

## **“The King of Everything”**

Reading: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Matthew 25:31-46

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As a rule, Americans don't like royalty. We do seem to enjoy it when the British royalty have a wedding or a baby, but a rejection of kings and queens having any authority over us is part of who we are as a country. Our founding document, the Declaration of Independence, says that “we hold these truths to be self-evident,” meaning that it doesn't really need proving because it's assumed to be true, “that all men are created equal.” And because of that, then, “Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” What that implies is that a king or queen does not rule by divine right, and their authority is not unquestionable or absolute; instead, their authority relies on the consent of their people. We take that for granted today, but at the time that was a pretty radical statement. Our Founders were taking a stand against thousands of years of monarchical government and, at least in theory, asserting that no person had more inherent rights than another, though of course functionally that was only true if you were a white male.

When they later wrote our Constitution, then, they explicitly made it so that our government cannot bestow titles of nobility. There cannot ever be an American king or duke or earl. It sounds kind of absurd to us today to even think it would be necessary to say that, because we're Americans and *of course* we don't have nobles, but at the beginning it wasn't quite so decided. It's been interesting and timely in recent days to hear people referring to President Obama as a king or an emperor because of his action on immigration; in our country, acting like a king is considered an insult. And so we read stories of ancient kings and queens in the Bible, and even though we know that they're true stories, they have a slightly far-off, fairy-tale quality to them. Few if any of us here really know what it's like living with a king or queen. Even in countries today that still have a monarch, in most cases they don't rule with anywhere near the power that they once had. It's hard for us to know what it really means to be ruled by a king.

But today is the last Sunday in the Christian calendar, the last Sunday before we begin a new year with Advent, and the last Sunday of the year is known as Christ the King Sunday. It's the culmination of the last year of telling and living the story of Jesus. Every year we begin by anticipating His birth during Advent, and we tell some of His story for a few months, and then we move into the season of Lent and Easter when we focus on His death and resurrection, and then during Ordinary Time we continue telling stories of His teachings and miracles. All of it leads us to the last Sunday of the year in which we boldly proclaim that this Jesus we have been worshipping is not merely our teacher or example or savior or messiah, He is also our King. This man is God incarnate, and He has been supremely faithful to us and to His mission, and therefore He is enthroned eternally as King and Lord of creation. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him.

Saying that Christ is King examines all the other “kings” you and I serve and worship. Saying that Christ is King is an extremely political statement, even in our modern, democratic society that rejects kings. Maybe it's especially a political statement in our modern, democratic society that rejects kings, because we're not as familiar with what a king looks like and how to act around one. It always amuses me when it's time for an election, because invariably one candidate or another, or one side or another, will try to suggest that their candidate is the truly Christian candidate, and I often hear people asking, “Who would Jesus vote for?” The answer is always, in their minds, the side that

they would vote for themselves. But the real answer is “No one.” Jesus wouldn’t vote for any of our candidates for any of our offices, because He’s the King, and Kings don’t vote. All authority in heaven and on earth is His.

The reality is that the Lordship of Jesus Christ is a challenge to you regardless of where you fall on the political spectrum. There may be things He affirms in your politics, but there will certainly be things He challenges or condemns, and your political opponents will get the same treatment. He will call you to examine your notion of what power looks like and what it’s used for. He will call you to examine your notion of sacrifice and generosity. He will take away your notion of human rights and replace it with a command to love both your neighbors and your enemies. Jesus is King, and no one else is. Jesus is King, and He sits in judgment over every other political claim or use of power or economic system or ruler; He is King over all kingdoms.

We’ve spent the last couple of weeks listening in on the Olivet Discourse, this passage of teaching in which Jesus outlines some of the broad themes of the future of His kingdom. A lot of what He has to say in chapters 23 through 25 of Matthew’s gospel is directed against the ruling religious elite, the people who had political power, who were using it for their own gain, and were preaching the message that people who weren’t like them were excluded from the kingdom of God. So Jesus is calling them out for their hypocrisy and failures as leaders among God’s people. He is telling them what it will look like when the kingdom of God arrives in its fullness not just to give people a glimpse of future, but also to make it clear that the kingdom of God will bring judgment upon those false kingdoms that do not honor God or use God’s name for their own benefit.

