

## **“When Jesus is Your King”**

*Reading: Colossians 1:11-20; Acts 9:1-19*

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Today we celebrate Jesus as our King. This is Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday in the church calendar, the culmination of one more year of the church's journey in our life in Christ. We begin the journey again next Sunday as we enter Advent and wait once again to celebrate the birth of Jesus, and then as the year progresses we continue telling stories from Jesus' life and continue being formed by His presence, we let our stories be formed by the story of Jesus and His church, and then we arrive again at the end and commit ourselves anew to serving Him as our Lord and King. The story always leads us here, to the proclamation that Jesus Christ is Lord of all.

So today we are telling stories of what that means. If Jesus is truly your King, what does that look like? What can that mean, really, in the life of a person? Well, quite simply, it means transformation. It means more than just hoping I'll go to heaven when I die, it means that heaven begins soaking your life now, giving you not only the hope of resurrection but the beginnings of the reality of resurrection, as Christ our King begins remaking us into what He originally made us to be and we rejected.

We could never possibly tell all the stories of how Jesus has transformed lives, but today we will tell a few. Some of our stories will be from the Bible, some will be from our history, and some will be from our own lives. We tell stories because it's one thing to debate or argue or discuss or study the theory of what Jesus does, but it's another thing entirely to hear the reality in a person's life.

We begin with Paul: an Apostle, a theologian, a missionary, a church planter, a pastor, and a martyr. We could add all kinds of titles to his name, but he started out as one of the first and worst enemies of the church. Jesus spent a good part of His ministry preaching against the religious elite who held so tightly to their own self-righteousness that they had no room for love or grace, and Paul, known as Saul at that time, was one of those people. The Bible doesn't tell us this, but it's not hard to imagine Saul in the audience that day at the temple when Jesus accused the religious elite as being hypocrites, a brood of vipers, and whitewashed tombs. It's not hard to imagine Saul being involved in the plot to kill Jesus, or sitting in the gallery in the sham of a trial that convicted Jesus. What we do know is that he was personally involved in the persecution of the first churches, and he directed at least some of the violence that led to the deaths of early Christians.

And here's the thing: in his mind, he was completely justified in doing so. He was following the law. He had the authority of the highest religious authorities to carry out his mission. These Christians were worshipping a man as though He were God, which was blasphemy, and warranted death. So Saul was justified in stamping out Christians wherever they were, with no quarter given, and our reading for today makes it clear that he intended to spare neither man nor woman.

And then Jesus became his King. The symbolism is potent: the man who thought he saw everything so clearly is blinded. The man charging ahead on a mission is knocked off his feet. The man going to Damascus to round up Christians ends up joining them. The man trying to stamp out the followers of Jesus ends up being Jesus' chosen ambassador. Undeniable transformation brought on entirely by an encounter with the risen King Jesus.

This man named Ananias plays an important role in the story; we don't know much about him beyond what we see in this passage. Jesus speaks to him in a vision and tells him that Paul is expecting him, and Jesus also says that "this man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name," and Jesus "will show him how much he must suffer for my name." But that's not the message Ananias gives Paul. Instead, he tells Paul that Jesus sent him "so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." I don't know how significant it is, but he decides to leave out the parts about being Jesus' chosen instrument, and that Paul is going to suffer in that role.

When Jesus became Paul's King – that is, when Paul encountered Jesus not only as a miracle worker or teacher or moral philosopher or even as the martyr who founded a new religion, but when Paul encountered Jesus as the eternal, living Lord of all creation – the entire orientation of Paul's life was transformed. His reliance on his own ability to maintain the standards of religion transformed into a reliance on the power and goodness of Jesus. His mission to maintain the boundaries and the standards of his religion transformed into a mission to expand the boundaries of Christ's kingdom by announcing the messages of his Lord. His message of condemnation for all who failed to meet the mark became a message of inclusion and invitation to those who were far away. The persecutor became a proselytizer. The enemy became an ambassador. He was transformed and appointed to go out as a messenger of transformation.

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Sometimes Jesus reveals Himself as King by humbling us, as He did with Paul, by knocking him off his feet and demonstrating His power. Other times He reveals Himself as King by coming to us in a moment of need and showing us the grace that can only come from a king. The Apostle Peter is a perfect example of this. He is, in many ways, the exact opposite of Paul: rather than a member of the educated religious elite, Peter is an everyman who works with his hands. Rather than resisting the ministry of Jesus, Peter throws himself into the life of a disciple almost from the very start. Where Paul might rely on an intricate rhetorical argument, Peter would be more likely to charge ahead boldly and brashly. Where Jesus had to humble Paul by knocking down his carefully-constructed theology, Jesus had to pick up the pieces of Peter after the failure of Peter's boldness.

