

I don't know who, if anyone, pays attention to the titles of my sermons but I do try to give clues in them, if you can follow my distinctly odd thought patterns, to the key ideas in the sermon. Today's, I realize, may be especially obscure. "The One True King" was the title of a sermon I preached on Christ the King Sunday back in 2006. I confess to you that in my original planning, seeing what sort of hectic week I had ahead, I intended to preach that sermon again, pretty much as written. But over the course of the week, as news of terror attacks and reactions to them continued to flood in, I realized that such an approach would be dishonest, even cowardly. And so, this morning you will hear a substantial update to that sermon, focused in part on the international events which have so impacted our lives this week. Thus, the new title: The One True King (New International Version). There's not much funny about what I have to say this morning but I don't think we should wrestle with God's message for us without at least one smile, so that's my feeble attempt at humor.

I'll recall for you the reasons I think and speak of Jesus as "the One True King" in a few minutes but first I want to consider what a later passage in Revelations called "the kingdom of this world," a phrase later appropriated by Charles Jennens, the librettist of George Friedrich Handel's famous oratorio, "Messiah." If you know that music and those words, you may know that in the Hallelujah Chorus the phrase, "the kingdom of this world," is immediately followed by, "is become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ." And while I would certainly confirm the ultimate truth of that proclamation, I must also hold out the truth that we still live in the in-between time, the not-yet time, the paradox that the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community, is both now and not-yet-fulfilled. And because of this, the kingdom of this world is still ruled by the kings of this world, foreign and domestic, who come to power through arms, through heredity, and through the will (or lack thereof) of the people they rule.

It is important for us to remember and to give witness to the facts about these kings of the world. Let's begin with the international scene, specifically with the entity variously known as ISIS, ISIL, the Islamic State, or, most recently, Daesh. If you are not familiar with that word, it is a "loose acronym" for "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" (al-Dawla al-Islamiya al-Iraq al-Sham). According to several sources, it is the name most commonly used by enemies of ISIS and it also has many negative undertones, as Daesh sounds similar to the Arabic words Daes ("one who crushes something underfoot") and Dahes ("one who sows discord"). The bad guys don't like it, which makes it their name of choice by a growing number of those opposed to them. To call them Daesh removes the air of legitimacy conveyed to them by calling them a "state." It also strips them of the cover of being "Islamic." Because, let's be honest here, those guys are no more Islamic than the Klan is Christian, despite what both of those terrorist groups claim. As evidence begins to trickle out of those areas where Daesh has strongholds and is in pitched battle with various governments and rebel groups alike, it becomes more and more obvious that despite their public statements the leaders of Daesh have absolutely no interest in teaching, promoting, or adhering to any form of Islam, not even the dangerously fundamentalist Wahhabism preached by al-Qaida. They do not worship Allah, the All-Merciful. They are devotees of some nameless god of carnage.

Nor are the rank and file of the Daesh forces following their leaders out of some misguided religious fervor. Lydia Wilson, a research fellow at the University of Oxford, recently published a study in which she interviewed captured Daesh soldiers. The results surprised her: they had

not joined the movement out of any philosophical adherence but because they saw Daesh as the only way out of an ever-worsening, chaotic situation, one exacerbated by the American intervention in Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein. We know that other Daesh soldiers have been kidnapped and terrorized boys, just trying to survive. These are not “true believers;” they are victims of their commanders as surely as those who died in Paris. They, too, have been sacrificed to the god of carnage by the kings of this world.

Other “kings” of this world serve other gods: the god of fear, for example. I have been horrified this week by the parade of American governors, congressmen, and other “kings” who have told us that we need to be afraid of the very people we should be protecting: the refugees fleeing from the chaos and carnage of Daesh. I have been reminded of a movie that Connie and I very much enjoy: Aaron Sorkin’s 1995 look at a U.S. presidential campaign, “The American President.” Do you know it? Near the end of the picture, Michael Douglas, playing President Andy Shepherd, makes a stirring speech calling out his opponent and defending his girlfriend. I’m going to quote from that speech but I’m going to change the end of it to put it in the context of our current situation. See if you can guess where I stop using Sorkin’s words and switch to my own. “We have serious problems to solve, and we need serious people to solve them. And whatever your particular problem is, I promise you Bob Rumson is not the least bit interested in solving it. He is interested in two things, and two things only: making you afraid of it, and telling you who’s to blame for it. That, ladies and gentlemen, is how you win elections. You gather a group of middle age, middle class, middle income voters who remember with longing an easier time, and you talk to them about family, and American values and character, and you wave a photo of men and women in Arab dress and you scream about patriotism. You tell them those people are to blame for their lot in life. And you go on television and you call them terrorists.”

