

Sermon preached by
The Reverend Hope H. Eakins
at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, Connecticut
on November 25, 2014, The Feast of Christ the King, Year B

Today is the Feast of Christ the King, "and he shall reign forever and ev-ever," we sing, "King of Kings and Lord of Lords." At least we hope so, because sometimes it's pretty hard to believe that God is seated upon the throne. Almost three thousand years ago, when this morning's first lesson was written, the people yearned for God's Kingdom to come as much as we do today. The Book of Daniel was written when the community had been persecuted by enemies who sacked Jerusalem and plundered the treasury and deported the people. The Lord might be King, but the nation was in exile and people wondered if God could truly be in charge.

The second lesson from the Book of Revelation was written seven hundred years later in another time of trouble. The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed once again, and both Jews and Christians awaited a Messiah who would come and take charge of the world.

No wonder the people of God yearned for a powerful leader, and no wonder we do too. Try as we might to manage our world, things can change in an instant. A mammogram shows a shadow. There's an accident. Corporate downsizing. A child on drugs. Divorce is mentioned. Or maybe just something that eats at our gut and weighs down our soul. We want someone to be in charge. Say, how about a benevolent King? A monarchy would save post-election recriminations and court cases. Hey, if you had a monarchy, you wouldn't have to have elections in the first place, would you? Ancient Israel certainly thought that a human king was a good idea. Although they were ruled pretty well by the charismatic leaders they called judges, the twelve tribes had rivalries and feuds and had become weakened enough that Israel could not present a strong front to her enemies. So since the Israelites had not learned how to live together under God's sovereignty, they begged for human sovereignty. "This theocracy isn't working, God," they declared; "We need a monarchy."

A human king was not a good idea, said God. A human king would draft their sons to serve in armies and to forge weapons of war. A human king would demand a tenth of their grain and their flocks in taxes. But the people refused to listen and insisted, "No, we will have a king over us so that we may be like all the other nations; we need a king to govern us and go out before us to fight our battles."

There is something attractive about relinquishing responsibility, isn't there? "The King is in charge," we could say, "and I? Well, I have little power and few resources, so I can't do much by myself." The founders of our country knew the dangers of this attitude, and so they rejected the idea of an American monarchy. They threw away a lot of tea to avoid having George III as their king, and they refused to crown George Washington. And then they established a democracy where every voice could be heard because every voice is important and every voice is valuable.

Yet although democracy is a good system for our government, it is not perfect. All human government is flawed because we can't always agree on what is good for us. And since we sometimes make bad decisions, we need a higher rule and a holier rule to lead us. We need a Savior called Christ the King whose kingdom is not of this world because it is bigger than this world, a kingdom of before time and forever, a kingdom of heaven and earth, a kingdom where the truth is always told and where love matters more than power.

What does it mean to claim Christ as our King? Well, it doesn't mean that life will be hunky-dory and all our battles will be fought for us. Instead it means that we will have hard work to do because our King calls us to serve this world. Knowing that we do not have all the answers, we will read the Scriptures and say our prayers and gather in Christian community and listen to each other. Here are some stories of people I know who did just that.

Monica and Pete are thankful for thirty-five years of life together as husband and wife. They recently went shopping together with every intention of buying Monica an important piece of jewelry to mark their anniversary. The gold and diamond necklace was gorgeous but in the end Monica and Pete decided to spend their money not on jewelry but to build homes for the poor in Haiti. They keep remembering Jesus' words, "In as much as you have done it unto the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me." The relief agency gave them a little house model in thanks for their help, and they are filled with joy each time they see it on their shelf.

Mary was on her way to the top. A corner office with a nice corporate title on the door was within her grasp. But then her boss asked her to rewrite her report figures to paint a rosier financial picture for the department. Mary could not forget Jesus' question, "What does it profit to gain the whole world and lose your soul?" so she refused to compromise the truth and fell into her boss's disfavor. She did not receive the expected promotion, but she is at peace.

Bob has decided to run for his state's legislature. If elected, he will have to resign his high-salaried partnership in a prosperous law firm because of possible conflict of interest. The prospect of a dramatic cut in pay does not bother him, though, because Bob is grateful for the many blessings he has already received, and he wants to give thanks to God by spending the next part of his life in public service. Bob takes seriously the words, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Why does Bob remember these words from Scripture? Why do Monica and Pete and Mary find direction in Jesus? Why not follow the advice given by wealth management firms and self-help magazines and across neighbor's fences? Well, I think that like us all, they have tried to do just that and they have never been satisfied in measuring their lives by the world's standards. They have looked for more, looked for a King they can rely on, and they have found that King in Jesus Christ.

I heard this week about Judge Elizabeth Hines, a Michigan jurist who received the Rehnquist Award for Judicial Excellence at the Supreme Court this month. A friend who was there for the event told me about Libby, a brilliant woman who has judicial excellence, sound judgment, and creativity. She's kind and compassionate and humble, he said, and she loves bad puns. Judge Hines' work focuses on domestic violence and making our court system as rich with solutions as it is with penalties. After singing Judge Hines's praises, my friend paused and looked at me with wonderment and said, "Hope, do you know what she does? After she renders her judgment, she gets down from the bench and takes off her judicial robes and sits at a table with the offender and talks to him. She says things like, "you have been in this court too often, what can we do to make sure you don't come back." "

Gosh, that sounds a lot like Christ the King to me, the one who took off his robes and climbed onto a cross for us, the one who stoops down to meet us where we are, the one who loves us enough to make us try harder, the One who insists that if we are to follow him, we need to stoop down too.

And when we do stoop down to follow, we will come to share Christ's values and hold them fast. No matter what, we will work for peace before we consider war. We will tell the truth and care for the weak. We will trust that no matter how our human leaders fail us, no matter how impotent we feel, Christ is with us always "ordaining, maintaining his Kingdom divine" and inviting us to give our lives, spend our lives, to make God's dream come true.