



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Beginning and the End
A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

November 22, 2009
Christ the King Sunday (Year B)

Revelation 1:4b-8

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John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

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.

A friend of mine was a pastor at a church in Kentucky, where he developed an appreciation for southern kitsch. One of the things that he took a liking to was what he called "Velvet Elvises." Perhaps you've seen those garish pictures of Elvis painted on black velvet. Michael bought several of these paintings to give to friends and relatives at opportune times. I was fortunate—if that's the right word for it—to receive one of the paintings in the middle of a class in seminary. I greatly appreciated that gift, and gave it a prominent place wherever I lived. I would offer to show it to you, but alas, Alayne did not hold it in such high regard. After we got married, she did her own version of trading spaces and my velvet Elvis has been relegated to a box in the attic ever since.

But Michael also presented a velvet Elvis to his four-year-old niece in Spokane, Washington. And he did so with a lecture on who Elvis was and how his music had changed the world.

Not too long after that, his niece went to Sunday School. It happened to be Christ the King Sunday. The teacher began, "Today is Christ the King Sunday. Today we cele-

brate that Jesus is King.”

Michael’s four-year-old niece raised her hand: “Excuse me,” she corrected. “Jesus is *Lord*. *Elvis* is *king*.”

And with that, a neatly-planned church school lesson fell apart and something else came into focus. This is not some idle claim the church makes. To shout “Christ is King” is, in the same breath, to shout who—or what—is not.

Today is the final Sunday in the Church Year. Next week Advent begins, and we’ll find ourselves out in the desert listening to John the Baptist and watching for the hills to be made low and the valleys to be lifted up so that all flesh can see the glory of God. But today, at the close of the year, we celebrate what we have come to believe about the child whose birth we will soon celebrate—that he is Lord of All. That Christ is King.

And that is not always an easy word to speak or to hear. And it’s not just four-year-olds who have trouble getting our minds around the concept of Christ the King. It’s all of us, no matter the age, who struggle with this day on the church calendar. It’s a difficult day to recognize, and to preach, which makes me understand why one associate pastor, who preaches about four times per year, announced in our preaching group a few years back, “I’ve been the associate pastor here six years and I have *five* sermons on Christ the King.”

The church calendar is filled with difficult days. There’s the challenge of Christmas and Easter and Pentecost and Trinity Sunday. These are days that test the skills of the preacher and the sensibilities of the listeners because they are so foreign to our ears. But, when you get right down to it, this day on the church calendar—this Christ the King Sunday—is a bit different from other difficult days. Think about it. We have trouble understanding Christmas because we dare to say God became flesh and dwelt among us.

We have trouble understanding Easter because we say Christ who died was brought back to life by the power of God.

We have trouble understanding Trinity Sunday, because it asks us to consider a deep doctrinal concept of God in three persons.

All of those days and others on the church calendar which cause us trouble do so because they ask us to understand something we have trouble understanding.

But our difficulty with Christ the King Sunday is caused by a different reason. It’s not that we don’t understand what we’re saying when we affirm “Christ is King.” No, it’s because we do understand. Our trouble today stems from the fact that we know exactly what we mean when we say, “Jesus Christ is the King.”

In one of his books, New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson talks about how the creeds of the church shape us and define ways in which we acknowledge Christ as King:

“The Christian people affirm specific things as truths by which to seek to live. They implicitly reject other things that other people might consider to be true. By believing definite things, the Christian people become definite as well. It is a people that chooses to declare and live by certain convictions, and not others. . . . It is a matter of living according to a specific view of the world and maintaining allegiance to the practices of the community that seeks to live according to that vision of reality.” (Luke Timothy John-

son, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why It Matters*, (New York: Doubleday), 2003, p. 51.)

To say “Christ is King” is to say that every other thing which seeks our worship—our honor—is not the king—is not the ultimate concern. Not work. Not family. Not our children. Not our government. To acknowledge Christ as King is—when push comes to shove—to yield to the ways of Christ’s kingdom over any other.

