

11.23.25 Sermon Transcript – Luke 1:46-55

If you were here last week, you may have heard the moment during the children's sermon when I was talking about the T. Rex and the word association of “Rex” and “king” – and my child standing up and saying “No kings in America! You know, that's a preacher's kid for you. But the word king does tend to, again, using the language of my child, “be pretty sus” in our world today. They're suspect. A king is not a good thing. There's a negative connotation with that word. And well, that's with good reason. Today is Christ the king Sunday, and I've always struggled a little bit with that title because I struggle with the word king. Maybe that's some uniquely American part of me, but I just struggle with the idea of a king.

Now, if we think back into the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, and we go back to 1 Samuel, there is this story of Israel demanding a king. Remember, Israel has gone through this story of liberation. They've been liberated from slavery in Egypt under Pharaoh. They've wandered in the desert, they've settled into the land, and they're being ruled by people called judges. Now, judges were not like the kind of judges we have in our courtrooms today, but the judges were the rulers. But all the surrounding nations had kings. And Israel said, “We want a king in order to be like the other nations!” That was their demand. That was what they wanted.

And God speaks to Samuel, who is the prophet at that time, and he says to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people, for they have rejected me from being king over them. Listen to them and warn them. Show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.” Basically, God says, “All right, Israel, you want a king? I am going to give you a king. But here is what is going to happen. He will press your children into his service, whether that's in the military, whether that's in his palace, whether it's to serve him in other ways. Your king will take from your land and take the toils of your labor. He will take what you have and give it to his elite loyalists, and he will make you his slaves.” This is the warning that God has for Israel. He doesn't say, “No, you can't have a king.” He doesn't refuse them or deny them, but he tells them exactly what is going to happen when they set up a human being as a king. This demand for a king does not go well. It goes exactly as God says that it will.

This is not the only story in the life of God's people or the life of the Church where we have seen this problem. When human beings, people who follow God and claim God, try to set up or elevate a human being, we see throughout history what happens when we put together faith and empire. Christian history shows us this problem as well. Many of you have heard me before rail on the Emperor Constantine, but this is a moment in Church history in the 300s, where our trajectory forever changed, and not in a positive way.

Prior to the time that Constantine became the Roman Emperor, the early Church was really small. Networks of communities met in houses, on the margins, in the fringes. People took care of one another. But there was also persecution. Followers of Jesus were not well liked. In many instances, they were not protected. And in other instances, they were in fact, persecuted by Rome and by others. And of course, that's not a great thing. The early Church had a very different dynamic to it. But then along comes Constantine. (Now Constantine's mother was a Christian, St.

Helena. She's well known for going to the Holy Land and kind of making pilgrimages and declaring, "This is the site where Jesus was crucified, and this is where he was put on the pavement at Gabbatha." And so she established a lot of the holy pilgrimage sites.

But Constantine was not a Christian. In fact, he had a pretty negative view of Christians until the eve of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, when he was vying for sole rule over the western part of the Roman Empire. And on the eve of this battle of the Milvian Bridge, he has this dream or this vision where he sees the image of the cross. Or sometimes the story says it's the Chi Rho, which is the first two Greek letters for Christ. And he hears this voice saying, "By this sign, you will conquer." And so Constantine, having had this vision, he has this symbol put on banners and on the shields of his army. And the next day they go out and they have this decisive victory against Maxentius, who was his competitor, his rival for power to rule over the western part of the Roman Empire. Constantine consolidates his power and he believes the cross, this symbol of Christianity, has helped him to gain his power. And so we see this first moment of a powerful ruler and Christianity going hand-in-hand. Now, the history that comes from that is one that is fraught with violence. It is one that is fraught with conquest and domination, in the name of Christianity and in the name of Jesus. There is a long and terrible history there. We see what happens when the community of the faithful and empire become wedded together. It's not good.

Ever since those first days, when Israel demanding a king, and then Constantine, and onward ever since, humanity has wanted a God who has blessed flags and justified prejudice, who has legitimized power and mirrors our preferences. A God who makes one nation the chosen one, and our agenda of power and control, the divine one.

This has been a problem for a long time, but today is Christ the King Sunday. And on first hearing, we might think, well, that lends itself really well to this terrible history that we've had. But today is the day where we make this claim that Christ is king, not Caesar, not any president, not any nation, not any ideology, not any empire, ancient or modern, but it is in fact Christ. And when we say Christ is king, we are not just imagining another king, a ruler of an empire like all of the ones that we see in our world today. We're not looking at a king who rules over an empire that operates by empire logic, the logic of domination and conquest and coercion. Instead, it's a different type of kingdom and a different type of king.

