

“Jesus the (fill in the blank)”

Reading: 2 Samuel 7:8-16; Revelation 5:11-14

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Today is what is known as Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday in the church’s worshipping journey through the year before we begin again with Advent. It’s a fitting way to end the church year, by celebrating that Jesus is the Lord of all creation. If you’ve ever moved your residence over a long distance, especially if you’ve moved across a state border, you’ll know that there’s a period where all of your legal paperwork is in a sort of limbo – you’re now living in a new place, but your driver’s license, credit cards, car registration, and so on are all still affiliated with your old address until you get them changed. It’s a good feeling to have all of your paperwork updated to your new address after you’ve moved; it gives you a feeling of being settled in, as though your identity is back in order, like it should be. This Sunday is the day when we recognize that Jesus’ paperwork isn’t in limbo, His identity as the only true King is now and forever secure. There is no need to wonder or question who Jesus is on Christ the King Sunday: He is the King. Proclaiming that Jesus is Lord or King erases any doubt about who or what He is.

And there is plenty of doubt to be erased. Many people have had many things to say about Jesus over the years, but not all of those people have actually met the man they’re talking about. Every year around Christmas and Easter, as regular as clockwork, some fake scholar will claim to have discovered something new about who Jesus was, something that promises to shake Christianity to its bedrock. Of course it never does, but there is no shortage of theories and explanations for Jesus. Even in our church, there may be no shortage of theories about Jesus. Even those of us who go to church might live our lives as though Jesus is something less than the King, or we might relate to Him as though He is less than the King. It’s easy to do, especially since there are so many options other than King.

Many people like to think of Jesus as a great teacher or a great wise man. Some people are happy to say that Jesus *taught* us the way, but then they stop there. Jesus the Teacher is manageable; we have lots of teachers around us, so we know what teachers do and how to interact with them. A teacher is someone who knows something or learns something and then passes that on to those of us who haven’t learned it yet. Jesus certainly did a lot of teaching during His ministry; most of the conversations and events we have recorded in the gospels are set in the context of Jesus teaching. He taught in parables, stories with a spiritual punchline, He taught about how to live a moral life, He taught about the law, He even touched on politics. He was certainly a great teacher; nobody can argue that.

But some of us might focus on Christ the Teacher and leave Him at that. We might think that because He was a great moral teacher, He was only a great moral teacher. That way we can post quotes from Jesus on Facebook alongside quotes from Gandhi or the Dalai Lama; they’re all good moral teachers who have some good things to say. Maybe Jesus was even the greatest moral teacher ever to live, and maybe His teachings rank as the best and most enlightened teachings the world has ever heard. A lot of people are willing to go that far, to Christ the Teacher, but they aren’t willing to go as far as Christ the King. Jesus the Teacher, even Jesus the Greatest Teacher Ever, is easy for a lot of people to accept, because you can learn about something without committing to it. If Jesus is only a teacher, then that means we can take what we like from His teachings and throw out the rest. Those

miracles and healings are a little hard to believe, so we can ignore them. And those times when He said that He is the only way to get to God, that's a little too exclusive, because we want to think that everybody's basically good enough to go to heaven when they die. Or we'll quote the line about not judging others, but we'll leave out the part about being perfect as God is perfect. We'll insist that Christianity is all about universal love, but we'll skip the hard part about loving your enemies. That's what happens when we stick with only Jesus the Teacher: we sift out so many of the things we don't like that we end up with something that isn't Jesus.

Jesus wasn't tortured because He taught revolutionary new ideas. He wasn't condemned as a criminal of the state in a show trial because He taught everyone how to be nice to each other. He wasn't executed as a professor or a wise man. He was killed because He said that the kingdoms of this earth are not where the real power is, that the only kingdom that truly matters is the kingdom of God, that He is the one sent to call all men and women back to the kingdom ruled by the King of kings.

But a lot of people know that Jesus isn't just a teacher, and that we have to relate to Him as much more than just Jesus the Teacher. We've been told that Jesus died for our sins, and we see from the Bible that one of the things His death accomplished was to atone for our sins – so, in other words, all of the things we've done to hurt one another and rebel against God don't have to be held against us because the blood of Christ covers them over or atones for them. Jesus filled the role of a sacrificial lamb according to the Old Testament system in which animal sacrifices were used to atone for the sin of the people, and in fact Jesus fulfilled the entire system of sacrifices so that no more sacrifices are needed. So we see that more than being just Jesus the Teacher, He is also Jesus the Sacrifice who opens the way for us to enter into the presence of God.

And of course all of this is true; Jesus really did die for your sins and my sins. But again, the temptation for many of us is to think He is just Jesus the Sacrifice and forget that He is also Christ the King. We hear that Jesus died for my sins and we think that all is well; we stop right there. Just like Jesus the Teacher, Jesus the Sacrifice is easy enough to manage and control. There are certain mechanics involved in offering a sacrifice that make it, in some ways, easy. Once the sacrifice has been offered, it's easy to think everything has been done that needed to be done, and now that we've sacrificed we are right with God. If Christ is our Sacrifice and we are right with God, it's as though Jesus did the hard work, and now we get to sit back and enjoy the fruits of His suffering, the fruits of going to heaven with a minimum of effort on our part. Jesus the Sacrifice becomes a tool for us to use so that we can avoid suffering and guilt for ourselves. We're grateful for what He did, but we get to be the ones to enjoy the blessings of His sacrifice, the blessings of eternal life in heaven, all for the low price of one quick prayer accepting Jesus' sacrifice and believing that He died for your sins.

