

Christ the King Sunday; Proper 29c 2019
November 24, 2019
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC
The Rev. Catherine L. Tatem

Jeremiah 23:1-6 Psalm 46 Colossians 1:11-20 Luke 23:33-43

We don't know too much about kings. We might wonder whether or not Prince Charles will abdicate the throne after his mother dies so that William can be king, and maybe Harry is relieved to be increasingly farther from the throne. Elvis was "the King," but that's Hollywood. It is hard to keep track of the many biblical kings.

King Herod. There were five King Herods. The first King Herod was a Roman-appointed ruler who was King when Jesus was born. He ruled in the southern part of Israel, in Judea, which was inhabited primarily by Jewish people. Jerusalem was its capital city. This King Herod, who preferred the title Herod the Great, felt very threatened when some wise people came and asked where they might find the newly-born king of the Jews. Herod was the King of the Jews! In order to stop this unlikely threat, Herod ordered the murder of all males in Bethlehem aged two and under. Jesus survived because his father Joseph had been warned in a dream to flee to Egypt, and not to return to Jerusalem until Herod was dead.

The King Herod in today's passage is Herod Antipas, who was never really a king at all. Herod Antipas was a Tetrarch who ruled in Galilee under the Roman Emperor Tiberius (full name: Tiberius Julius Caesar Augustus). Oh, to be King! There are, then, two Herods in Jesus' life: one who *was* the "King of the Jews" and one who *wanted* to be king ...

It was Jesus who had the inscription "This is King of the Jews." The sign was over his head on the cross as he died. The sign holds deep irony; it was put there as a cruel joke, only it is a scandalous truth. This is not at all the kind of kingship we have in mind for Jesus We wanted a king with military power; Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. We wanted a king who would save us and give us our kingdom! Jesus? He healed people, brought a few back from death, he ate with the worst sorts, did slave's work – he untied sandals and washed our feet! Now who will save us?

"The people stood by, watching; ... all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things" (Luke 23:35, 48-49).

They heard and saw the flogging, the taunting: “You a savior?” they jeer. “Then save yourself.” Soldiers with sour wine chide, “Aren’t you a real king? Save yourself.” Even a criminal scolds: “I thought you were supposed to be a Messiah. Prove it.”

Three sneering challenges.

This is not the first time that Luke writes about Jesus being tested, mocked three times: From Luke 4:

Jesus, ... was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.

³The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.’

Then the devil said: I’ll give you power over the kingdoms of the world if you’ll worship me; and finally,

‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down” from the Temple. Let an angel catch you.

We might have known that Jesus would not fall prey to doing magic, grabbing power, or doing tricks. He shows up to do what God must do, even at a place called “the Skull.” Theologian Karl Barth writes that “In the very place that seems godforsaken - there, precisely there, God is present and active. Where God’s reign is mocked and Caesar’s reign seems triumphant - there, precisely there, God reigns. And that imperial inscription above Jesus’ head, the one meant to taunt, intimidate, and demean - there, precisely there, God’s kingship is declared!

Here is how Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, describes our king:

[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers ... making peace through the blood of his cross.

Jesus did *not* submit to temptation and save himself. Jesus emptied himself of his divinity and allowed himself to be subjected to the ways of the world, following to his death the will of God. In proclaiming ourselves as Christians, we walk in the kingship of Jesus. This is not salvation earned by being good. This is not Jesus saving our lives by changing bad situations into good ones. The salvation of the cross, our salvation, is knowing and trusting that no matter what the circumstances, God loves us. God’s love surrounds us.

It is God’s next action, raising Jesus from the dead, that we know that the cross was all about love and mercy. Jesus shall reign. We know the hymn:

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
does its successive journeys run;
his kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
till moons shall wax and wane no more.

2. For him shall endless prayer be made,
and praises throng to crown his head;
his name like fragrance sweet shall rise
(with every morning sacrifice.)

Our message of and from the cross:

Kings and wanna-be kings do not rule us. Nations do not control us. It is God who rules in our lives no matter what. Whatever takes us from this earth will not control us or “win,” because Jesus will take us into paradise. Now, and as we enter Advent, we have the gift of a new opportunity to return to God and the gift of the Holy Spirit. We are meant to hear hope in these readings, deep, abiding hope that Jesus will come again, that the Holy Spirit is with us, that God will not abandon us. God’s kingdom will continue to overcome the many ways in which we attempt to destroy it.

Since before time, God has been creating, loving, along with Jesus, with the breath of the Holy Spirit hovering over the deep Breathe it in friends ... breathe.
There is hope.

God, who is love, will never let go of you. God is who saves us.

Amen.