We hear a little bit about what that kingdom is like in Mary's song this morning, as she proclaims, declares the greatness of God. It's not a sweet or sentimental song. It's not some domesticated or safe song. I like to think of this as the first punk rock anthem that Mary brings, because it's a liberation anthem. It's a song that she's singing under empire, but one that protests Empire. It's a protest liturgy that's whispered by a teenage girl living under Roman occupation on the edge of the empire. Mary is someone on the margins. And she is singing, declaring this reality of God's kingdom breaking in through the child that she is going to bear. And it's not just a personal song. It's a song that has implications for all of the world, for all of society.

Did you notice what the song says? It says, he has scattered the proud, he has brought down the powerful. He has lifted the lowly. He has fed the hungry. He has sent the rich away empty. Imagine

hearing that song. First, imagine hearing it with a set of Roman ears. And then imagine hearing it through the ears of somebody who is on the edge of society, just like Mary is. It's a song of power. They're words about how God rules. It's about a reordering of the world. In Mary's song, the kingdom is one where power is redefined, where strength is actually measured by mercy. It's where glory belongs not to the powerful or those of high status, but to the humble and to the lowly. It's a kingdom where kings are judged by how they treat the poor amongst their kingdom. In this song, in this kingdom, the world's winners are not the winners in God's kingdom, in God's economy. This kingdom stands to correct every system, ancient and modern, that tries to baptize domination and call it holy. Mary's song gets at the heart of empire logic.

Something that I learned this week as I was preparing for this Sunday is that this is actually the 100th anniversary of the Feast of Christ the King. So it's a relatively modern feast, and it came about in 1925. Pope Pius XI named it a feast day in the Catholic tradition, and it grew and it expanded to be embraced by Protestant traditions as well. But if we think about the context in which this feast was first declared, a feast of the Church, it was in the aftermath of World War I. The Western world was in the midst of political and economic turmoil. During this time, we also saw the rise of fascist and authoritarian leaders. We have people like Mussolini who was rising to power. We see early expressions of Nazi influences rising during this time. And so Pope Pius named this feast the Christ the King Feast because he said, "Christ, not the state, not the nation, not the political leader, is the true king, to whom all authority, loyalty and allegiance belong." This was in a time of rising authoritarianism. The feast for Pope Pius was a theological antidote to political idolatry.

It feels very fitting in our moment today as we declare to one another that it is Christ who is king, that it is Christ who rules in our hearts, that it is his kingdom to which we belong, to which we strive to embody. When we say Christ is king, we are rejecting every other false one. Christ rules not from a throne, a golden, fancy throne where he lords it over. No, Christ reigns from the hard wood of the cross. That is where Christ reigns. Kings of this world shed the blood of others, but Christ sheds His own for the sake of everyone, including those who hate him. Kings seek power through violence, but Christ, Christ divests himself of power through self-giving love. When we say Christ is king, this is what we mean. Kings crown themselves with gold, but Christ is crowned with that crown of thorns.

If Mary is telling the truth in this song, and she is, she is declaring that God is lifting up the lowly, centering the forgotten, healing the broken. He's dismantling systems of exploitation and reshaping the world through unlikely people. If that is God's work that is declared in this song, then as the church, it is also our work not to defend our "supremacy" or to justify power, but to participate in God's upside down kingdom, which is a revolution of love and of grace.

So what does that mean? It means we choose compassion over control, invitation over coercion, mercy over dominance. It means we choose truth over propaganda, and solidarity over supremacy. That's what it looks like for us to live in God's upside down kingdom where we proclaim that Christ is king.

One final observation about this song that Mary sings. I don't know if you noticed it, but she sings in the past tense. God has said it. God has done it. It's not "He will lift up the lowly." He has lifted up the lowly! He has sent the rich away empty! And why is this? It's because if God has said that it will be so, it is as good as done. We can trust that it is as good as done. Christ already reigns from the tree and his kingdom has no borders. It has no barriers, no armies, no flags, no coercion, just grace and mercy and justice and love.

And so today on this Christ the King Sunday, as we prepare to move into a new church year, may we join Mary in her song – not a song protecting power, but as participants in God's upside down kingdom. May we declare that our souls magnify the Lord, that we magnify Christ the King of Kings, the one who shows us a new, a different, and a much, much better way. Amen.