

“If I... Were ... King!”

Sermon: Year B, Christ the King

Text: John 18:33–37

Preached November 25, 2018 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Grace to you, and peace, from the One who is, and was, and is to come. AMEN

I led a deprived childhood. I’m somewhat embarrassed to state that I was one of the very few in my generation who never saw *The Wizard of Oz* as a child. It was shown on TV every single year, because we didn’t have DVDs then, but it was always on Sunday evening when those of us raised Baptist were all in church for the second or third time of the day, so we weren’t allowed to stay home to watch. I could catch only the first few minutes before I had to scurry over to church. It wasn’t until I was an adult that I knew that most of the movie was actually in color, because, like poor Dorothy, I had only ever seen Kansas. When I did finally get to see the whole movie, though, I identified most with the Cowardly Lion. You remember him, the one whose heart’s desire was to be king of the forest? I won’t sing his song for you, but these are the words:

If I were King of the Forest, Not queen, not duke, not prince.
My regal robes of the forest, would be satin, not cotton, not chintz.
I’d command each thing, be it fish or fowl.
With a woof and a woof and a royal growl - woof.
As I’d click my heel, all the trees would kneel.
And the mountains bow and the bulls kowtow.
And the sparrow would take wing - If I - If I - were King!
Each rabbit would show respect to me.
The chipmunks genuflect to me.
Though my tail would lash, I would show compash
For every underling!
If I - If I - were King!
Just King!

You know, that sums it up for us: young or old, we just love the idea of having everyone bow down to us, commanding others and having them jump to do our bidding, calling the shots...but we would be *benevolent* despots, wouldn’t we? We would use our power for good! We have fantasies about what we would do if we were king or queen ... and secretly, I think a number of us have that as one of our heart’s fondest desires. And if we can’t be the king or queen ourselves, we want to follow someone who is like that. Even we Americans, who have always prided ourselves on our democratic rejection of kingship, still get a secret thrill when we see the trappings of royalty, and we inwardly and sometimes outwardly long for a strong ruler who is going to make us feel like someone’s in charge, someone is going to make us safe in uncertain times, when everything seems to be changing. We want someone with power, and we want to be right in there next to them.

From the earliest times, starting with the first disciples, and increasingly across the ages, Christians have tried to make Jesus into that kind of king, and we still do. The Feast of Christ the King that we observe today is actually the *newest* festival on the Christian calendar, and wasn’t observed until 1925, when Pope Pius XI instituted it in an effort to “fight atheistic communism, secularism, and anti-clericalism, and to help re-establish the authority of Christ”—and of course, of Christ’s spouse and representative, the Church—“in *earthly* government.” That’s a paraphrase of the original papal proclamation. Power was slipping away from the Church, and the powers that be wanted to do something about it. By claiming Jesus as king, the Church expressed its own desire to be in charge.

But at the center of this feast of Christ the King today is not a stirring description of Christ sitting on an earthly throne in power, as much as we want it to be. It seems supremely ironic to me that on this Feast of Christ the King, or Festival of the Reign of Christ, as many Lutherans have begun calling it, when our minds are filled with images of pomp and splendor that we associate with royalty, the gospel reading is not a post-Resurrection reading, when Jesus is victorious in our eyes, where we picture him ascending to be enthroned at the right hand of the Father. No, today’s gospel describes the lowest point in Jesus’ life, when he has been betrayed and put on trial before Pilate, seemingly powerless, humiliated, denied and abandoned by those he loves, about to be nailed to a rough cross, where he will bleed and die, suffering the same fate as criminals and revolutionaries. His hands will not be free to wield a scepter, because they will be nailed to a wooden beam. Rather than being dressed in regal raiment, he will be stripped of all clothing, his body laid naked for the crowd to see every square inch of him, with not even a demure linen loincloth to cover him. The only herald announcing him king will be a mocking sign over his head that reads, “This is the King of the Jews.” We know

the story. It is almost too familiar to us. But here, on the threshold of the lowest depth of darkness and suffering, here is where we find our king. Here is where we find Jesus, firstborn of all creation: hanging on a cross. That cross, dear sisters and brothers, is the closest thing we have to a throne in this story.

