

Rev. Tina Lang • Christ the King Sunday, November 22, 2015
Texts: 2 Samuel 23:1-7 and John 18:33-37

Kingdom, Power, Glory



**First United
Methodist Church**

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

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I'd like to try a little experiment today. We're going to try a word-association experiment. I'm sure you know how word-association works: I say a word and you respond immediately with the first word that comes to mind. In word-association there's no time for thinking or analyzing, just your immediate reaction to the word you hear.

As much fun as it might be to have you shout out your responses, that might be a little chaotic too, so instead of responding verbally, just say your response silently in your head. Because you can't shout it out, your brain is going to want to take you further into your thoughts, but try to hold onto just that first word or image that comes to mind. Are you ready to try this experiment? Remember, you want to stay focused on your very first reaction; here we go. The word for you to respond to is: King.

Okay stop! No thinking now, just remember the word or image or feeling that came to mind when I said king.

Because it's a Sunday and we're together in this unique place, because the sermon title is Kingdom, Power, Glory, and because those words are literally writ large in front of us on huge projection screens, it is very probable that your responses to the word, King, might be skewed and a bit different than they would have been had you engaged in word-association with some random person on the sidewalk, but I'd still be interested to hear what first came to mind for you. Would some of you share the word or image that came to mind when I said the word, King?

Our language, our culture and our experiences have shaped us in such a way that for most of us, the initial response to the word, King, is something that reflects grandeur, something of distinction, images of domain, sovereignty, strength, might, control. But as people of faith, we profess that we want to be shaped by the Jesus story and that story offers a very different perspective than much of the language, culture and experience our daily lives. In a simple word-association experiment there is no time for thinking or analyzing, we're just invited to an immediate response, but faithful living and integrous worship invite us to something deeper, so on this Christ the King Sunday, we're invited to think together about what Christ the King means to us; about what Christ the King looks like for us.

We live in a nation that was created in direct opposition to the concept of being ruled by a king so it stands to reason that we have a hard time imagining what our king would look like. The people of Great Britain know what a king looks like. They have paintings and photographs of many of their previous kings so they know something about kings of the past, and now they have their long-reigning queen and three living generations of heirs so they know not just about the past, but they know something about kings of their future too. And as if the adult versions of two generations of heirs weren't enough, now, thanks to new age-progression technology, scientists at the University at Bradford in England have revealed what little Prince George will look like when the time may come for him to be named King George VII.

These computer generated images are age-progressions of the now two-year-old Prince George as an adult. The images were released a couple of weeks ago and it seems that her Majesty's royal subjects quickly came to the consensus that two-year-old George is their favorite and that the 40 year-old George is much more appealing than the 60 year-old George. Being much closer to the 60 year-old version than the 40 year-old version of myself, I will admit that I take some offense at their judgments, but it doesn't matter because the truth is that physical appearance really doesn't matter for me or for a king. A good king is revealed in attitude, in action, and in the health, well-being, and attitude and actions of the kingdom's people. That's a truth we just forget sometimes, and we're not the only ones to forget.

The people of Israel forgot. After generations of guidance from tribal leaders, prophets and judges, they went before Samuel begging for a king. They complained that all of the surrounding nations had kings to unify them and lead them in battle, but they had no earthly king. Speaking through Samuel, God told the people of Israel that they had no need of a king, that a king would be expensive, both financially and in terms of lost freedom; but in spite of all God's warnings, the people persisted in their requests and God gave them what they thought they wanted. Things went pretty well for a while. Israel was truly blessed by the leadership of a flawed but good king and we heard a partial description of what a good king looks like

in the passage from 2nd Samuel this morning. The good king is "...one who rules over people justly, and rules in the fear of God (otherwise translated as "in awe of God,") and the good king's "rule is like the light of morning, like the sun... gleaming from the rain on the grassy land."

Yes, David was regarded as the great King of Israel, so great (and so flawed) that the grand words we heard today are words he said about himself! And of course, the people of Israel's assertion of David's greatness had a lot to do with his military conquests. After all, he was the one who, as just a young boy was able to impressively slay the giant. He was the one who amassed great armies and who, as verse seven of today's passage says, used "an iron bar or the shaft of a spear" not just to protect his people and their lands but to grow his kingdom by taking the lands and homes and riches and, if you remember David's story, even taking some of the wives of others. David may have been a great king, but he was also greatly flawed.

