

Jeremiah 23: 1-6
Luke 23: 33-43
November 23, 2016
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
Christ the King Sunday

Christ the King Sunday is a recent addition to the church calendar. It was established by the Pope in the 1920's and marked for the end of October. It began to be celebrated on the Sunday before the beginning of Advent in 1970. So today with our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers we set aside a day to witness to the proclamation that Christ is King.

To proclaim Christ as King is no mere slogan. It is our calling as Christians. It is the guiding principle of our faith. But let's get real. Not many of us wake up in the morning with "Christ is King" on our lips. Indeed very few of us at the end of the day can say that we even entertained the thought, "Christ is King." *I'm* thinking about it because it's Christ the King Sunday and it's my job to pay attention to these

things. So maybe for us today it is, “Oh, Martha, look! It’s Christ the King Sunday! What the heck is that?”...Sunday.

And yet, I believe that deep down the trust that the proclamation that Christ is *indeed* King of our lives is not such a strange idea. Indeed, for me at least, if “Christ is King” is not a conscious thought, it is a deep yearning. *How I want Christ to be King! How I yearn for his life, his teaching, his priorities to be the governing principles of my life and of the world!* It is this deep desire that brings peace to my heart and mind when I connect with the living presence of Jesus. It is the anguish of my heart and mind when I depart from that presence and when the world seems to a stranger to him. It is why Sunday worship is so important. We gather to be renewed in the trust that there is a power *greater* than ourselves with a perspective broader and deeper than ours, a compassion and forgiveness more generous than ours, a capacity for love far beyond us which rules the world and yearns to embrace us. That power is God revealed in Jesus Christ.

This is why the Bible is so important. How do I know that the peace and love I experience is an encounter with Jesus and not some vague and passing pleasant feeling? How do I know that the anguish in my soul is despair at the apparent absence of the presence of Jesus in my life and not just a general angst about the state of the world? Or, here's another thought: how do I know if the anguish in my soul is *in fact* the *presence of Jesus* calling me to witness to him instead of blind rage about the oppression and injustice in the world?

The answer is in the Bible, God speaking to us through a book set aside from all other books to be our listening post for the Word of God.

And so it is on this Christ the King Sunday that we encounter two scriptures. I choose to believe that their selection for this day is not accidental. We are intended to make a connection between the words we heard from God's Holy Word and this day set aside to reflect upon the proclamation that Christ is King.

From the Old Testament we hear God speaking through the prophet Jeremiah. Despite all of Jeremiah's efforts, the leaders and

people have not worshipped God as ruler of all life. Their kings, who are called shepherds, have governed Judah for their own selfish gain. They have lifted themselves above God and led the people to worship idols. As a result the land has been conquered and the people—the sheep—scattered in exile. Yet God through Jeremiah promises that one day, he will raise a Righteous Branch from the fallen royal line of King David who will rule with righteousness and justice in the land. Israel and Judah will be reunited and restored to right relationship with God. There will be peace. All will live in safety. The King will be called “*the Lord is our righteousness.*”

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It is easy to miss the profound implication of this simple statement. The king through whom God will restore Israel will not promote himself as the solution of Israel and Judah’s problems. He will understand himself to be God’s agent. In all he does he will have but one concern: to point beyond himself to God-- the true ruler of life. He will be so submitted to God that God’s will will flow without distortion

or personal desire for recognition or power. The crowning achievement of this righteous Branch will be that the people will acknowledge the Lord as *our righteousness*. All the people will come to submit their lives to God.

That such a person never arrived on the scene is no surprise. No human being can fulfill such a job description. The best a leader can do is to be aware of her or his limitations and to seek the help of thoughtful and knowledgeable people who have the good of all at heart. Human history has demonstrated that such leadership is extremely rare. Most leaders of such humility are called saints.

Yet someone appeared on the historical stage during the time of the Roman Empire who Christians believe in fact *did fulfill* Jeremiah's prophecy. Paradoxically he did this by being the photographic negative of what worldly kingship is. He was born in a stable instead of a palace. He owned no personal property. He led no army, had no salary, and spent his entire life teaching, feeding and healing people. His only message was that God alone is the creator and ruler of life. God alone

deserves worship and obedience. To God alone people must look for guidance and encouragement. In God's Kingdom there are no nations worthy of a higher allegiance than to God. Indeed in the Kingdom of God there are no nations. There are only human beings united under the loving rule of God.

When Jesus spoke those who felt helpless and hopeless experienced hope. Those who had been cast out were restored. Those who welcomed him found a new life. Many wanted him to become a religious and military messiah and lead an army to kick out the Romans and restore true religion. This he refused to do and so nearly everyone abandoned him and called for his death. They made fun of his claims to kingship. What kind of a king allows himself to be arrested? What kind of king allows himself to be tortured and killed? What kind of king doesn't try to save himself?

When Jesus died, naked and bleeding on the cross, there was not a shred of dignity left. Was he just another human pretender like the ones in Jeremiah's day? Many thought so. Many still think so. Today

many pay lip service to Jesus but rely on earthly power and wealth. And yet there were those who saw him die who saw him alive just a few days later. There were those who didn't recognize him but whose hearts burned with the same intensity as they did when he was alive. Somehow the power of Jesus' life was not extinguished by his death. It stunned his disciples out of grief and fear and on Pentecost it literally broke out into the world and has continued to do so ever since.

And it can do so today among us who yearn for Christ to rule in our hearts and minds and to turn our hearts to the power which seeks not to dominate and control but to be love let loose. Indeed I believe that the very yearning we feel *is the kingly power of Christ* awakening our souls to his presence. It is through us that Christ as King is to become known. Amen.