

“Visions and Kingdoms”  
November 26, 2006

Revelation 1:4b-8  
John 18:33-37

I need to start this morning with a confession. The confession is this: when last Monday morning rolled around, and I started the day as your now *officially* installed pastor, my main feeling was relief, *great* relief. Preparing for last Sunday morning’s service and for the installation AND organizing the Interfaith Thanksgiving Service AND trying to tend to out-of-town guests had all left me feeling just a wee bit ragged, so having last Sunday behind me felt good. It felt freeing. Don’t get me wrong – being installed as this congregation’s pastor was and is a source of great joy – but *finally* being installed was also a gigantic relief.

So that next morning, Chey and I had our regular Monday breakfast of pancakes, and then we took Andrea, my former minister, to the Sacramento airport. At some point later in the day, I decided to spend some time with the scripture passages designated for *this* morning, and my heart sank before I even opened the Bible. You see, in the liturgical year, in the church calendar, this Sunday is known by one of two names: Reign of Christ Sunday and Christ the King Sunday. My heart sank when I read this Sunday’s “title” for two reasons. The first is that I simply don’t experience Jesus Christ as king or as someone who reigns like a king. The second reason my heart sank is that I think there are many of you who don’t think of him that way, either.

So last Monday, I sat with a sinking heart, I mumbled a few non-profane words, and I began to wonder what I should do about this morning’s service. Well, I thought, I could duck the issue altogether by ignoring the lectionary readings for today and choosing something else. Or I could duck it by choosing, from among the several readings assigned today, the ones that seemed *least* obviously related to the theme of Christ the King. *Or* – and I flirted with this one – I could try to get out of my dilemma by asking you all what *you* make of this morning’s readings, hoping that your answers would take up about 15 or 20 minutes of the service.

But then I realized that I probably shouldn’t be trying to duck anything and that I should, instead, try to honor the vows I made here last week and the vows I made in Deerfield, Massachusetts, last April. Those vows include my promise to serve this church faithfully and my promise to seek and listen for the word of God in the Bible.

So, having at last realized that there truly is no way out but through, I went back to this morning’s readings, and I invite you to join me there.

The first reading is from the Revelation to John, and the second is from the Gospel According to John. In both of them, the folks who passed on these stories are trying to tell us something about who and what this Jesus character was – and *is*. They want to share with us something of what they encountered of God in and through Jesus, and, to do that, they use a vision and a discussion about kingdoms.

Let’s start with the vision, a vision of Jesus coming with the clouds. This vision comes from the last book in the New Testament, a description of the revelation that John says he received from Christ. It is a wild and weird book, full of bloody imagery and cosmic battles, and it is, in my view, one of the most misused and most unfairly ridiculed

writings in the Bible. The misuse and the ridicule arise from the same mistake: the mistake of reading Revelation as a *literal* prediction of the future. So, at least for this morning, I invite you to read the book of Revelation, instead, as an allegory, an allegory intended to encourage early Christian communities to stay strong in their faith and to resist the power and lure of the Roman Empire. Taking the book as a *factual* description of the cosmos or a *literal* prediction of the future is akin to taking *The Lord of the Rings* and using it as a textbook in a world history class. If we take the Book of Revelation as factual -- or *The Lord of the Rings* as history -- we can easily dismiss it as fantastical, maybe even absurd. But if we take it on its own terms, as a vision, a visionary revelation, we can then ask the far more interesting and important question, "What bits of truth is it offering?"

To try to answer that question, I need to look also at the reading from the Gospel of John, the conversation between Pilate and Jesus after Jesus' arrest. The two of them are sparring over who Jesus is and why he's been arrested. Jesus never answers Pilate's questions, "Are you the king of the Jews? Are you a king?" Instead, Jesus tells Pilate, "My kingdom is not from this world; I came into the world to testify to the truth."

So here, on this Sunday, Christ the King Sunday, we have a vision of Christ coming with the clouds and the story of Jesus telling Pilate that apparently he does indeed have a kingdom, but not a kingdom of this world.

That's what we *have*, but what does it *mean*? And do we care what it means?

The place I have to start to answer those questions is with the people who told and then recorded these stories and these visions. I trust that those people of long ago are trying to tell us something that matters; I trust that want to share their experience of God's presence and truth in their own lives and communities. To understand what they're trying to share, we need to know at least some of what their lives and their world were like. When we know that, we have a chance to catch glimpses into the truth they are *still* trying to pass down to us through stories and sayings and parables and fantastic visions.

