

November 25, Reign of Christ Sunday

The slaughtered lamb—from the altar to the throne; from Temples of sacrifice to Cathedrals of grace; from taking life to giving life

Genesis 22:2, 12-13; Leviticus 3:1, 5; Revelation 5:9-14, 21:1-2, 22

Here we are, at the end of the liturgical year. Next Sunday is December and the beginning of Advent! So on this Sunday, as we are again anticipating the coming of Christ, we pause to remember that we are already living in the Reign of Christ. On this Sunday we celebrate that Jesus, the Christ, *is* our King.

But the Reign of Christ isn't like the reign of other king or president or any other political leader and ruler. And at one level we know this, of course we know this. But at another level, we don't already know this. *We are learning* what it means. And the learning of it takes a lifetime of being reminded and practicing.

We need this Christ the King Sunday every year to remember what the reign of Jesus is and what it is not. Because in the world around us, the way much of Christianity is practiced, Jesus, and the God of Jesus, function much like all the other political leaders. The scripts of our world are clear: If we as a nation want world peace, of course we have to kill those who threaten us. If we want to prosper as a nation and world power, of course we have to kill our enemies. If we want to maintain social order and the rule of law within our country, of course we have to take the life of criminals.

The way of the world says that in order to be free and thrive...in order to be saved...we have to protect ourselves from threats. And protecting ourselves is the most important thing. And taking life is simply part of the deal. Whether in war, or by capital punishment, or stand your ground, the script of the world says that the price of personal well-being often requires taking life.

And through the ages, we have written God into our scripts. Just as other rulers and nations require the taking of life in order to save life, so it has also been understood that

God requires sacrifice. But on Christ the King Sunday, we are reminded that it isn't God who demands sacrifice, it isn't the One God of Jesus who demands that life be taken. On this Sunday we are reminded that Jesus chooses to *give* his life. Confronted with the choice of taking life so that he could defend and save his own life, Jesus chose to stand defenseless in front of Pilate. Jesus chose to *give* his life.

It's necessary to pause here and highlight that Jesus had a choice. Jesus *chose* to give himself and his life. In this sense, he is not a victim. Victims of abuse and violence and war don't have choices. Someone or something happens to them and *they don't have a choice* in the matter. This distinction is important. When we lose sight of it, we tend to glorify victimhood. It's a script that has long been used to keep victims of abuse in their place, protecting the power of the abuser.

Christ the King Sunday is not about keeping the poor and the vulnerable in their place. Nor is it to tell them to give their lives to their abusers and oppressors. Living in the Reign of Christ isn't about silencing voices that are protesting against life-suppressing and life-taking systems and institutions. Remembering that we live in the Reign of Christ is first of all for those of us who are living in privilege, those of us who are benefitting from the life-taking, sacrificial systems of our world.

And it is a sacrificial system. We aren't buying and taking perfect animals to a temple for priest to kill, but the systems of this nation depend on sacrifices. The bodies of young men and women are sacrificed to the gods of war. It's a sacrifice we're willing to make for freedom. We sacrifice the bodies of children in poverty, especially black and brown children. We may not kill them, but we deprive them of education, and healthcare, and food, and housing. It's a price we're willing to pay so long as I have access to all the best options for

my children's future. We sacrifice the bodies of criminals, heaping all my sins and all the wrong of society on their bodies, killing them to satisfy the gods of my wrath and save me.

Of course when I say we, I'm talking about we as the collective that makes up this nation. The collective that is Fellowship of Hope is actively protesting and resisting these sacrificial systems. But I wonder if we'd be willing to consider ways in which we too, are participating in sacrificing others?

Let me pose some questions for our consideration:

- In the course of everyday relationships and encounters, where and how am I acting first of all to protect myself at the expense of another person? When do I "sacrifice" the other person rather than risk the "threat" of discomfort, insecurity, or some other form of challenge?
- As I engage in the world, where and how do I heap my anger and pain onto someone or something? When do I offer a scapegoat for sacrifice so that I can begin to feel better and heal?
- What is the economy that I live by? Do I choose to respond with grace and forgiveness when I am wounded or injured? Or do I sacrifice people and relationships because they have, intentionally or not, hurt me?

When I sit with these questions, I am less confident that Christ is my King.

This is why we mark the Reign of Christ today...so that we see and name the ways in which we are conformed to the sacrificial systems of this world. And with our confession, we begin to be transformed by the love and grace and forgiveness of Jesus, the Lamb of God, our King.

In the person of Jesus we see an incredible counterscript to the sacrificial system. Incredible because it goes against all of our instincts and against all the scripts of the political and social systems around us.

In the Reign of Christ, it is Jesus, the one who was sacrificed, who is on the throne. It isn't Pilate, the one who wielded political power and who took Jesus' life. Nor is it the religious rulers or persons from the angry mob demanding the death of Jesus. No, it is Jesus,

the one who stood exposed and vulnerable in front of the powers, who is on the throne. Jesus was formed by the Spirit of God, the Living God, God who is love. So in that defining moment of his life, in front of Pilate, rather than letting his instincts take over, Jesus trusted the aliveness and love and creativity of his God. He knew that if he took life in order to save his own, or if he participated in any form of violence to save himself, his action would only give birth to more violence. But if he gave his life, Jesus trusted that even from the tomb the Living God would create new life.

In the Reign of Christ, the scripts of this world do not have the last word! The laws of science and biology do not have the last word either! The Kingdom of God follows the law of love and grace, of forgiving and self-giving love, vulnerable, defenseless love. In the Kingdom of God, the Spirit of God is always at work, transforming new life. The Spirit is always and forever breathing into the chaos and void of our wounds, our sins, our violence, breathing and creating new life.

Such a Kingdom and such a King is hard for us to imagine. John shares his vision of such a place and such a reign, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth.... And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.... I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (from Rev 22:1, 2, 22). Did you hear that? In the Reign of Christ there is no temple. And if there is no temple, there is no place to offer sacrifices, no space to take life. And if there is no temple, then God’s presence is everywhere. Or as one person said, “The entire world is a burning bush and the city is a cathedral of grace.”¹

This is what it means to live in the Reign of Christ. This is what it means to sit at throne of the One God and of the slaughtered Lamb. The wounds of creation...our

¹ *From Street Psalms*

wounds...are with Jesus, the Christ, on the throne. In the Reign of Christ, we are being formed and transformed through our wounds. We, with all creatures, and all creation. within the Reign of Christ, the Living God is transforms tombs into wombs and raises up new life and aliveness.

May we keep John's vision in front of us as we live into the Reign of Christ.

May we bring our pain, our wounds, our sins, to the throne of God and the Slaughtered Lamb.

And may we sit, each day, at the foot of the throne Christ who reigns...Christ who reigns with love, and grace, who reigns with forgiving and self-giving love.