

**The Once and Future King
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Colossians 1:11-20**

So it's Christ the King Sunday, the end of the Church year. Next Sunday we'll turn over the liturgical calendar and welcome the Advent of a whole new year. If you don't remember learning about this holiday in Sunday School, take heart: it's been a red letter day in the church year since only around 1969. But language about Christ the King, the Ruler on High, the one who is crowned with many crowns—has held central place in the church's theology about Jesus Christ since the beginning. The hymns we're singing today—even the newer one—are triumphant, upbeat, and supremely confident that Christ is on the throne and rules the world with truth and grace.

Christ the King. Not Jesus, CEO. Not El Presidente, numero uno, or Chairman of the Board. Have you wondered about the associations we in the United States have with "king"? Well, we revolted against one to form a nation "of the people, for the people, and by the people." We're fascinated by the dramas and traumas of the British royal family. But honestly, don't we view all that as a throwback to an imperial past, quaint and outdated, full of pomp and pageantry but not particularly pertinent to these puzzling times? So I worry a little that we might perceive Christ's rule to be similar to the queen of England's rule: bejeweled irrelevancy, immersed in a thicket of art and culture that is more "antique than active." [*the phrase is Mary Anderson's, in "Royal Treatment," in the Christian Century, November 14, 2003, p. 18*]

The morning scripture reading from the letter to the Colossian churches offers another, different view. Here the rule of Christ is described in cosmic, spiritual terms—a kingdom of light in which the powers of darkness have been overcome and

defeated. In soaring language that may have been set to music in the early church, Christ is praised as the eternal creator, the ruler of the universe and head of the church. And then the punch line—what this has to do with us....today, and forever. Listen for God’s Word to the church in the reading from the letter to the Colossians in the first chapter at the eleventh verse. [COLOSSIANS 1:11-20]

Last Sunday, the congregation of Bay Presbyterian Church over in Bay Village voted overwhelmingly to leave the Presbyterian Church (USA). The materials distributed to the members leading up to the vote indicated they had become increasingly unhappy with the denomination, citing as an example its ongoing conversation about ordination standards with respect to gay and lesbian persons. But this is not simply about gay issues: in a pastoral letter to the congregation the pastor wrote that he believed the Presbyterian church had come close to abandoning its confessional standards, particularly “the lordship of Jesus Christ.” My purpose in sharing this is not to debate the decision they made, but to point out the seriousness of its basis in theology and biblical interpretation, not disagreement over ordination perspectives. They sincerely believe that the Presbyterian Church (USA) no longer affirms Jesus Christ as its Lord and Savior, as it understands that lordship to be manifest in Jesus’ virgin birth and bodily resurrection; and his rule the only way to God. They view these three beliefs as so fundamental, that to question any of them is to abandon the essentials of faith.

It seems to me that this text from Colossians is a breath of fresh air in a conversation like that; or maybe more like a powerful stream breaking a dammed-up river. It explodes narrow micro-beliefs about Jesus of Nazareth to reveal the breadth and width and height and depth of Christ the ruler of the universe. Whether Jesus was born of a virgin pales in significance to the Christ, image of the invisible God, creating all things. The scientific details of how Jesus came to be alive after death seem less important than that he triumphed over the powers of darkness to become “the firstborn of the dead.”

Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life not to shut out travelers on other religious paths, but to reconcile everything and everyone to God. The Lordship of Jesus Christ finally is not an exclusionary doctrine for a small, select group, but the glorious and gracious reality that holds everything on earth and in heaven together. Christ rules!

And what that means is that others don't, despite appearances to the contrary. Money and governments and armies and information are exposed as inadequate and temporary powers. Jesus took them on by showing humanity a different way. The powers say, "The rich shall inherit the earth!" Jesus counters with "You can't serve God and money." The powers regularly advocate taking up arms; Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers." The powers insist that Caesar rules. Jesus proclaims the kingdom of God. The irony is that both of these opposing statements appear to be true; but they cannot be. One is temporary, the other eternal. Christ rules! To call him King is to acknowledge that we are his subjects—not his board of trustees. We have one Lord now, whom we are to worship and serve.