This is some of what we know about their world. They lived during the dominance of the Roman Empire throughout most of the Mediterranean. Rome's armies were powerful and feared far and wide. Less than 50 years after Jesus' death, the Roman army had destroyed and ransacked the Jerusalem temple, a sacred site for most of the earliest Christians. When Rome and its armies conquered new territories, it enslaved large numbers of the local people, including civilians. These people were forced to work in mines, in agriculture, and as household and professional servants, and many, if not most, were slaves for the rest of their lives. At the other end of the spectrum of wealth and privilege, the Roman elite lived in luxury, with a surplus of lavish food and drink, even while so many of the empire's subjects lived in poverty and misery.

And all this, according to the Emperor and those who benefited from the empire's violence and oppression, was divinely ordained. This distortion of human community, they claimed, was the result of the gods' blessing. According to the imperial vision, this distortion of human community was, indeed, ruled by a god, the emperor himself, who was proclaimed as divine over and over again, through architecture, art, laws, and religious rituals.

This was the context in which the folks who passed on the Gospel of John and the Revelation of John lived and worshipped and struggled. In the midst of what John

Dominic Crossan calls this “imperial program,” those early Christians believed and tried to live a very different reality, a very different truth. They tried to live as followers of Jesus, who offered a “program,” not of domination and self-interest, but a “program” of compassion, courage, and ministry. They tried to live as followers of Jesus, the one through whom they encountered a God who loves and blesses all of creation, not simply the rich and the powerful.

The Jesus who emerges from the stories and parables and sayings and visions we have received from these early Christian communities stands outside the religious and political powers of his day. This Jesus reaches out to the marginalized, the outcasts who are considered unclean and sinful by their own communities and are considered useful only as slaves or servants by the Roman Empire. This Jesus teaches love of God and neighbor as the most important commandments of all. This Jesus calls his disciples to serve one another and to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, and care for the sick and imprisoned. Although some of his followers hoped he would take up the sword against the imperial program, this Jesus responded to violence and raw power with peace and healing ... and *forgiveness*. Finally, above all and through all, this Jesus trusted God, and the God he trusted was nothing like the empire’s false gods.

This is the Jesus we’re called to follow, and he continues to reveal and urge us to trust a God that looks nothing like the false gods of our own time. The false gods of the present echo those of the past in exalting military and economic power without asking who and what are crushed underneath that power. The false gods of the present echo those of the past in teaching that luxury for the few and poverty for the many are divinely sanctioned, or are at least an inevitable feature of human life. The false gods of the present echo those of the past in tempting us to believe that things, material things, have real value, in tempting us to believe that bestowing things on ourselves and our loved ones is one of the highest expressions of love. The false gods of the present tell us that we can best celebrate the birth of the Christ child by spending more money than we have to buy things that none of us truly needs. And all this to celebrate the birth, life, and ministry of someone who seems never to have owned anything other than some carpentry tools and the clothes on his back.

In the face of the power and dominance of the empire’s false gods of the 1<sup>st</sup> century and in the face of the power and dominance of the false gods of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, those early Christians who gave us this morning’s readings about visions and kingdoms were telling one another and they’re telling us that the God they had encountered through Jesus was more real, more powerful, and more trustworthy than they or we can even imagine. They’re telling us that God is not limited by what we can see, touch, taste, smell, and hear. They’re telling us that the compassionate truth Jesus sought to reveal and to live cannot be contained or defeated by the powers or kingdoms of this world.

Even though they used language and images that can seem strange, even incredible, their message is simple and, important ways, universal. It is the same message of trust and faith in the power of love and compassion that the Dalai Lama has offered in these words:

Never give up.  
No matter what is going on,  
Never give up.  
Develop the heart.

Too much energy in your country  
Is spent developing the mind  
Instead of the heart.  
Be compassionate,  
Not just to your friends,  
But to everyone.  
Be compassionate.  
Work for peace  
In your heart and in the world.  
Work for peace.  
And I say again,  
Never give up.  
No matter what is happening,  
No matter what is going on around you,  
Never give up.

Those early Christians were in danger of giving up, and this morning's readings were one community's offerings of encouragement. They encourage us to trust that the compassion and ministry of Jesus reflected God's compassion. They encourage us to trust that the powers and kingdoms of this world cannot defeat God's compassion, unless we give up. They encourage us to trust that what they experienced through Jesus – and what they urge us to let ourselves experience – is something so sacred and so uncontainable that we can even see it coming with the clouds.

It is a remarkable a vision. May we see it and trust it, more and more each day.  
Amen.

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