My sisters and brothers, I want to be perfectly clear about how I feel in this matter. Our Scriptures, both the Jewish and the Christian Testaments, leave us no doubt about the commands of God and of Jesus in the matter of immigrants: we are to care for them. Deuteronomy 10:19 – “You shall love the stranger, for you were once strangers in the land of Egypt.” Leviticus 19:34 – “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.” Matthew 25:35 – “for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me...”

And as many times as we are reminded by our sacred writings to care for the immigrants, we are also reminded not to fear. It seems that God never sends an angel without God’s messenger saying “Don’t be afraid.” We are about to enter into a time of year in which we remember the story of the birth of Jesus in a stable in Bethlehem and what do all those stories from the Gospel According to Luke remember the angels saying to Zechariah and to Mary and to the shepherds? “Be not afraid!” To quote from another sort of book altogether, the science-fiction classic Dune, “Fear is the mind-killer.” Fear makes us stupid. Fear makes us easily led. And that’s just what they are counting on, those would-be kings of the world both foreign and domestic who want leadership over us, not for service but for power. We’ve even seen it here in Lynnwood in the most recently contested election when members of a certain group added to the campaign signs of their chosen candidates, “Save the Lynnwood Fire Department.” Well, to borrow another phrase from Aaron Sorkin, my name is Christopher Boyer and I AM a Lynnwood City

Councilmember and your fire protection isn't going anywhere. It may be organized differently; we may pay for it differently but you will be just as safe or safer than you were before. Be not afraid.

All these would-be kings seem so petty when we step back and look at them through the lens of truth and courage and love. It can make us wonder, how on earth did they capture our attention anyway? The truth is that we have a craving for true leadership. We want someone to come along and encourage us to be better people, to bring us together as a community, to lead us away from fear. We are fascinated with the royalty we overthrew in 1776. We mythologize our leaders and their families to make our own royalty – remember how the term Camelot was used for the Kennedys? Our movies and television shows and literature are full of stories of queens and kings. One of the favorite fictional strands of royal lore for Americans has been the theme of “The One True King.” The popularity of the Arthurian legends is witness to this as are the works of those two great Christian novelists of the mid-20th Century, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. You could add the great Disney movie, “The Lion King,” to the list of stories of “The One True King,” as well. In that movie, Mufasa’s ghost even says to Simba (with that wonderful James Earl Jones voice), “Remember who you are. You are my son and the one true king.” In these stories, both old and new, the people and land of the kingdom are suffering because the legitimate royal line has been broken somehow. The king is absent or the king is dead and his heir is missing. There may be pretenders to the throne but they are either weak or evil. The return of the true king, though much anticipated, comes unlooked-for. In some cases, the one true king is unrecognized until he proves himself by a test or by some combination of attributes. One of those attributes is usually prowess at arms but strategic wisdom and personal strength and skill alone are never sufficient to confirm the identity of the one true king. His character must be as strong as his arm – he is a man of truth. The one true king is also known to be a protector of the weak. He is a healer and the establishment of his reign brings peace, prosperity and fertility to both the land and the people.

As I was musing over our lectionary passages this week, I found myself drawn to Jesus’ description of his kingdom as being “not of this world” and his mission as being “to testify to the truth,” and my mind went to that old phrase, “The One True King,” which seemed very similar to me to “King of Truth,” a title that Jesus’ words seemed to imply. Thinking of those fictional kings and of Christ the King, I wondered, “How does the Gospel compare to those archetypical tales? What truths do the fictions help reveal about the real One True King?”

Certainly, viewed through the lens of story, Jesus matches our expectations of the One True King at several points. Fans of [The Chronicles of Narnia](#) will know that Aslan had healing powers over the magic spells of the White Witch and Tolkien aficionados will remember that Aragorn had “healing in his hands.” This was a gift commonly attributed to virtuous kings in ancient and medieval literature & legend; England’s Edward the Confessor is one example. Jesus, of course, was a mighty healer. We read in the Gospels that he was pursued to the point of exhaustion by those seeking healing. Aslan’s return and the reigns of Arthur and Aragorn were marked by prosperity and fruitful harvests. In Shakespeare’s works, as in the Bible, a bad king brings famine while the rightful king restores the balance of Nature. Paul tells us that the ultimate reign of Christ will heal all of Creation, which now groans and travails in pain. Jesus repeatedly shows his preference for the poor and the powerless and, though we do not have a picture in the

Gospels of Jesus as a mighty warrior, defending the helpless, John the Revelator certainly foresees something very similar in his vision of the end times.

