

**Christ the King November 22, 2009
Psalm 18:1-6, 16-19, 46-50; Acts 12:1-19**

**Year of the Bible
Marci Auld Glass**

Today is Christ the King Sunday. This is also the end of our liturgical year. Our new year will begin next Sunday with the first day of Advent. In some ways, it is appropriate that our church year should build toward this. The course of our journey of faith should lead us to declaring that Jesus is Lord, that his kingdom will have no end, and that the Kingdom of God will have final say against the powers and principalities of this world.

But this language can be uncomfortable for those of us who don't give power to earthly kings.

What does it mean for us to declare Christ as King? And to more than declare it—what does it mean for us to live as if that is true?

One of the other things we do at the end of a year is to look back, to remember the year that has been. And I think it has been a pretty good year in the life of this particular congregation—despite the deaths of long loved members, we have welcomed new members and stayed strong in the midst of a frightening economy.

But for American Christianity, overall, I'm not sure this is a year we'll look back on and celebrate. And I think it stems from some confusion about what it means for Christ to be King.

Here's an illustration. After the tragedy at Fort Hood a few weeks ago, people were saying that the shooter, who happens to be a Muslim, claimed to be a Muslim ahead of being an American. The commentators went on to say that he should have put his country ahead of his ideology.

If ideology was behind his horrible actions, then I would argue he should have just put his ideology aside altogether. Our world doesn't have room for any ideology that is life-taking instead of life-giving.

I am certainly not seeking to justify violence, terrorism, or whatever was behind his motives. What if he had been a Christian? Would people have said he should have put being American ahead of being a Christian? I am troubled by the idea that we should be Americans *ahead* of being Christians. Who is our King?

Where do our loyalties lie?

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In the early years of the faith, Christians weren't allowed to serve, and wouldn't serve, in the Roman Army because the soldiers were required to worship the emperor and to make sacrifices for him.

Over time the church moderated its stance, allowing people to serve in the defense of their country as long as they weren't forced to commit idolatry. And when the emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, the distinction between God and Country blurred to such a level that we still, 2,000 years later, are seeking to answer the question—who is our king? Who do we serve?

Clearly, millions of faithful Christians have managed, over the years, to serve God and country, but I encourage us to be careful when we automatically connect the two.

For example, I know some of you are upset about the phrase “happy holidays” replacing “Merry Christmas”. Certainly, when we are greeting other Christians, the appropriate greeting is “Merry Christmas”. The birth of Christ is *our* reason for this approaching season.

But I suggest to you that if our government were to sanction “Merry Christmas”, it would blur the line between God and Country in ways that are helpful to neither. For one thing, not all Americans are Christians. And as we value our freedom in this country to worship a King who was born in a stable, so we value the freedom of others to worship differently.

Additionally, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Good News available to us, and to the world, through the person of Jesus of Nazareth, is MUCH, MUCH bigger and better than any political ideology of any nation. Even ours. Having our government explicitly claim Christianity seems an attempt to confine God to our human political aims. And no matter what you think about our government in DC under any President, they do not speak for God.

Our scripture passages today are from our Year of the Bible readings, and while they aren't explicitly about Christ as King, they are about the implications of living as if Christ is our King.

Peter is arrested by King Herod. He doesn't get in trouble with the religious establishment—the Presbytery or the General Assembly. He's arrested by the government. Claiming that Jesus was Lord had very real political implications for Peter and the early church. Because the Emperor was Lord and King. Claiming Jesus as Lord was, as far as the Romans were concerned, a subversive political statement—not just a religious claim. Herod assigns 16 soldiers to guard him, which seems a little excessive to me. But what do I know? Clearly this is a prisoner Herod either thinks is dangerous or is likely to try to escape.

But in this story, the Kingdom of God is too strong to be contained by walls, locked gates, and Roman soldiers.

On one level, Peter knew this. He'd been preaching that very message. In chapter 5, after they've been busted out of prison the first time, he says, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus...and we are witnesses to these things..."

So Peter knew what it meant to proclaim Jesus is King. He'd been thrown in prison for doing exactly that.

