

Sermon: Serving an Unexpected King

11/22/2020

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

In the first century, there stood a large hill just outside Jerusalem named Golgotha, or “the place of the skull.” As Jesus was led towards the skull-shaped hill, his stomach empty and mouth parched, the soldiers escorting him stripped him and cast lots over his clothes, dressed him in purple, the color of royalty, put a crown of thorns on his head, and began saluting him, “Hail, King of the Jews.” For some time, the religious and political authorities had been plotting against him, determined to rid themselves of this so-called Messiah and Son of Man. Finally, his day of reckoning had arrived. Before Pontius Pilate, the Governor of Judaea, they demanded that Jesus be found guilty and sentenced to death on a cross. The crime they charged him with was nailed to the cross right above his body: “This is the King of the Jews.”

For over 500 years, the Jews had been anxiously awaiting the arrival of their king. The prophets had foretold that God would send them a Messiah, a descendent of King David who would once more sit on the throne. But the king that God sent them was not the one whom they were expecting. Drawing on the prophets, many Jews believed that their king would be well-versed in and observant of Jewish law, a charismatic ruler who would inspire others to follow his example, a righteous judge who would reign wisely, and a great military leader who would restore the Promised Land to God’s chosen people. No, Christ was not the King who they were expecting. And if we are honest, on this Christ the King Sunday, we must admit that Christ is not the king who we expect either.

Today, we live in a world largely without monarchs and the ones we do have, like Queen Elizabeth II, primarily have ceremonial roles. This is not to say, though, that we no longer have

an image of them in our minds. Thanks to the books we read and television shows we watch—a prominent example being the current hit series *The Crown*—, we envision kings and queens as having a scepter in their hand and crown on their head as they issue decrees and lead their armies. We imagine someone with unrivaled wealth, power, and authority. Someone whose word is law and rule is unquestioned; well, assuming you want to keep your head. We do not envision someone like Jesus. Kings are not supposed to be born in a manger because their parents cannot even find them a crib for a bed. They do not teach in the synagogue from an early age, only to leave everything behind and begin preaching about how the first will be last and the last will be first. How many kings do you think surround themselves with devout followers who are constantly unable to understand their teachings and who abandon them in their greatest hour of need? Kings are supposed to be eating decadent meals in extravagant dining halls with other royalty and dignitaries, not at tables and on hillsides with anyone who might invite them. And most of all they are supposed to die in glorious battle or in a majestic castle at the end of a long life, not on a cross like a common criminal. No, Jesus is not the King that any of us were expecting. My guess is that is why we struggle so much with Gospel lessons like today's, the Parable of the Sheep and Goats; because serving such an unexpected King requires so much more of us than we expected.

In many ways, it feels like we live in a world where anything is possible. In response to the hunger we see all around us, we have begun using computers to track and monitor our food supply, reducing food waste and food loss. We have gene editing technology that allows us to correct genetic defects in our crops as well as treat and prevent the spread of disease. The use of GPS and unmanned tractors and drones has given rise to precision agriculture, which have made farms more efficient. We've even found a way to convert proteins from algae, beet leaves, and

insects into food with 3D food printers. This technology gives us hope that, with enough time, we will one day be able to end world hunger. Imagine all the amazing things we will one day be able to do! We will be able to ensure that everyone has access to clean drinking water, that we all have clothes to wear and a roof over our heads, that the criminal justice system treats everyone equally and without prejudice, and that we no longer contract and suffer from so many of the illnesses and diseases which ail us, including the coronavirus. All we need is a little more time, because victory over this and so much more is waiting just around the corner.

Except, Jesus tells us, we have not been called to sit around and wait. On the day when our King returns and is seated on the throne, we will not be judged based on whether all the problems facing this world have been solved. We will be judged to be sheep or goats based on whether we have gone out and put our faith into action. Whether we have done simple, concrete things like give Jesus food when he was hungry, drink when he was thirsty, welcome him when he was a stranger, clothe him when he was naked, take care of him when he was sick, and visit him when he was in prison. “Now wait just one second,” we can hear the goats respond. “That’s not fair. You never told us the rules, and even if you had, there’s no way we could have followed them. We just met you for the first time right here, right now. How can you judge us for not having done these things when we never had the chance?” “Ah, but you did,” Jesus replies. “You just didn’t realize it at the time.”

One Sunday, Bishop Will Willimon and his wife stopped at a restaurant after church. “It was crowded,” he recalls,

and our server looked tired and weary. After the meal and things were thinning out, I asked her: “You look tired – are you okay?” She told me she had been up most of the night with her little boy who was sick but that she was okay. I said: “It must be hard after being up all night, having to stand on your feet and work so hard.” She just nodded. “What’s the hardest day of the week to work?” She didn’t know I was a Reverend. She said “The hardest day of the week is Sunday. I dread all the people who

come here after church. They make so many demands and some of them are so hateful. And they never tip hardly anything.

“Think of all the people you’ve met like this woman,” we can imagine Jesus saying to the goats. “People who were tired and weary after a long night spent caring for their sick child. People who were hungry and thirsty, cold and alone, and sick and imprisoned. People who you could have helped but didn’t even notice were in need. Or even worse, people who you did notice but decided weren’t worth helping. Each time you failed to care for one of these people, you failed to care for me. So, yes, you did have a chance, you had thousands if not millions of them, and now the time has come to be held accountable for your actions.”

The challenge with this passage is not that we’ve been called to do something beyond our ability or control. What we’ve been called to do is love God and their neighbor, and out of that love seek to make a difference in the lives of those around us. No, what makes this passage so challenging is how simple yet all-encompassing it is. Because the truth is that people don’t just hunger for food, they also hunger for meaning in their lives. And we don’t just thirst for water, but for hope, now and in the future. There are those among us who have a closet full of clothes, but feel exposed and ashamed when we allow others to see who we really are. Some of us are sick, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. And feeling trapped and imprisoned doesn’t require that we’ve committed a crime or been locked up in an actual jail. This past year is a living reminder of just how important things are like food and water, health and friendship, meaning and hope, and healing and reconciliation. These are just a few of the many concrete things that we have been called to share, when and how we are able.

And so, we have reached the point in the sermon where the pastor is supposed to look out toward the congregation and ask what more we should be doing. Truly, this is an important question, but in many ways it also misses the point. For the reason why the sheep cared for the

least among them was not because they had been told to do so. Standing there, they were just as confused as the goats when Jesus told them of all that they had done for him. Rather, they did so because of whom they were, people seeking to love God and their neighbor. People striving to follow the example set forth by their unexpected king. May we worshiping here today not just seek to do likewise, but to be likewise, this and every day of our lives, so that when that day comes, Jesus might look upon each of us and bid us come, and we might be amazed by how gracious and unexpected a gift we have just been given. Amen.