If you've read the gospels before, you've probably noticed that Peter is almost always the first to speak up and the first to go too far. It's Peter who is first among the disciples to declare that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah of God. It's Peter who is then first to rebuke Jesus in a stunning breach of respect when Jesus predicts His suffering and crucifixion. But of course the most memorable moments come during the events surrounding Jesus' crucifixion, when Jesus is first confronted by the mob sent to arrest Him and Peter springs into action by drawing a sword and taking a swing. But just a matter of hours after that, Peter's impetuosity leaves him, and he fails the Lord he was so quick to defend. While Jesus is on trial, Peter is asked by three separate people if he is one of Jesus' disciples, and he denies having known Jesus and fails the test of faithfulness.

The last chapter of John's gospel tells us what happens later, when Jesus has been raised from the dead as a sign that He is Lord of all. Over the course of a few weeks, Jesus meets with His disciples and removes any doubt they may have that He has defeated death through the cross, and that He is indeed the Lord and Messiah. The last chapter of John's gospel tells of when Jesus appeared to His

closest disciples at the Sea of Galilee, where it all began a few years earlier. Peter and the others are back to doing what they did before, what they knew best: fishing. Many have understood this as Peter trying to come to grips with all that has happened; after the trauma of the crucifixion and the disappointment of his failure, Peter needs some time to sort things out.

And Jesus, the Lord who has been betrayed and abandoned, comes to him in that moment, forgives him, and appoints him for new service. After they break bread together as they did so many times before, Jesus asks Peter a pointed question: “Do you love me?” And what’s worst, Jesus keeps asking him; maybe He’s giving Peter the opportunity for the significance to settle in. And each time, as Peter answers Him by saying that yes, Peter loves Him, and as Peter gets more and more distraught that Jesus keeps asking, Jesus’ response is the same: “Feed my lambs, take care of my sheep, feed my sheep.” Peter failed Jesus in the critical moment, but here Jesus is giving him the opportunity to declare his allegiance again and is appointing Peter for His service again. Peter is not out of the kingdom because of his failure: he is still appointed to take care of Jesus’ flock.

When Jesus is your King, it’s not that your failures don’t matter, that everything is fine and we just pretend nothing happened and move on. No, when Jesus is your King, your failures can become the foundation for His grace, the basis for redemption, and the starting point for appointment to new service.

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When Jesus is your King, sometimes He humbles you, sometimes He shows you kingly grace in response to your failures, and sometimes He interrupts your life to break your heart. That was the case for a Methodist minister named Orange Scott. Scott was born to a poor family in Vermont, and though he had almost no education as a child, he was determined to use what he had to know God. After a camp meeting encounter with God while he was 20, Scott was deeply committed to pursuing God. He soon became a minister of a circuit of thirty different preaching points spread out over 200 miles, but he wasn’t a circuit rider – he did it all on foot. Within ten years he was elevated to a position similar to our district superintendents.

He was a dedicated Christian and servant of God focusing his efforts on evangelizing the lost, and had been for many years. But then, in 1833, Scott became newly aware of the evils of slavery in our country and heard of the new abolitionist movement. He quickly learned all he could about abolition and helped build a movement among Methodists in New England. At the 1836 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, however, he learned how deeply the church can become ensnared by compromises with evil as his colleagues called him a “reckless incendiary” and a “mental incompetent.” He was told to make a choice between being an abolitionist or holding his position, and when he refused to compromise, he was assigned to a small, out-of-the-way parish as punishment.

But the broken heart God had given him for the oppressed would not let him stop. He and a few other like-minded ministers withdrew from the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1842 and began publishing an abolitionist newspaper called *The True Wesleyan*. Over the next couple of years, more churches joined the movement and became the Wesleyan Methodist Connection, one of the first

denominations to be formed by taking a stand against a social evil and the beginning of what would one day become The Wesleyan Church.

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When Jesus is your King, sometimes He humbles you, sometimes He heals your hurts, and sometimes He breaks your heart for the people around you. But what is always true is that if Jesus is your King, He appoints you to be His ambassador. He never saves you and then leaves you where you are. He transforms you and calls you to be a servant to others and a witness for Him.



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