

## God is Pleased

One of the challenges of being a preacher in this Year of Our Lord Two Thousand and Ten is to take the collection of books we call the Bible, the latest of which was written at least 1800 years ago by anybody's measure and written for a people whose way of life we can scarcely even imagine now, and craft a talk that makes that ancient message accessible and relevant to a congregation whose experiences range from Great Depression to Great Recession, from world-wide war to world wide web and from the Golden Days of Radio to On Demand streaming of movies, sports and the latest transmission from the International Space Station. Accessible and relevant. And funny. And not too darn long. In looking for clues to help us in this endeavor, many of us turn to the traditions of the Church. How have other preachers at other times and in other places dealt with this problem? What can we learn from them? And so, we write, we preachers, with one eye on the Church Calendar and one eye on the secular calendar. Can the seasons of the Church year as well as the seasons of the solar year help us make those relevancy connections on certain Sundays? Sometimes, the Liturgical Calendar and the civic calendar seem to clash and this, indeed, is one of those Sundays. Liturgically, it's the last Sunday of the Church Year, Christ the King Sunday. Uppermost in the minds of most Americans, however, it's the Sunday before Thanksgiving Day. How does a preacher choose on which theme to focus his or her sermon? Well, I think the answer today is to do both.

The two observations are actually not as disparate as we might initially think, especially if we think for a moment about their origins. The Solemnity of Christ the King, to give the official high church title, is actually a fairly young tradition. It was first instituted in 1925 by Pope Pius XI. Apparently, the Pope looked around him in those years following the War to End All Wars and, seeing the wholesale redrawing of national borders, the rise of nationalism and the rapid rearmament of the supposedly newly pacified Europe, decided that the world needed to be reminded who was ultimately in charge. The Bishop of Rome's declaration of this new observance was meant to turn Christians spoiling for the next fight to decide who was going to be top dog in the Twentieth Century to the consideration of how we are all called to give our ultimate allegiance to the Prince of Peace, the King who died for the sake of love for all and who called us to demonstrate our love for God and our neighbor by caring for the helpless and giving ourselves to service rather than seeking little thrones of our own. The message seems not to have been heard in many quarters.

The first Thanksgiving celebrated by the Pilgrims in Plymouth was likewise a God-centered event. In this case, the celebrants were simply thankful to God for a small harvest that would allow them to survive the coming winter (the previous winter had seen the death of nearly half of the colonists, including 13 of the 18 adult women who traveled on the Mayflower) and peace with the natives who shared resources with them. The resulting tradition was ratified as a national holiday by Abraham Lincoln in 1863, seeking in the midst of war to turn the nation's hearts to both thanksgiving for God's blessings and petitions for God's help in establishing peace. His proclamation read, in part, "I do therefore invite my fellow-citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next as a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners, or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are

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unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the imposition of the Almighty hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it, as soon as may be consistent with the divine purpose, to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility, and union.” The sober mood of both Pilgrim Fathers and Great Emancipator is a far cry from the commercialized celebration of consumption that the day has become for many.

It seems to me that we need both of these reminders today. We do have much for which we can be thankful to God, despite a faltering economy, despite personal setbacks and familial tragedy. As some of my friends in the Black Caucus are wont to remember in prayer, we are here this morning, clothed and in our right minds. Most of us have dependable shelter and enough to eat. All of us have been blessed by the friendship of those around us this morning and by the inestimable love of God. We can also give thanks for the fact that it is Christ Jesus and not any other human being who is the one who has ultimate charge of the universe – he is our King and our model for the leadership which we exert. It is through the life and work of Christ Jesus the King that God has shown God’s pleasure at bringing wandering humankind into loving relationship with Godself and for this we can be most thankful of all.

Our passage from Paul’s letter to the Colossians this morning ties together the ideas of Thanksgiving and Christ the King. Paul shares with the Colossians his prayer for them that they “May... be made strong with all the strength that comes from God’s glorious power, and may... be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled (them) to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.” It is a good reminder to us that we can still joyfully give thanks even in troubled times as long as we remember to call on the God-given attributes of endurance and patience. In his commentary on the books of Colossians and Philemon, the great English theologian N.T. Wright remarks that “there is a slight distinction to be drawn between ‘endurance’ and ‘patience’. The former is what faith, hope, and love bring to an apparently impossible situation, the latter what they show to an apparently impossible person.” I’ll leave it to you to decide which attribute you need the most. Two of the insights to be garnered here, Wright continues, are “that growth in the knowledge of God, and in holiness, is an uphill battle, and... that strength for this battle can only come – but will surely come – from the power of God Godself.” We can give thanks to God even for the ability to give thanks to God.