As the biblical scholar and teacher, Walter Brueggemann, reflects on this passage and on King David's words about himself, Brueggemann says, "It is evident that the historical reality of David stands in considerable tension with this magisterial assertion." Even so, Brueggemann acknowledges that because of his genuine, ongoing relationship with God, David's reign was something special. Brueggemann says, there are "three motifs to the shape and significance of David's rule: "God's sovereign power, God's moral expectation, and God's abiding fidelity." Even with his significant flaws, David's adherence to those three motifs means that 3000 years after his reign, he is still revered as the great King of Israel. It's no wonder then, that scripture reminds us that Jesus is a descendant of the house of David. "God's sovereign power, God's moral expectation, and God's abiding fidelity" partially present in the reign of ancient King David, become fully present in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, the one we celebrate and name today as Christ the King.

The people of Great Britain have their art and photos from the past and they have the benefit of computer programs to help them see what their future king will look like, but how were the people of Israel to know what their future king would look like? They could look to the past, not for photographs and probably not even much artwork was available depicting their kings, but they could remember and they could tell the stories they had heard from previous generations. And in addition to the stories of their own kings, they had observed the behaviors of kings and rulers of other nations, kings who tended to deal with them as their own King David had previously dealt with others, "with an iron bar or the shaft (and very often the deadly point) of a spear."

What kind of image would come to mind for the people of Israel as they tried to picture their future king? If we were to engage them in the word-association experiment with the word king, it's not likely that they would have imagined someone like Jesus any more readily than we did with our word-association experiment. Like the people of Israel, our responses to the concept of king are shaped, distorted even, by traditional understandings of kingship that assume absolute power, exploitation and the accumulation of material riches. Our understandings just don't match up with Jesus' understandings, much less with his faithfulness and his consistent practice of those understandings. We have our misunderstandings and ongoing questions about Jesus' kingship, and Pilate had questions of his own.

In the Gospel reading today, there are two different men and two different understandings of kingship. One man is a well-dressed, powerful officer of the Roman Empire and the other is a ragged, street preacher from an unimportant little town in the region of Galilee. It wasn't uncommon for self-proclaimed prophets, teachers and healers to wander from town to town, but whatever this preacher had done, it was disturbing enough that the people turned him over for trial and it became Pilate's job to decide whether or not this Galilean was a real threat. So Pilate asked Jesus directly, "Are you the King of the Jews?" A good question for Pilate and a good question for us. "Are you the king? Are you our King?"

All four of the canonical gospels agree on Jesus' answer: "You say that I am a king." Pilate asks "Are you the King," and standing there, with his life on the line, Jesus' simple and prudent answer would have been "no," but that's not how he answers. His answer isn't "yes" either. Instead, he replies: "You say that I am a king." "That's your word." Jesus' reply to Pilate is a sort of "yes and no." It's a: "It depends on what you mean by king" sort of answer. Pilate is left to sort out the truth for himself, as are we.

Pilate, the crowds around Jesus and we struggle with the same question, “Are you the king?” We may have different reasons for asking the question, but we’re all perplexed in part, because our preconceived notions get in the way.

After all, this is a king who was born in a stable, who wandered around the countryside with common folk rather than amassing an army, who taught women, ate with traitors, held little children in his lap, washed his followers’ feet! This is a king who was vulnerable; who said and then demonstrated that instead of fighting we should turn the other cheek. This is a king who talked about loving our enemies rather than conquering them. This is an altogether different kind of king and if the king is altogether different, then doesn’t it follow that the kingdom and the kingdom people will be altogether different?

If we struggle with the concept of Christ the King, perhaps it’s because, like Pilate and so many before us, we’re caught up in conventional understandings and we miss the supreme revelation of kingdom, power and glory even as it stands right before us in the paradoxical form of Jesus, the Servant-king.

In his book, “The Secret Message of Jesus” Brian McLaren says, “Much about Jesus’ message is frustratingly unclear and impossible to categorize, but this much is clear: this carpenter’s son from Galilee challenges every existing political movement to a radical rethinking and dares everyone to imagine and consider his revolutionary alternative. What is that alternative? It is to see, seek, receive, and enter a new political and social and spiritual reality he calls the kingdom of God...” And what does that kingdom of God look like? “If you’re part of this kingdom, you won’t curse the sinners and scoundrels; instead, you’ll interact with them gently and kindly, refusing to judge...welcoming and treating them as neighbors... If you’re part of this kingdom, you won’t be blindly patriotic and compliant...you’ll be willing to confront any injustice...You won’t nestle snugly into the status quo, but you’ll seek to undermine the way things are to welcome the way things could and should be...If you’re part of this kingdom, you begin to live in a way that some will say is stupid and naïve. Turning the other cheek? Walking a second mile? Defeating violence with forgiveness, sacrifice and love? Come on! Get real! But others might see in your way of life the courageous and wild hope that could heal and transform the world.”

It is the courageous and wild hope that the world might be healed and transformed which was modeled for us by Jesus, an altogether different kind of king. And as we have the courage to live and share that wild hope we become the royal, holy people who help to usher in an altogether different kind of kingdom. May it be so. Amen.