

First Presbyterian Church
John 18:33-37, “My Kingdom is Not of this World”
by Pastor Matt Johnson

You may have noticed a theme today, from the welcome and call to worship,
to the songs we’ve sung and the texts that have been read,
we’ve been dwelling on the theme that Christ is King.

Indeed, Jesus is the King of Kings. As we recited in the Apostle’s Creed,
he now sits at the right hand of God the Father on the throne of heaven,
and will one day return to judge the quick and the dead.

There is a point being made in the Lectionary,
to put this theme and this text from John’s Gospel immediately
before we enter the season of Advent, so that we go into Advent
fully aware of the King whose arrival we are preparing for.

But all of that’s very proper, and sometimes it takes a little irreverence
to help us dig deeper into such themes.

One of my favorite irreverent movies from a while back is called, “Saved,”
which offers a satirical look at life in a Christian high school.

There’s a scene at the school’s first assembly of the year,
and the principal enters an auditorium during an assembly to rock music,
does a back-flip, and then grabs a microphone
and starts pumping the kids up.

He says,
“The Lord Jesus is in the house! Let’s get our Christ on. Let’s kick it Jesus style.
Y’all wanna walk with the ultimate rebel, right?
The ultimate CEO? The biggest celebrity of them all?”

And this…works! The kids are all pumped up and start chanting
with the principle, “Jesus Rules! Jesus Rules!”
which the principal revels in for a few moments when,
without any transition from the chanting,
he offers a solemn invitation, “Let’s pray.”

This scene hits home for me because the reverence called for in prayer
to the Creator of the universe has already been trampled on
by all these efforts to be cool and to making sure
that the kids think Jesus is cool.

But Jesus is not cool.

At least not in the trendy, pop-culture sense.

– ooh, contemplation question for the ride home:

“Explain the following statement: Jesus is awesome, but not cool.”

You might want to write that down,

“Jesus is awesome, but not cool. Explain.”

In something of a similar way, I’ve become a little worried about how quickly
I can get excited about talking of Jesus as King.

Because if I’m not careful, I can easily get pulled into a form of thinking
that isn’t really any different from saying that Jesus is the ultimate CEO.
The man upstairs. The head honcho. The Pope’s president.

I’m not concerned with this because I think that,

“God is very serious and we should always be very formal
and serious with God.”

No that’s a false kind of reverence that I’m not interested in.

But I am concerned with regard to all the cultural associations
we have with powerful leaders of this variety: Kings, Presidents, and CEOs.
These are typically white, male,
American leaders in our imaginations.

Considering our go-to stereotypes for powerful leaders, it is all too easy
to sing songs of Christ as King and project the assumptions
we have about powerful white men onto Jesus.

In John 18, we have a story of Jesus standing before just such a king.
A powerful Roman-appointed regional governor named Pontius Pilate.
Pilate has taken custody of Jesus after the Jewish leaders
took Jesus from the High Priest Caiaphas.

Pilate is a man with tremendous earthly power.
He orders the movements of soldiers,
lives in a palace,
controls immense wealth
and commands the attention of all who stand before him.

Specifically, he wields the authority of the great Roman Empire
in the region of Judea and the city of Jerusalem – the land of the Jews.

It's this man of power who stands in the Praetorium.
and asks Jesus in v. 33 - "Are you King of the Jews?"

Jesus responds to Pontius Pilate as he would any questioner
on the streets of Jerusalem or Galilee,
returning a question in response to a question:
"Is this your idea or did others talk to you about me?"

For someone in custody, this is a non-standard response to a judge's first question.

In v. 35 Pilate displays some patience by explaining his area of interest:
"You were handed over to me by your own nation's leaders –
what did you do?"

Pilate seems to be perplexed about what has provoked this situation in which Jesus,
supposedly a Jewish king or claiming to be a Jewish king,
to be handed over to Roman authorities by the Jews? What did he do?

In v. 36 - Jesus, again, doesn't answer directly,
but rather describes the unusual nature of his kingship.

He says, "My kingdom is not of this world."

Quite a statement.

It implies that Jesus is, indeed, King – but not the kind of King
that Pilate is used to encountering.
Nor is Jesus the kind of King the Jews were used to encountering.

As evidence, Jesus notes that his followers have not fought to prevent his arrest.
(True, Peter sliced a guy's ear off, but Jesus miraculously reattached it,
and it was clear at that point that combat tactics were not
to be included in Jesus' regime.)

When Jesus says his Kingdom is not of this world,
we correctly intuit that Jesus' Kingdom is a heavenly one.
But let us not think that means it has no tangible connection to earth.

Jesus was not just a "King of Heaven" but was rightly called the King of the Jews.
The land Jesus was born on was land of promise,
a geographic and cultural environment that was indispensable for
shaping Jesus' childhood, maturation, faith, understanding,
ministry...and kingship.

The dust of Israel's streets, the wine of its vineyards,
the figs of its orchards and the grain of its fields permeate Jesus'
relationships, teaching, healing, and miracle working.
If we forget the Jewishness of Jesus and the land that he lived in,
then we strangely disembodied the miracle of the incarnation.

So let us make no mistake: it is a Jewish King of Israel
who stands before Pontius Pilate.
And yet(!) -- his kingdom is also not of this world.

Here we see that Jesus' kingship shares a dual nature just as Jesus' person does:
fully human and fully divine.

As a result, Jesus consistently demonstrated a very different way of engaging
categories of power, privilege, and kingship.

Virtually everything that our kings were about, Jesus was not:
Jesus was the unkingly king of an unkingdomly kingdom.

The challenge for Jesus was to explain God's Kingdom to the people,
and the challenge of the people was to understand Kingdom
in terms of totally new categories.

In his book, “The Unkingdom of God,” Mark van Steenwyk explains
that when Jesus is tempted in the wilderness by Satan,
the diabolical nature of the temptation
isn’t due to the source of the temptation—the fact that the offer
of political, economic and religious power comes
from the devil instead of God.
Rather, the temptation concerns the sort of reign Jesus should pursue.
Jesus is the unkingly king.

The implications for us as the people of God are never-ending.

In a world that craves after power, and status, and celebrity and image,
“likes” and “retweets,” we must constantly remind ourselves
that we do not serve a king who was the ultimate CEO,
the biggest celebrity of them all.

And in being reminded, we must also take heart that the liberation Jesus promised
in the Kingdom he inaugurated is available to us *today*.

- We can join in that unkingdom by receiving God’s grace to the deepest places in our lives instead of seeking a righteousness that is apart from God.
- We can join in that unkingdom by lifting up others instead of indulging our need to be recognized.
We can join in that unkingdom by advocating for the poor instead of being swept up in empty political theater.
- We can join in that unkingdom by seeing our spending as opportunities to invest in those who pay workers well, instead of propping up an oppressive economic order.
- We can join in that unkingdom by practicing hospitality toward each other and toward our neighbors. We pray that our unkingly King will lead us as we seek this hospitality, in Community Dinner, in Laundry Love Day, and in our daily way of life.