We’ve seen several parables in a row in which there is judgment at the end of the story: first there is a wedding, and those who are not prepared are left outside. Then there is a master who goes on a trip and leaves his assets with his servants, and the one who doubts the good character of the master to the point of failing to use the assets the master has given him is reprimanded and cast out. And today we finally come to a truly royal parable: “When the Son of Man” — that is, Jesus, as the promised Messiah who will usher in the end of God’s work — “comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne.” Not just a wedding or a return from a business trip, this is a king sitting in judgment on his throne. Make no mistake: the completion of God’s plan involves Him returning in judgment as the true and rightful King with all authority.

But even in this glorious moment of exaltation there is a reversal of expectation. The one who sits on this throne in splendor and power begins to judge based not on how brave or virtuous people have been, or how many churches they’ve built or how much work they’ve done to increase God’s kingdom. No, the king judges based on how they have treated the least among them: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoner. What’s more, to further shake up our expectations, this glorious King reveals that He identifies with “the least of these.” He calls them His brothers and sisters, and what you did for them you did for Him, even to the point of claiming to *be* them: *I* was hungry, *I* was thirsty, *I* was a stranger. So before we even get to the sheep and the goats, there is this focus on Jesus as the unexpected King, and how you respond to Him as He is, and how you respond to those people He claims as His own.

Jesus is drawing heavily from a much older parable told by the prophet Ezekiel; we read part of it. God compares His people to a flock, and He cares greatly about that flock. He begins by

condemning the shepherds who had been in charge of the flock because they took care of themselves at the expense of the flock. The sheep scattered and were attacked because those shepherds, those leaders among God's people, cared more about getting the good stuff than they did about caring for the sheep. The result is that God will remove those shepherds and will Himself take on the role of the Good Shepherd. He will do the sorts of things that we hear Jesus preaching about, even in our parable of the sheep and the goats: He will find His lost sheep, tend them, bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, and destroy the sleek and the strong sheep.

And once He's dealt with the bad shepherds and brought the flock back together, God will sort through the sheep themselves. He cares very much how the sheep treat one another. The assumption is that those who are fat and strong and sleek got that way by shoving the weaker sheep out of the way. "Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of the pasture with your feet?" He asks. If that's not a loaded political statement, I don't know what is. God cares about the health of His flock as a whole, but also how the sheep in the flock are treating one another.

Jesus adopts Ezekiel's imagery into His parable of the arrival of God's kingdom. Here there is less focus on the shepherds of the flock and a more exclusive focus on the animals in the flock. The promised Good Shepherd has arrived, so the rejection of the other shepherds has already taken place. But the flock has yet to be dealt with. Again, they're separated based on their treatment of the weak and marginalized. We've seen three parables that end with judgment: the first called us to be watchful and expectant for our Lord's coming, the second called us to be good servants who are faithful with what our master entrusts us with, and the third calls us to a special concern for the marginalized and weak. We trust that our Lord will be faithful to return, we trust His goodness enough to make use of the gifts He gives us in the meantime, and we trust His love and provision enough to use those gifts for the benefit of the weak. The King is coming. Will He find you expecting Him? Will He find you using His gifts? And will He find you serving and loving the marginalized?

There were a lot of factors leading to our Founders' decision to reject the authority of the King of England, but many of them came back to the king abusing his power. The shepherds in Ezekiel's parable live for their own gain and use the flock for what they can get out of it, and the strong sheep trample the good grass before the weak sheep can get to it. Nowadays, when we feel like the President is abusing his power, we say he's acting like a king. This is how we expect the powerful to act, not because we're cynical pessimists, but because that's how it's been for a very long time.

But here in this parable we see the King of Kings sitting on His throne in glory, passing judgment based on how the least are treated. This is a different kind of King. This is a King who uses His power for the powerless. This is a King who shepherds His flock especially for the sake of the weakest in the flock. This is a King who finds His greatest glory in identifying with the most humble. He will shepherd His flock with justice, and that means that when He comes, He will come on behalf of the least of these.

Our celebration of Thanksgiving is coming up this week, of course, and in the course of our worship today we've begun the process of expressing our thanks to God for His goodness to us. Our gratitude and our generosity are linked in God's kingdom. God's sacrifice for us is connected with our sacrifices for others. God's humbling of Himself for our sakes leads to our humbling of ourselves to

bless those whom our world deems unworthy. Our Good Shepherd leads us to good pastures and then expects us to make room for others. As God has blessed you, how will you then go and be a blessing to those in need around you? As God gives the gifts of His kingdom to you, how will you use those gifts for His glory by serving others?

Benediction: The Son of Man will come in His glory. As you go, remember that whatever you do for the least of these brothers and sisters of His, you do for Him.



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