

Jeremiah 23: 23: 1-6
Colossians 1: 9-19
Luke 22: 24-32

Strength and Strengthening
November 20, 2016
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Today is Christ the King Sunday, or Reign of Christ Sunday. Americans have historically been suspicious of kings ever since the time of the revolution. Our national narrative our story of independence and freedom, tells us that we threw off the yoke of kingship through a bloody war, and that we hold tight to our freedoms whenever they are threatened. And yet, there is ambivalence. We like strong leaders. Some anglophiles even secretly admire the monarchy: a royal family is kind of intriguing. Our religious traditions have a similar ambivalence. In the first Book of Samuel, in the Hebrew Scriptures, we are told that the people were ruled by tribal judges and religious leaders in a kind of shared leadership. But they begged the prophet Samuel to anoint a king for them. They wanted a strong king, just like all the surrounding nations. Samuel warned them, “you won’t like this much, when your king starts ordering you around, conscripting your sons and daughters, taxing you beyond your means.” But the people insisted, even though it is clear that in clamoring for a king, they were rejecting God’s leadership.

In today’s passage from Jeremiah, we hear of the fallout from this choice. A nickname for the king was “Shepherd of the People.” God condemns the shepherds who destroy and scatter the helpless nation, and promises a new shepherd, who will bring justice, wisdom and peace. Christians read this as a prediction of the eventual coming of Jesus.

So today, when we are given so many titles for Jesus - Shepherd, Righteous Branch, King, One who Serves, Firstborn of all Creation, Head of the Body – we might well feel some of that ambivalence towards acknowledging even Jesus with terms like King or Lord. For some of us, that language just does not work.

And so I turn to... my computer to get a handle on things. In Colossians I read, “He is the image of the invisible God.” That word, “image” is actually “icon.” Jesus is the icon of God. OK, I know about icons: there are a lot of them on my laptop. I know that an icon is a” pictorial representation of a facility available on a computer system, that enables the facility to be activated by means of a screen cursor rather than by a textual instruction.” I found that on an online dictionary. An icon is a kind of short cut. Click on it, and it takes you where you want to go. Of course, now with touch screens, you could just tap on the icon, and open up the page.

Well, I can’t just put my cursor on Jesus, and I don’t have a touch screen, so I may need to take a little time to understand this image, this icon, and where it takes us.

As I said, the ancient people of Israel had some experience with monarchy. They believed that kings should be anointed by God, and then live out God’s commandments. If the king was righteous, the nation and the people prospered. If the king was wicked or unfaithful, disaster came. So, in spite of all the honor and glory that came with being a king, they were also called “shepherds” and the people were a “flock.” This is the image (icon) Jeremiah uses when he says, “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture.” The humble icon of a very

lowly profession was used to make leaders accountable. God was not a shepherd, but God would display some of the qualities of a shepherd when the people were gathered, and became fruitful, free from fear. The king was not a shepherd, but he would need to adopt some of those qualities: care, nurture, attention, watchfulness. These are the scriptures Jesus read, and they informed his understanding of leadership and strength.

The earliest followers of Jesus used the language of kingship to describe who he was, what he said, and what he did. Every king enjoys some kind of power, a rule, and a kingdom. So did Jesus. His first words of public ministry announced that "the kingdom of God is at hand." But just as the concept of shepherd redefines monarchy, Jesus was redefining power and leadership and community.

Earlier I read from the Gospel of Luke, and the disciples were having a conversation with Jesus about power and leadership. In various forms, this wrestling with the issue of power, this question of which one is to be regarded as the greatest, turns up in all four Gospels. This is a hint to us that it was a big issue. Some people wanted to be in charge. Some people wanted the recognition and the honor that comes with being a leader. Jesus makes it clear that the political kingdoms around them were **not** a model for the new community.