We can also give thanks to God for the blessing of sharing in spiritual light rather than in spiritual darkness. While Paul uses light and darkness in this metaphorical sense, there is also a sort of literal message here, for me, anyway. As we move into the time of year when nights are long and dark and days are short and gloomy, it is comforting to me to think of the light. I’ve been known to say with an air of assuredness that the short, grey days of the Pacific Northwest don’t bother me, thanks to my boyhood sojourn in the British Isles. This fall, though, I’ve noticed that it’s harder than usual for me to get out of bed until there’s a sufficient amount of light coming through the bedroom window for me to see about me and likewise that I start feeling ready for bed as darkness sets in, even when that comes at 4:30 in the afternoon! Maybe it’s something about turning 50... But I do like thinking about sharing in the inheritance of the saints in the light when walking home from the office in the chilly gloaming of November.

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Of course, there are more profound reasons to be thankful to God for that inheritance in the light. Paul contrasts that blessed state with being under the rule of the powers of darkness from which God has rescued us and transferred us to the Kingdom of the beloved Son. It's probably not the kind of language that we would use today. To fully understand and appropriate it, we might need to look back to the situation of the Christians in Colossae. Eugene Peterson, author of that powerful Bible paraphrase, "The Message," writes in his introduction to his translation of Colossians: "Most people of that day believed the air around them was thick with unseen spirits that humans ignored at their peril....The Colossians were terrified that if they didn't appease the spirits, they laid themselves open to disease and poverty." Referring to this quote from Peterson, Kate Huey, a United Church of Christ scholar, writes: "Perhaps a fear of 'unseen spirits' that need to be appeased sounds strange to us, but don't we too live in fear of many 'powers'? Don't we fear the power of greed, and war, and violence, and addiction, and commercialism? And what about the philosophies, values, and beliefs that shape our way of life today, like an exaggerated individualism, excessive materialism, and an unfounded trust in military might for our security? Doesn't it often feel like the Powers That Be influence our lives more than the power, and the wisdom, and the plan, of God?" But Paul testifies and we can confirm in our own lives that just as God delivered the Children of Israel from the power of Egypt and of Babylon, just as God delivered the Psalmist from the power of war and disease and death, so God delivers us from those dark powers that afflict us today. In the Kingdom of the Beloved Son, in whom we have redemption and the forgiveness of sins, we are able to give our allegiance to and live life in the blessings of faith and hope and love.

Paul says a number of things about the nature of Jesus the Christ and his identity as King in this passage and I don't have time to speak of them all but I do want to touch on one in particular. Paul recognizes that Jesus reveals himself as King as he engages in acts of forgiveness and liberation because this is when he displays the greatest attributes that God has shown again and again to his wandering, murmuring, faithless people. In echoing the deeds of the Creator of the Universe, in behaving as a true Son of the Loving Father, Jesus participates in the very being of God Godself. Paul uses a word in relating this to the Colossians that is startlingly relevant for 21<sup>st</sup> Century post-moderns after over a millennium of disuse in the West. Jesus, he writes, "is the image of the invisible God." The Greek word for image, in this sentence, is *ικον*. Jesus is the icon of God. Until very recently, unless you were a member of one of the Eastern Orthodox churches, the concept of an icon as revelatory of something greater would have seemed foreign to you. But in 1983, Steve Jobs, not generally thought of as a contributor to contemporary theology, changed all that with his company's introduction of the Apple Lisa and its graphical user interface, or GUI. Thanks to the GUI of Lisa and Macintosh and their copycat competitor, Windows, icon has a whole new meaning for us. The Rev. Dr. Fred Anderson connects the technological with the theological very aptly. "As icon of the invisible (Jesus) is more than simply what God looks like," he writes. "He is also the One through whom you and I enter into God's eternal yet ever immanent presence. That is what icons do for us; they transport us into the reality they signify. The world of computers gives us an immediate illustration. When you click on an icon, the program behind it opens to you, and you find yourself transported into its wondrous world. In a religious and liturgical frame of reference, focusing on an icon draws you through that image into the presence of the one so portrayed... (Jesus) is the one through whom you and I can be drawn into the very presence of the invisible God. He is the icon of God, the image of the invisible." As the image of the invisible Almighty, Jesus participates in God's

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character. Inasmuch as God's glory can be characterized as majesty, so do we understand Jesus as King.