This doesn't fit anything we know about rulers. Rulers have power, rulers have respect, rulers get to tell people what to do. This picture of a powerless, dying Jesus doesn't fit our notions of power. And to the Romans, the idea of Jesus of Nazareth, the would-be insurrectionist who had been put to death by the most shameful means possible, as a king of *any* sort, must have seemed as ridiculous as the pretensions to royalty of the Cowardly Lion. Yet the Church chose to refer to Christ as king. What kind of king could this be?

At its best, the Church remembers and tells the whole story, not just the story of a triumphant king, but also the story of the One who willingly chooses the way of suffering and powerlessness, the way of submission, the way of the cross, the way of dying and rising, in order to speak the truth. Believers knew the truth that Jesus testified to before Pilate, the truth of the Reign of God, Christ's true kingdom, that upside-down world where the last will be first, the weak will be strong, the mighty will be cast down from their thrones, and the poor exalted, a world where forgiveness and mercy will flow freely, where hunger and pain and injustice will be no more, an upside-down world where we will compete with one another in seeing who will be the greatest servant rather than the greatest master. I use the term "upside-down" with caution, because the Reign of God Jesus announces is actually the world put "right-side up." In fact, the world as we experience it *now* is the upside-down version, turned from its proper orientation by the power of sin and by people's desire to rule over one another rather than to serve one another. Believers knew also of the power of the Resurrection, and understood that, by dying and rising, our Lord Jesus had ushered in that kingdom that will break the power of the kingdoms of this world, that will undo the brokenness, that will bring resurrection and new life to all of creation.

But the Church forgets over and over again that Jesus did not choose to establish his kingdom using the kind of power that earthly rulers wield. The Church has erred repeatedly when it has confused the kingdom of God with the kingdoms of this world. We go astray and do great harm when ally ourselves with the rulers of this world, seeking to use their power as our own. This was true in the time of Constantine, when the Church became the established religion and took on the trappings of the Byzantine Roman court, living in luxury and wielding earthly power in unjust ways—and allowed itself to be used to perpetuate injustice, forgetting its servant calling, because that power felt so good. It was true at the time of the Reformation, when the Church throughout Europe, both Catholic *and* Protestant, allowed itself to become the tool of worldly powers at war with one another, again because of our thirst for power. It was true in 20th-century Germany, when a large portion of the Church there became willing participants in Nazism. It is true today, when we in this country have allowed the Church to become identified with the American civic religion, and are wooed by promises of political power, thinking that we can establish the kingdom of God and "right behavior" by legislating it, and instead becoming tools once more of those who crave power and control for their own sakes. In our fear of terrorism and of change and of the unknown, in our fearful desire to control, we put our trust in rulers who speak of strength and assurance, we put our trust in laws, and brute strength, and power over others, and we lose sight of the truth of the kingdom of Christ. We often fail to speak a word of truth to our governments, because we want to BE the government, we want to BE the rulers of this world.

We must never forget, though, that we are subjects of a very different kind of kingdom and of a very different kind of ruler. We live with our feet in two different worlds at the same time, the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God that is breaking into this world. Our security comes not from the might of weapons or the power of nations, but from a very different source. Our true security comes from a God who was willing to become a servant and to suffer in order to reconcile us and all creation to God's self. Our ruler is the Christ, who rules not with a sword and army, but with a simple statement of truth spoken in the face of governmental power, and by the giving of himself. Our choice, dear brothers and sisters, is not to be the kings and queens of the forest, but rather to choose to be truth-speaking priests to one another, to be foot-washing servants of one another, and to be humble servants of the One who rejected the use of the power that he could have wielded, who rejected the kind of power that we find so tempting, choosing a far greater power instead. At this end of the church year, we rejoice not in the triumph of the Church, but in the triumph of our servant king and high priest, the one who chooses the way of the cross, the way of dying and rising, and who has made us a kingdom of servant priests to serve one another and all of God's creation. Thanks be to God! AMEN