The problem with that is that something that has been sacrificed is dead. Once a sacrifice has done its job, the work is done, and you don't have to worry about the sacrifice any more. The debt has been paid, the account is closed, the transaction is over, and everybody's happy. But Jesus didn't stay dead, and so Jesus the Sacrifice can't be the whole picture. If we live our Christian lives as though nothing changes after we accept Christ's sacrifice, if we think we just get to accept the sacrifice of Christ and enjoy the blessings without also sacrificing our own lives, then we're acting like Jesus is just Christ the Sacrifice and not Christ the Living King.

Or we could see Him as Jesus the Savior, which is also something we hear regularly. We talk

about salvation and say that Jesus came to save us, and He is our savior. "Savior" is one of those nice, Christian words that you rarely hear outside of church, but a savior is effectively the same thing as a hero, someone who saves us from mortal danger, who swoops in and rescues us when we can't rescue ourselves. And that's very true of Jesus: when we were unable to help ourselves, when we were sick and dying with the stench of sin, when we hated God and swore to fight to the death against him, even then, Christ was our Savior, the hero who came to us and saved us when we were unable to save ourselves. But again, if we stay there, if we think He is just Jesus the Savior and not Christ the King, He becomes little more than Superman. If you've got Superman on your side, all you need to do is step back and let Him do the tough stuff, and if you find yourself in trouble, just scream loud enough, and he'll swoop down to save the day, as usual. If Superman is your hero and he's listening for your call, what is there for you to do? If something bad does happen, then, just blame it on Superman, because he dropped the ball and it certainly couldn't be your fault. And so, rather than doing the hard work of living the Christian life, we can sit around waiting for Jesus to swoop down and do everything for us.

These are the things that can happen if we try to make Jesus anything less than Christ the King: we can so easily twist His words to fit whatever circumstance we want that we think He is at our disposal. If He is anything less than the living and active ruler of the universe, then we will try to turn Him into Jesus the Republican, Jesus the Democrat, Jesus the Revolutionary, Jesus the Environmentalist, Jesus the Capitalist, Jesus the Celestial Vending Machine, Jesus the Buddhist, Jesus the Patron Saint for whatever cause or lifestyle I want to subscribe to or happens to be trendy today. The foundation of any heresy is the desire to make God more manageable or controllable by making Him less than He is, and that is precisely what we do if we make Him less than the King of all kings and Lord of all lords. He may be the omnipresent God, capable of being anywhere, but that doesn't mean he'll fit in your pocket.

The basic message of the gospel, the most fundamental teaching that has been passed down by the church for the last two thousand years, is the proclamation that Jesus is Lord, shouted from the rooftops and whispered in the dark corners. Our most basic message for the world is not Jesus' moral lessons, it's not that He died for your sins, and it's not that He can be your personal savior: those are all true, but our most basic message for the world is that Christ is King. He is the King who was promised to king David thousands of years ago, the one who fulfilled God's promise that there would be an eternal kingdom of God's faithfulness led by a faithful King like David. This was a sheer gift out of God's grace beyond faithfulness; David didn't deserve a promise like that. But God promised, and He fulfilled that promise in Jesus. And when the soldiers were crucifying Jesus, they put a sign over Him letting any passers-by know that He claimed to be the King of the Jews. They meant to mock him, but they didn't know how much truth there was in their mockery. He really is the King of the Jews, and the King of the Romans, and the Germans, and the Americans, and the Russians, and everybody else. He is the one praised in the courts of heaven, glimpsed through squinting eyes by John, who wrote the book of Revelation. John was ushered into a scene in heaven before the throne of God, and there he saw all of heaven worshipping Jesus Christ, the Lamb Who Was Slain.

The nice thing about teachers and sacrifices and saviors is that they benefit us; in some sense they are defined by how they benefit us, and we care about them precisely because they benefit us. A king, on the other hand, isn't there just to benefit you; kings are defined by their own royalty. We learn from teachers and we make use of sacrifices and we get saved by saviors, but kings aren't there

just for us; they demand loyalty and allegiance and obedience from us. That means that if we proclaim and celebrate that Christ is King, we are declaring our allegiance to Him and Him alone. It's all or nothing with kings, either we belong to Christ the King and to Him alone, or we still hold on to serving something else, and we have no part in Christ's kingdom. Jesus wasn't raised from the dead so that the story could have a happy ending; He was raised from the dead so that He could rule the world as its King forever. The Holy Spirit wasn't sent to the church just so that we could feel good and be excited during times of worship; He was sent to help us to live in the kingdom of God.

If He is indeed the living King, this has implications for our lives. He is not just a storybook character. If He is the King, then what He says is what should guide us. Do we just quote what we like about Jesus, or do we take the time to study and learn all of what He has told us? Do we fit Him into our politics, relationships, business, and recreation, or do we fit all aspects of our lives to fit Him? If He is the living King, that means that He continues to lead us; do we know Him personally in a growing, dynamic relationship? Are you continually welcoming Him to guide and transform your life? Jesus Christ really is the Lord of lords and the King of kings. He really is alive today, right now, King over everything. The world doesn't yet recognize that He is its King, and His kingdom hasn't yet come in its fullness. But that doesn't make Him any less the rightful King. Are you trying to make Him less than the living, active, mighty King who wants your loyalty? Will you declare your allegiance to the true King?



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