Even as we say that Jesus participates in the very being of God Godself, so we can also say that the very fullness of God's self has become resident in the man, Jesus. In fact, we can say along with Paul that it pleases God for all of the attributes of God to dwell in the Beloved Son. The Greek word which Paul uses here for pleased, εὐδοκεῶ, has an interesting usage in other Scriptures. In Greek translations of Deuteronomy, of Psalms and of the Book of Isaiah, this word is used to express the attitude of God toward dwelling with humankind. It is a reminder that God takes pleasure in dwelling with the people of God. In the Gospels, εὐδοκεῶ is mostly used in the various telling and re-tellings of God's words about Jesus at his baptism and at the transfiguration, "my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." God is pleased with the way in which Jesus is fulfilling the calling of God. Paul seems to combine these two ideas in writing to the Colossians. God's pleasure in the life of Jesus is tied with God's dwelling with God's people, not in a particular place as in the Zion of the Psalms, but in a particular being. God's fullness dwells in the Son, making him fully God as well as fully human – a Kingly attribute indeed.

We also find the word in the Gospel According to Luke, when Jesus says, in a phrase that sounds as if it was spoken specifically for Good Shepherd, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Perhaps Paul heard about this saying of Jesus from his friend Luke for he seems to pick up on this idea as well. Paul tells the Colossians that they are indeed included in the kingdom, as we've already heard. How is this accomplished? By yet another act of God in Christ – "through him God was pleased to reconcile to Godself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross." God is pleased to give us the kingdom. God is pleased to reconcile all things to Godself. The reconciliation of humankind to God, our inheritance of the kingdom is brought about because God was pleased not just to dwell in fullness in the man Jesus during his life but also during his death on the cross. This is astounding! God loves us and all of Creation so much that it pleases God to become one of us and to experience death for all of us. God gives Godself over to the power of that which is Not God – death, destruction, chaos, only to defeat those powers forever on our behalf. To return to the commentary of N.T. Wright: "On the cross, God took upon Godself that which stood as a barrier between God and God's human creatures – sin. The worst that sin can do is kill: dying, Jesus exhausted its power." In verses not included in the reading, Paul continues, "And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him..." If all this sounds incomprehensible, perhaps it is worthwhile to quote another of Paul's uses of εὐδοκεῶ – he writes to the Corinthians, "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God was pleased, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe."

All that is in me gives thanks for this proclamation of God's unlikely, extravagant, loving grace. I want to stand up and sing when I hear that Jesus, the one in whom God embodied that grace, is declared King and crowned Lord of all. This is the kind of good news that we need in the midst of trouble, the reminder of light that we need when our days are dark and nights are long. The reign of God's Anointed One, the King of Glory and the King of Peace, the Beloved Community

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of which we will see the consummation in the future but which has already begun to break out into our world, this is indeed a reason to kill the fatted turkey and break out the stuffing and the casseroles and the white and sweet potatoes and the pumpkin pie. As the Pilgrims celebrated their harvest and the hope of their physical survival for another winter, so can we make merry that our spirits have been given their food in the form of the Good News and that we have a sure and certain hope of life abundant here and now and life continuing in that in-breaking Kingdom of God.

Our celebrations may be tempered by our knowledge that the consummation has not yet come, that the Beloved Community is still but a dream and a hope on this Earth. We must, as Paul wrote to the Colossians, be steadfast in our following of the calling of our King and our God. We must always remember that we are now the Body of Christ on Earth, that we now have the responsibility, combined with our brothers and sisters around the globe and across the ages, to both pray and work for God's justice and God's peace to be realized everywhere. But, thanks be to God, we do not have to rely on our own power, for Christ is over all and in all. With the power of the King and the fullness of God and God's love, we can be bold in proclaiming the good news – the King is coming! The King has come! The King is here! Amen.