

THE REAL KING

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Nov. 26, 2017
based on Psalm 72:1-2; Isaiah 9:1-7; I Timothy 6:13-15***

This past week we just celebrated one of the most important holidays in our society—not Thanksgiving, but Black Friday, the day when the stores make money, when retailers hope to move into the black on their way to the great profits reaped during the upcoming happy holiday season. A society's holy days say a lot about what that society values.

This is why in the church we celebrate an alternative set of seasons and holidays. Our church year begins not with New Year's Eve, a festival of silly parties and too much to drink, but on Advent, which starts next Sunday. Advent is a sober and meditative season, calling us to look with expectation toward the coming of a Savior. And so it goes throughout the year; we have a whole series of church seasons and holidays which continually stand in sharp contrast to the celebrations and values of the surrounding culture. At Christmas, while the culture is gorging itself in a materialist frenzy, we in the church celebrate the birth of a poor child in a stable. When we arrive a Lent, a time of focusing on the self-sacrifice of Christ, we in the church begin the season with Ash Wednesday and a service of repentance. The culture prefers the day before—Fat Tuesday or Mardi Gras, a day of excess and indulgence. At Easter, we in the church are celebrating the resurrection of Jesus, while the culture is eating chocolate. At Thanksgiving, which is based on Biblical thanksgiving festivals, we in the church are lifting thanks to God, while the culture can't wait to get to the mall. And so we arrive today at the final day in the church year. It is Christ the King Sunday, a day when we proclaim that the child born on Christmas is now on the throne of heaven. The society around us is caught up in power struggles and is full of fear about what the future holds. But we in the church declare that there is One who reigns above, in whom we have a sure and bright future. We will consider that message this morning.

Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

The world is plagued by bad rulers. From North Korea's Kim Jong Un to Turkey's President Erdogan to the Philippines' president Duterte, we see rulers with very different styles who have one thing in common—they all terrorize their people and create havoc for the sake of advancing their own power. Occasionally, a revolt manages to get rid of a bad ruler, as just happened in Zimbabwe, where what was essentially a military coup brought an end to the disastrous, nearly forty-year reign of Robert Mugabe. But it so often happens that when one bad ruler is eliminated, another assumes power. Mugabe's likely successor is nicknamed "the Crocodile"—which does not seem to bode well for those yearning for freedom and peace.

All this of course is nothing new. In ancient times, there were bad rulers aplenty on the world stage. The ancient Israelites had such a horrible experience under the oppression of the Pharaohs in Egypt that when they finally escaped from slavery and entered into the Promised Land, they resolved to have no rulers at all. Their ideal was to have God as their Ruler. But that did not work, because it was too easy for people to ignore God, and the result was chaos. So they got a king over Israel, but they hoped and prayed that the king would embody the goodness and justice of God. Thus we have Psalms such as the one we heard earlier: “Give the king Your justice, O God! May he rule Your people with righteousness and the poor with equity” (Psalm 72:1-2)—a longing for rulers through the ages. Unfortunately, this did not work out very well in Israel, because most of the kings were bad; and indeed God had warned the people that this would be the case when they insisted on getting a king in the first place. The problem is that kings are human and thus are inclined to fall into sin; and since power tends to corrupt, rulers with power are inclined all the more to fall into wrongdoing. We see plenty of examples of that in our own time!

But in the midst of bad rule, God brought a word to the people of Israel through the prophets that God would send a new kind of king—God’s anointed, the Messiah. We heard exactly this message in our Old Testament reading from Isaiah—words which the prophet proclaimed against a very dramatic backdrop. It was the late eighth century B.C. Israel had long since split into two, because there were two different groups of rulers who had a lot of trouble getting along. That sounds familiar. In both the southern kingdom of Judah and especially the northern kingdom of Israel, most of the kings were more interested in their own wealth and glory than in being faithful to God, and that lack of faithfulness led finally to serious consequences. In the north, the Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrian Empire in 722 B.C., which was engaged in brutal expansion. When Isaiah talks of “every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood . . .” (Isaiah 9:5), he has in mind Assyrian armies.

A few years after the fall of the northern kingdom, the Assyrians threatened the kingdom of Judah as well. Things looked grim, but in the face of all that, Isaiah proclaimed a stunning message. “There will be no gloom,” he says, “for her that was in anguish. In the former time God brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time God will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan—Galilee of the nations.” (Isaiah 9:1) The “land of the Israelite tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali” was a way of describing the upper part of the northern kingdom of Israel, which had fallen into anguish and contempt when it was conquered by the Assyrian Empire. But Isaiah declares that out of precisely that region, which would come to be called Galilee, God would do something truly glorious. Isaiah continued:

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwell in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined . . . for every boot of the tramping warrior

in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. For unto us a child is born, and unto us a son is given. And the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. (Isaiah 9:2,6-7)

Seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus, Isaiah declared that out of Galilee would come a new kind of king. He would be “on the throne of David”—meaning he would be the successor to all the Davidic kings, but he would truly reign in righteousness, he would embody the power and grace of God, and his kingdom would endure forever. You sense that prophecy being fulfilled in the very opening pages of the New Testament when wise men come saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews.” (Matthew 2:2) During his public ministry in Galilee, Jesus spoke often about the kingdom of God, and he was recognized as king—he was recognized with praise on Palm Sunday, when the people shouted, “Hosanna! Blessed is He who come in the name of the Lord, the King of Israel!” (John 12:13), and he was recognized with irony at the cross, as a placard was placed above him that read, King of the Jews. (*it read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews”* John 19:21) But upon his resurrection, it became clear that Christ now is indeed on the throne of heaven; and so Paul, in his letter to Timothy that we heard earlier, would speak of “our Lord Jesus Christ . . . He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords . . . (I Timothy 6:14-15)