There are two important words hidden in the text here words that give us some insight into communal strength. When Jesus tells his friends that he has come to them as one who serves, he is saying, "I come to you as a deacon:" deacon means servant. When we follow the icon, the image, of Christ here, we come to the world of service. Bread and wine was served at that last supper, just as members here serve the elements at holy communion. This demonstrates the servanthood that Jesus taught, and triggers our imagination to think of service in a larger sense. When Jesus says that "I confer on you, just as my father has conferred on me, a kingdom," he is actually using the word 'covenant.' Jesus covenants with his followers, based on a covenant he made with God, to live in this strange kingdom, where kings are servants, and servants are kings. The whole "top – down" concept of ruling has been subverted. So we remember this when we say on communion Sundays: "We covenant with God and with one another..." For the new community, even the idea of one all-powerful shepherd doesn't work. We are all shepherding one another. Or, since Jesus urges Simon, "strengthen your brothers," we are all strengthening one another. In covenant. As servants.

So far I have been focused on the text, and squeezing as much meaning as I can from a few words. But I am thinking, maybe the computer idea of an icon can be more instructive for us here. As I said earlier, clicking on the picture, the icon, with the cursor lets the facility be activated without textual instruction. In other words, words are not our only tool. All the biblical titles and symbols and phrases are only valuable if they get us to display the good news, if they let our facilities be activated. Did any of you come here, to worship, to get activated?

The beginning of the Letter to the Colossians contains an ancient hymn which speaks of Jesus as the image of the invisible God. Do you know who else has been created in the image of God? Think back to the story of creation in Genesis..... Adam and Eve, which is an icon for Man and Woman: humanity. Jesus reminds us and calls us to honor that image, to act like that image, to click on that icon and activate our facilities. Just as Jeremiah called out to the leaders in Israel to live up to their God-given role as Shepherds, Jesus calls out to us to live up to our potential.

Colossians says, "In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." In Jesus of Nazareth, we see God's blueprint for the world revealed. Another way of saying this is that Jesus was the best example we have of a life lived in tune with the Spirit, a life spent in revealing God's word of justice, love, sacrifice, reconciliation. That is why we listen every Sunday for some story, some new facet, some new glimpse of that life, hoping that we will gain some insight for our own path.

I noted earlier that today is Reign of Christ or Christ the King Sunday. Our ancestors in this place would not have known or celebrated this day 200 years ago: it's a relatively new idea. Pope Pius XI introduced it in 1925, at a time when totalitarian rulers and systems began to take hold in Europe: led by people like Mussolini and Lenin. The Pope wanted to proclaim the power of Christ against the tyranny of secular powers. It was an announcement of protest and resistance. Other churches adopted Christ the King Sunday as a way of saying that there was a power above human kings and rulers. If we are ever tempted to glory in our political successes or our political power, the reign of Christ brings us back to our senses. The reign of Christ reminds us of the kind of king we follow.

Today is also Thanksgiving Sunday. We anticipate Thursday's national holiday. We are also giving thanks at the conclusion of our annual giving season, for the generosity of this congregation. I can easily make a list of the things for which I am thankful, the things I love about this church. I love the people, I love the music, I love the building, I love the opportunities to learn. The list goes on and on. But perhaps, these days, I am most grateful for the moral compass we are given in troubled times. This **is** a troubled time. The discourse of xenophobia, racism and misogyny has revealed a hidden dysfunction in our nation, which was probably always there. I believe that we are being asked to tolerate the intolerable. And so I gratefully turn to the example of Jesus and the strength of our community. I need it more than ever.

This week I gratefully read the words of a pastor, Paul Raushenbush, who said:

I am a follower of Jesus, who was the embodiment of love, the word of love made flesh.

I am a follower of Jesus, whose mother gave birth to him in a manger and whose very birth was so threatening to the powerful that they plotted to kill him as an infant.

I follow a dark skinned, Palestinian Jew whose first sermon preached liberation for the oppressed, release to the captives and good news to the poor.

Jesus, whose best followers were women, who praised people of other faiths, who tenderly washed the feet of those around him, and who angrily cleansed the temple of hypocrisy.

I call Lord, the one who stood up to bullies who would stone a woman for adultery and condemned the righteous piety of those who would judge but had no mercy.

I follow the Jesus who gave dignity to those degraded, invited repentance for our trespasses against God and neighbor and who draws us into right relation."

This Thanksgiving, I give thanks for a tradition that lifts up the value of each person as created in God's image. I give thanks for all the ways that so many lead by serving, and all the ways that strengthening brothers and sisters happens here, and elsewhere in churches and communities all over. I give thanks for the way that covenant surrounds us and holds us up, willing members of the Body of Christ, the church. Thanks be to God. Amen.