You may know that the only theological affirmation required to become a member of Fairmount (or any Presbyterian Church) is an affirmative response to a single question. *Is Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior, and do you promise by God's grace to be his disciple?* Many inquirers and confirmands struggle with that question (members and ministers too), and I think we never do get to the bottom of it; we never figure out completely what it means or how we're to do it. But we can start by asking who rules in our lives. At what throne do we swear our allegiance? How we spend our money and our time provide important clues. So does our general orientation: are we guided by faith or fear? A sense of calling or calculation? Who—or what holds first place in our lives? These are questions each of us must answer for ourselves, as well as for our church. Is it anything less than the firstborn of all creation, the head of the church and lord of the universe?

What makes this text additionally challenging for us is that the apostle described God's redemptive work in the past tense—as if it had already taken place. “He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son...” “...through Christ God was pleased to reconcile all things to himself...” Yet the world is still sharply and destructively divided; at war with one another and with the planet itself. The powers of darkness have shown no sign of surrender. How could Paul write so confidently?—and how can we believe it? It's even more astonishing when we recall that Paul wrote this letter while imprisoned. He certainly wasn't enjoying the fruits of his labors and the vindication of his cause. Neither were the Colossians. Their city had been virtually destroyed by an earthquake not many years prior to the establishment of Christian congregations. For the apostle, hope was possible only because of God entered human history. Not content to remain a ruler on high, remote and shrouded in mystery, God shared vulnerable human life. In graphic terms, we are reminded that Christ's involvement with us was real and brutal. Reconciling earth to heaven came by way of a bloody cross, an execution by the ruling powers. How ironic the inscription Pilate had them affix just above Jesus' head: “The King of the Jews.” Coronation on a cross; a crown of thorns. And yet it was through this suffering that death was defied; the powers beaten back so they could no longer claim final victory. Instead, the power of unarmed truth and unconditional love, will have the final say in human history. Christ rules. Injustice and violence and death that seem so firmly entrenched have been defeated. The biblical prophets felt this struggle so deeply they used the language of battle to describe it. Tell the people their warfare is over; tell them to live as ones who know Who occupies the throne.

Do we know? Or rather can we trust that Christ rules and will make that kingdom manifest on earth as it is in heaven? It's hard to see sometimes, hard to believe, harder still to practice. Yesterday we celebrated the life of long-time member Betty Bonthius who died recently. Her family spoke of her passionate commitment to social justice, growing out of her

Christian faith. As many families do, they assembled a photo collage of her life, and I noticed how many of the snapshots reflected her engagement. Picture after picture showed her marching for civil rights, protesting the Vietnam War, sitting in at the School of the Americas, speaking out for farm workers rights, standing with Cleveland's poor and rallying for women's reproductive rights. The display provided a fascinating social history, but I confess my immediate reaction was to wonder what good it did. We're embroiled in war again; our city is among the poorest in the nation; the global gap between the haves and have nots is staggering. Did she waste her time? What, after all, is so little in the face of so much? In his tribute to his mother, one of Betty's sons provided the explanation. *She never lost faith in God. She believed that God would bring about justice and peace and freedom, and we had only to do our part.*

Seems to me Betty was prepared to endure everything with patience, because she believed in the depth of her being that Christ rules, that God has broken the back of the power of darkness and we are even now living into the kingdom of the beloved son.

Friends, this Lord calls us to citizenship in his Kingdom, to live in obedience to his rule. We affirm the lordship of Christ when we pray the Lord's Prayer (either version!) "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We affirm the lordship of Christ every time we pray, praising God for gifts unearned and undeserved; acknowledging that we are not in charge, we are not in control, and that in fact we seek God's help and guidance and strength. We affirm the lordship of Christ whenever we counter the values of this world with the values of God's kingdom. We affirm the Lordship of Christ whenever we put those values into practice, no matter how great the problem or how impossible the ideal. And for heaven's sake, let's work together. For our sake. For earth's sake.

So we come to the end of another church year, another cycle of listening for God's Word and that Word made flesh in Jesus. We've heard the stories and been touched and challenged by his teaching. And all that we have lived, as we have buried the dead, baptized babies, married and divorced, struggled and thrived, grown weary and been renewed, all our unresolved problems, our questions about truth and fears of insignificance, we bring here and now, and place them in the arms of the One who rules. Then with infinite love Christ will sort it all out—what needs blessing, what needs forgiving, what needs healing. All of it, and all of us, Christ holds together until that day when the coming Kingdom is here at last.

GOD IS FAITHFUL AND GOD WILL DO IT. ALLELUIA! AMEN.