It is this truth that we proclaim on Christ the King Sunday. But what does it mean in today’s world to say that Jesus is King? It means, first of all, that in spite of all the evil that rages on planet earth, and in spite of all the would-be empire builders of our age, it is Christ who truly reigns above all, and therefore we can have hope that God’s goodness will finally prevail. In the days of the prophet Isaiah, it seemed that the wickedness of Assyria was all powerful; but Assyria never did conquer Jerusalem, and the empire soon collapsed. In the days of Jesus it seemed that Rome was all powerful, but Jesus made plain to Pontius Pilate that his authority as Roman governor was only apparent, and that the power of Rome for all its seeming invincibility was ephemeral. In fact, today there is nothing left of ancient Rome and nothing left of Assyria, except some nice ruins. Earthly kings are passing; but meanwhile, more than two billion people today acclaim Jesus as King. So no matter what evils and powers we confront in our time, we can trust that it is the Lord who holds the ultimate reins of power in the universe, and therefore we need not despair, but we can trust that God’s purposes will finally prevail, and we can know that our destiny lies in the hands of God.

But this then brings us to a second key implication of the message that Jesus is King—it moves us to consider where exactly our loyalty lies, for if Jesus is King, then our ultimate allegiance should be to Christ, and to His values and His call. The challenge for us

is that it is all too easy to say that Jesus is King while actually giving our highest devotion to something else. A notable example of this issue right now can be seen in the state of Alabama, and all the controversy surrounding Roy Moore. Anyone with a Christian perspective is, of course, greatly disturbed by the many accusations of sexual misconduct that have come out concerning all sorts of people—Roy Moore, Al Franken, and a whole list of others. What is distinctive about Alabama is the way in which a number of Christian leaders have vigorously defended Roy Moore, the reason being—there is an election. When religious principle runs into politics, strange things happen, and particularly right now in Alabama, where the Bible ordinarily is held in high regard. Roy Moore brought a piece of the Bible into his courtroom—the ten commandments—gaining him great popularity in the state. But with an election at stake, the Bible suddenly is getting twisted in Alabama, or ignored altogether. Early on, when Roy Moore was first accused of molesting teenage girls, one Alabama state official suggested that even if he did, it was just like the older Joseph connecting with teenage Mary in the Bible. As Biblical scholars cringed, few of Roy Moore’s defenders were ready to run publicly with that idea; but many were still inclined to defend Moore’s candidacy by saying that there is simply no proof of the accusations. But here it is notable how the Bible is suddenly out of the picture; for in the Bible, there is a basic principle for how to establish guilt for an alleged crime—two witnesses are required for conviction. In Roy Moore’s case, there are nine women all accusing him of misconduct. That ought to at least be enough to make one hesitate as to whether this guy ought to be in the Senate. Thus Daniel Akin, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (hardly a bastion of liberalism), expressed “disappointment” with pastors who were still supporting Moore’s candidacy, and said, “I think we have allowed our political loyalty to influence our decisions.”

That statement, of course, could apply to a lot of situations. The central issue for each of us personally is where our highest loyalty truly is. It often happens that people believe in Jesus but direct their highest devotion to something else—to political party or to career or to the quest for money or status or fame. But if we truly acclaim Jesus as King, it means we let the values of Jesus shape our decisions and our priorities and our actions. This is why Paul, in the passage we heard from I Timothy, couples faith in Jesus as King with faithfulness to God’s principles. As he said, “I charge you to keep God’s commandments unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . the King of kings.” (I Timothy 6:14-15)

This brings us finally to the third key aspect of the message that Jesus is King—if we truly acclaim Jesus as King, we will participate in his kingdom. So where exactly is his kingdom? When Pontius Pilate asked Jesus about his kingship, Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36)—indicating clearly that his kingdom is a spiritual rather than worldly one. This however does not mean that Jesus’ kingdom is simply in heaven, because Jesus instructed his disciples to pray, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on

earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10); and Jesus said to his followers, “The kingdom is among you.” (Luke 17:21) In essence, the “kingdom” is *wherever God’s rule is in effect*—which means that the kingdom is in heaven, but the kingdom is also here on earth whenever people are living according to God’s ways. Wherever people are showing forth the compassion of God, wherever people are caring for the needy, and lifting up the lowly, and welcoming the outsider, wherever people are living in harmony and peace, wherever people are standing firm for what is just and right—wherever people are letting God’s reign take effect in their actual lives, there is the kingdom. Jesus’ teaching clearly is that allegiance to Him is not just a matter a matter of inner piety; it is a matter of actually following the leadership of His Spirit and living out His goodness in our daily lives. This is why we join together in the church to be witnesses for Christ in the world. It’s why we make the commitments that we do in baptism to help children grow in faith. It’s why we engage in extensive missions in our community and world—it is because we are to let God’s Kingdom take hold in the world through us.

So how do we live with hope and purpose in a time when the rulers are very imperfect? We find a positive vision when we recognize that God has sent us the true and eternal King, who transcends all the wrong and all the frailty of our world. When we lift our devotion to Christ and live under His reign, we can have confidence in His victory over evil, we can share in how God’s purposes would unfold through us today, and we can know that we are a part of that kingdom of which, as Isaiah said, “there shall be no end.”