To honor Christ as King, then, is to engage in dangerous work. It is dangerous on the one hand, because when we say that Christ is King, we are also saying that others are not. That means that no president or dictator or political system—nothing else in all the world—has authority, because Christ is King.

But to say that Christ is King is also dangerous because, if we’re not careful, it can lead us down the risky path of thinking that God’s power made known in Jesus is just like the power of other kings. And that’s dangerous, because “the constituting event of the Christian faith is not a power play that follows the rules and logic of most of the power plays we know—retaliation, competition, self-protectiveness, and the like. Instead, Jesus dares to trust and obey the divine will that takes him to the cross—and beyond.” (Brueggemann, et al.)

It is this upside-down way of thinking about power that marks our celebration of Christ the King Sunday, the final Sunday of the Christian year. You know why I think we wait until the end to acknowledge Christ as King? I think there are two reasons. For one thing, it’s taken us a whole year of watching and listening to Jesus to recognize that this peculiar way of life he leads us into is shaping us into a kingdom of priests. It’s taken us a while to figure out that this haunting figure who seems to live life upside down, is really the king. It’s taken our eyes some time to adjust to the truth that this one who is the servant of all is in fact the king.

Christopher Idle wrote a hymn about this striking contrast. Here’s how he describes it:

My Lord, you wore no royal crown; you did not wield the powers of state, nor did you need a scholar’s gown or priestly robe, to make you great.

You never used a killer’s sword to end an unjust tyranny; your only weapon was your word, for truth alone could set us free.

You did not live a world away in hermit’s cell or desert cave, but felt our pain and shared each day with those you came to seek and save.

You made no mean or cunning move, chose no unworthy compromise, but carved a track of burning love through tangles of deceit and lies.

You came unequalled, undeserved, to be what we were meant to be; to serve, instead of being served, a light for all the world to see.

(I especially love this final stanza:) *“So when I stumble, set me right; command my life as you require; let all your gifts be my delight and you, my Lord, my one desire.”*

So what's the other reason Christ the King is at the end of the year? Because next week is a chance to begin anew. We have a chance to order our time and our lives around the person and work of Jesus Christ, the one whose power, whose kingship, is unlike any other, so that he does come to have first place in everything.

But be warned: to yield to the ways of Christ's kingdom means to be vulnerable in every sense of the word. To recognize at the deepest level that this church belongs to Christ is to recognize our need to be faithful stewards. And that means more than simply preserving our life together—it means reaching out in ministry in the ways we discern God calling us to serve.

And the foundation of our ministry together is this: Jesus is the beginning and the end. No matter what decision we're faced with concerning some area of ministry, we will seek to align ourselves with the beginning and the end for the church—with Jesus Christ.

Not long before I left Nashville, Second Presbyterian Church, located about two blocks from where I was pastor, had its sanctuary destroyed by fire. When they began the difficult process of deciding what to do next, there were some who said, "We need to build back exactly what we lost," even though the space was woefully inadequate for their growing congregation. There were others who said, "We don't want to make it any larger, because we'll lose that familiarity we all love here." But when their pain began to give way to hope, they began to hear some new things among them. "Is God calling us to make room for more people to participate in the ministry that we're about? Remember, this is Christ's church, and we are stewards of the ministry we've been given here." As they reaffirmed Christ as King—as Lord of all—they quickly recognized that their life together was too rich not to share with others.

I am convinced that we are in the same moment in our congregation's life. God has formed us into a community who gathers at this busy "crossroads of real life and abundant grace" and with that blessing comes huge responsibility. But if we acknowledge Christ as the very center of all that we do here as a congregation, and if we remember that Christ is the very center of our individual lives, our decisions about the ministry we pursue and the checks we write and the time we offer will lead deeper into the mission God has placed us here to do together.

And that mission which God invites us to undertake together is huge. It's a mission so large that God invites each of us to take a part, to offer our best gifts, trusting that God will use us in amazing ways as we reach out from this crossroads of real life and abundant grace.

So here's my prayer for our congregation as we prepare to enter new year next Sunday: *"So when (we) stumble, set (us) right; command (our lives) as you require; let all your gifts be our delight and you, our Lord, our one desire."*