But did you notice in the text that Peter seems a little surprised to be rescued? He thinks he's having a vision. He can't quite believe his own eyes as they pass through locked doors.

And then he goes to a house where the church has gathered to pray for him. And they don't believe it either. They are praying for him to be released, but when he shows up, they think it must be a ghost.

This text illustrates well how the power of God, how the Kingdom of God, is so much bigger than any human understanding of it—even humans who have devoted their lives to the proclamation of the Kingdom. We just can't get our minds around it. The divine mystery defies our narrow imaginations.

But we should still try to seek the Kingdom of God. It is right for us to gather at the end of each Christian year, to proclaim Jesus is King, and to consider how our life reflects our claim that God is Lord of our lives.

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But we should also do so cautiously. We should be careful to equate the Gospel with any human institution or political party. We should be careful to not confuse the goals of any government, no matter how well intentioned, with the much bigger work of the Kingdom of God.

And, like Peter and the followers who had gathered to pray, we should proclaim the gospel and pray for it, and then we should expect to see things change.

**We should expect to see the lion and the lamb lie down together.
We should keep looking for people to work out their differences to build something bigger than our individual desires.
We should train our children to make stands for justice.
We should expect to see love between people that is stronger than any illness or death that might try to get in the way.**

Our reading from psalm 18 is attributed to David after the lord had delivered him from his enemies. And it seems to fit with Peter's deliverance from jail. But I hope we'll see it in the broader context of following Christ as our king. Because when we look at it that way, it isn't just delivery from the people we don't like or agree with. It is the delivery of the entire creation from the systems that work against justice. The promise of the coming Kingdom of God gives us hope in the face of despair because it shows us that God is ever for us.

Hear the words of the Psalmist again:

**He reached down from on high, he took me;
 he drew me out of mighty waters.
He delivered me from my strong enemy,
and from those who hated me;
for they were too mighty for me.
They confronted me in the day of my calamity;
but the LORD was my support.
He brought me out into a broad place;
he delivered me, because he delighted in me.**

It is appropriate to dedicate our pledges on Christ the King Sunday. Because where we place our time, talent, and money makes a claim about whom we serve. God is inviting us all to be tangible signs of God's kingdom on earth! In a few minutes, we'll be collecting the rest of our pledge cards and also our time and talent cards. I invite you to do

something for God's kingdom that you haven't done before. You don't need to sign your name to the time and talent form, unless you want me to contact you about it. This is for you. If you've never gone with us when we've walked through the neighborhood inviting people to join us, then maybe this is the year. If you've never served as liturgist, or usher, then maybe this is the year. If you've never helped with a mission project, maybe this is the year. Whether it is teaching Sunday school, feeding the homeless, serving on a committee, or pulling weeds from flower beds as our wonderful volunteers did yesterday, I invite you to do something for the kingdom of God in this coming year.

I think that one of the reasons Christianity has been struggling in America is because we've forgotten what our message is. It seems that all Christians are known for anymore is what they're against. Think about it—if you were to ask non-Christians what we believe, they would likely say we were against rock and roll, against abortion, against gay marriage—the list goes on. Because I think Christians have spent more time saying what they're AGAINST.

But that isn't the message the world needs to hear. The gospel of Jesus Christ, the Kingdom of Jesus Christ—that's the message the world needs to hear. Listen to Jesus' words from Luke, when he quotes Isaiah:

**“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
 because he has anointed me
 to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
 and recovery of sight to the blind,
 to let the oppressed go free,
 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”**

That is what Jesus was FOR.

And we are invited to be his witnesses to the very end of the earth—all the way to Kuna, even—to share that good news. It will require us to expand our imaginations, because God's Kingdom is so much more than we can dream it to be. It will require us to be aware of the way our culture tries to equate God's kingdom with the kingdoms of this world. It will require us to think about and put into words, what it is that we are fighting FOR, not just against. And, like Peter in prison, praying for release, we will need to have eyes open to recognize where God is at work in our lives, unlocking our chains, opening locked doors, and setting us on the path so we may proclaim the kingdom of God. Amen.