get baptized or join the Church.

Unlike Presidents or Prime Ministers or other types of rulers known to us, Jesus came demonstrating the nature of his lordship, showing us what it will mean to us, in practical, observable terms, to be subject to his authority.

The reading today from the prophet Ezekiel pictures a God who, like a good and concerned and loving parent, works to gather in all the children from all over, shepherding them back into the safety and security and joy of the fold. Jesus also compared the kingdom of God as like a shepherd who does not rest if just one out of a hundred sheep is lost, but will search and search until that one sheep is found and returned to safety. For this king, no one is unimportant, no one is forgotten, no one is left behind, no one is marginalized, no one is excluded, everyone is welcomed and loved, personally and uniquely.

Most child experts agree that one of the fundamental fears of children is the fear of abandonment, the fear of being left behind, of being lost. I remember my agony at having to leave my children with child care providers when they were very young. The look of fear and anguish in their faces was almost more than I could bear. And I remember wondering why infants and toddlers, even before they could walk and talk, got so upset at their parents' leaving. The reason, of course, is the fear, not rational or intellectual yet, but deeply imbedded in their psychic DNA, that their parents are not coming back for them. That is a fear for children, and, I believe it is a fear of adults as well, although we have learned to employ coping mechanisms to hide that fear. Our parents leave us in death, our children leave us by growing up and becoming adults, our spouses and partners die and leave us bereft. We are forever being left behind.

But this Sovereign will not leave us behind. This Sovereign is looking for us, even now, calling us by our names, and this Sovereign will not cease looking for us until we are found and can be returned to the joy of home. Such is the nature of the Reign of God. Such is the nature of Christ the King.

Such also is the nature of our Sovereign that we know how he will rule over us: with love and forgiveness and justice. In the theology of the gospels, Jesus is lifted up onto the throne of the cross, the throne of suffering and sacrifice, and from there he deals with his people, his loved ones, those he came to find and save.

They crucify him, but he forgives them from within his pain. They insult and taunt him, but he absorbs their abuse and refuses to strike back. He could save himself, and is challenged to do so by those taunting him, but for their sake submits fully to the sting of injustice and humiliation, and to the pain and darkness of death. He could ignore their pleas for forgiveness, choosing instead to punish the creatures for their hatred and hardness of heart; instead, to the cry of the thief on the cross next to him: “Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom”, Jesus

replies, his suffering embracing our suffering, “Truly, I tell you this very day you will be with me in Paradise.”

I submit to you that these are all images with which we can identify and, whether or not we can connect with kings and kingdoms, we can resonate with the kind of love and forgiveness and healing and welcome extended to us by God through Christ the King in the Reign of God, and can then exhibit, by our joyous and thankful living of these values, the kingdom of heaven to the world.

The apex of George Frederick Handel's oratorio, “Messiah,” is the treasured “Hallelujah!” chorus in which the words of the book of the Revelation to John, the last book in the Bible, are rendered in triumph. Listen to them again as we celebrate this last Sunday in our Liturgical Year: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our God, and of God's Christ, who will reign forever and ever.” As we celebrate and anticipate God's triumph, let the substance of that triumph be ours as we rejoice in the Lordship of Christ, and in our citizenship within the Reign of God.

AMEN.