



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Following the King of Kings

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

November 23, 2014

He is the Prince of Peace and the Lord of Lords, and the King of Kings. He is a wandering rabbi, born in questionable circumstances but known by all of these royal and political titles. As a country that hasn't had a king since the late 18th century, I'm not sure how we interpret these titles. But we can start with how the Israelites would have heard them.

From its earliest days as a loosely united people in the land of Israel, traditionally thought to be after the wandering year after escape from Egypt, Israel was a confederation of tribes, twelve of them, named for ten sons and two grandsons of Jacob, the man known as Israel. The tribes had their territories and organized their common lives individually. Tribal rulers were called judges, people appointed to dispense justice, usually sitting by the gates of their communities. If a need or crisis arose, a leader would emerge, lifted up by God to deal with the crisis, but nothing beyond it. They were not called to enduring power - God was the only king that Israel needed.

This arrangement continued for about two centuries. The Book of Judges tells the stories, the succession of judges who sometimes acted sometimes as mediators, sometimes as military leaders. However, many a chapter in the book of Judges begins with "The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord..." and some dire circumstance would befall the people - judgment from God for their misbehavior. The stories of Gideon and Samson are some of the heroes lifted up to rescue the Israelites. The crises became more and more dire and bad things happened. Some men from the tribe of Benjamin perpetrated one of the most horrible crimes in the Bible - the gang rape and death of a defenseless concubine and then they kidnapped women from another tribe. There was no inter-tribal mechanism to hold them accountable. There was no authority that could bring justice. The last line of the Book of Judges says "In those days, there was no king in Israel; all of the people did what was right in their own eyes." It was the ancient near east's version of the Wild West.

That was the pressure from within to have a central figure of authority. The Philistines provided the pressure from the outside. They were Israel's primary threat and enemy and as separate small entities, all tribes were at risk. The Philistines could not be vanquished by any one tribe. If Israel were going to survive, they would need to unite; they would need someone to lead them. It fell to Samuel, a prophet and a man of God, to name Israel's king. He chose Saul

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- which was not a successful start for a monarchy. It was David who succeeded Saul and brought Israel to its full strength and status. He captured Jerusalem, which became known as the city of David. He united all of the tribes, vanquished every military foe and brought prosperity. Israel became an empire held together by everyone's relationship with David. He was the one with the relationship with God on his people's behalf. The united Israel lasted only through the reign of David's son, Solomon. People followed them because they created security and prosperity.

When Jesus is called the King of kings, it is the image of the might of David and the wisdom of Solomon that would have come to mind for the people of his time. Israel was desperate to regain its own sovereignty. They were hungry for a king to lead them, to fight for them, to keep them safe. To be a king is to be at the head of a political system. But keep in mind, politics merely refers to how we organize our common life - what system do we choose, what structures do we build to make it happen, what are the common values. Choosing Jesus, the Christ, as the leader of our common life has pretty specific implications. His life and teachings give us the outline of a Christ led government, in which all people are in direct relationship with God. Today's gospel is a very political statement of expectations for the common life of those that would follow this King.

I found an amazingly honest observation from a very conservative pastor in the Midwest whose name is Brian Zahnd. In an interview in the Religion News Service he has offered up a critique of Christianity's failure to actually follow the King of Kings. He said,

"On the evening of 9/11, I was one of several pastors leading a city-wide prayer meeting. As a pastor, my vocation is to lead people in the Jesus way. That's not what I did that night. I allowed our collective anger and the palpable desire for vengeance to shape my praying. Essentially, I prayed a "war prayer." My prayer was a petition for God to take our side in what I felt was the "inevitable" war to come.

This is how I failed, though I suspect very few saw it as a failure. For the most part, it's what the crowd wanted. But the task of the pastor is not to follow the crowd. I wish I had done better. I wish my prayer had been more of a brokenhearted lament than an angry cry for vengeance. On the 10th anniversary of 9/11 I asked my congregation to forgive me for my failure.

The kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed is intensely political. *It's God's vision for human society. We might think of the kingdom of God as the **government** or **politics** of God. But since the days of Constantine, we have increasingly embraced a privatized postmortem distortion of the gospel that stresses Jesus securing our place in heaven while leaving us free to run the world as we see fit. We've demoted Jesus from Lord and King to Secretary of Afterlife Affairs. "*

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The question before us today is what does the politics of Jesus look like? From the Gospel, we get a clear understanding of how we are to treat the poor, the dispossessed, the outcasts, and the defenseless. I believe that that would be the organizing principle of his Kingdom. His parables of mustard seeds and lost coins are all about believing in abundance, not scarcity. And this brings us to the primary work of Jesus' politics - to help free us from the prison of scarcity and the tyranny of money. People tell me regularly enough that we shouldn't talk about money in church but Jesus talked about it all the time. It is the second most often discussed topic in the Gospels. When you follow the King of kings, you work at understanding money differently and the reason that this is so important is that the hold that money has on us is at the root of economic inequality that would never be found in Jesus' kingdom. Jesus would never condone a society in which a small portion of people have unlimited wealth and others have to hold fund raisers and on-line campaigns to pay for their children's medical treatment. In Jesus' politics, the deck is not stacked against struggling families, or people trying to afford college, or senior citizens who are worried how long their retirement savings will last. And I don't even have time to go into Jesus' policy on violence and national security. But I don't think it would look like what we have created in the US.

The church is more necessary now than it has ever been because human affairs have become so distorted, so malignant. We need a place to practice living into Jesus' politics. Our wildly successful Thanksgiving dinner campaign is a beautiful glimpse of the kingdom with a feast on every table. Our pledge campaign is meant to be way to practice a new way of thinking about money and to challenge the discomfort that comes up when we are asked to talk about or share it. The King of kings is a king of abundance. To follow him is to learn to trust that. To follow him is the rethink a whole lot of things. That's why we've been brought together, to be the Body of Christ, to be the politics of God, to learn how to follow this king.

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