Still, there are many ways in which Jesus subverts or redefines our expectations of The One True King. In their web-based commentary on today's lectionary passages, Jeff Krantz and Michael Hardin write, "inasmuch as today is Christ the King Sunday, please note that it is 'Christ the King under arrest and being interrogated Sunday.' It is Christ the King being held hostage Sunday. It is Christ the royal political prisoner Sunday. It is Christ the King soon to be beaten and crucified Sunday. It is Christ the innocent [victim and King] Sunday. It is not Christ the powerful King Sunday. It is not Christ the mighty warrior Sunday. It is not Christ the King as Lawgiver and dispenser of punishment Sunday. It is Christ the King-whose-kingdom-is-not-of-this-world Sunday." To that list, I would add, "It is Christ the King who was a refugee child Sunday."

It is also worth remembering that John's Gospel records Jesus performing a very unregal act just hours before his enforced conversation with Pilate about the nature of his kingdom. He has taken on the guise of a servant and washed his disciples' feet. And, as he tells Pilate, he will not permit his followers to take up arms on his behalf. This is contrary not only to what our expectations of The One True King might be but also to the common messianic expectations of Jesus' time. Jesus' kingdom is not of conquest but of truth and, in the words of the Jesuit scholar, John Kavanaugh, "It will not kill for the truth, it will die for it. If Jesus is king, he will be a suffering king. He will not demand ransom. He will be ransom. He will win, not by spilling the blood of others, but by offering up his own."

Still, the vision of Revelation shows us a Christ glorified before God's throne as "the ruler of the kings of the earth." Why would this be? If, in fact, the Gospel according to John and the Revelation of John are, as church tradition tells us, written by the same man, why would he be so careful as to present Jesus the suffering King on the one hand and Jesus Triumphant on the other? Why does he explode our expectations of the hero king in the first story and confirm them in the next?

Perhaps there is really no difference between the two portrayals. The glorified Jesus at the opening of Revelation is characterized as "the faithful witness." His mission, he said to Pilate, was to bear witness to the truth and, indeed, he has done that. He has been a faithful witness, in his life and work and in his death, to the truth so boldly stated in another work attributed to this same John, that God is love; that, in fact, God so loved the world that God's only son came and willingly gave up his life for humankind and all creation. Again, Revelation tells us of Jesus Christ, he is "him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood." Jesus is King, the Revelator implies, because he has made the whole world into his Kingdom. "He has made us a kingdom of priests," some translations put it. As the ultimate version of the One True King, Jesus has outdone Arthur, who forged a group of feuding Celtic clans into the nation of Britain. Jesus has made the whole world into one kingdom, one people.

I got a kick this week out of reading part of the commentary on these passages by Mary W. Anderson, a Lutheran pastor in Illinois. "Growing up in the South," she writes, "I often heard the home folks ask of a son's girlfriend, 'Who are her people?' They were fishing for two things:

a family name and a location.” Pastor Anderson continues, “A "people" was not a biological unit. They didn't necessarily share DNA but perhaps things more bonding: a common story, the foods and meals they ate together, the experiences they endured and the hopes that endure through generations. It's good to have a people. Those who have been baptized into Christ Jesus are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand. Christ has made of us a people with his kingship. And that kingship is unique, unlike any earthly kingship that is bound by geographic borders. This kingdom is boundless. Christ's rule is not limited to a particular racial or national group. All are welcome, especially the chronically unwelcome ones.”

That's the kind of king Jesus is: the suffering king of an unwelcome people. That's the kind of truth that King Jesus bears witness to: that we are bound together by the love of God for us and the love for each other with which God has infused us. The truth to which Jesus bears witness is the truth that we are free to love one another. We have nothing to fear from other human beings, nothing to fear from God. We are free to love.

Ultimately, I think, that's what sets the One True King of our reality apart from those fictional kings. All stories of fiction end. England still waits for Arthur to emerge from the Isle of Avalon in their hour of need. Simba fades into memory and is succeeded by his children in the great “circle of life.” Aragorn rules for a golden age, then lies down and dies, leaving Arwen to fade away from a broken heart. But of the story of Christ Jesus, the One True King, there is no end. He is Alpha and Omega, A to Z, the first and the last. His kingdom will have no end. We need not fear the dark times. The Kingdom of God inaugurated by Christ Jesus is here, within us and wherever we take it. No fear, only the truth of love that sets us free. We are the kingdom, a people united across national boundaries, a nation of priests whose task is to represent our loving God to all those around us who are searching for One True King. We are called to boldly go out into the world with the Good News: that there is one who is on the side of the poor and the powerless, that there is one who brings healing and freedom from bondage, that the King is coming, that the King is here!

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost! As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end! Amen, Amen.