



KALAMAZOO

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH

**Sermons**

Power Failure

November 25, 2018 – Reign of Christ Sunday

1 Samuel 8:4-18; John 18:33-37

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Today is Reign of Christ or Christ the King Sunday. This is one of newer festivals of the church. Unlike the big three - Easter, Christmas, and Pentecost, Reign of Christ Sunday has a relatively brief history. It was originally established by Pope Pius XI in 1925 on the last Sunday in October. In 1969, Pope Paul VI moved it to the last Sunday in Ordinary time – the week before Advent begins – to emphasize its importance and place it in a place in the liturgical year more fitting to its celebration. The church year begins with Advent – a time of waiting and anticipation of the coming of Christ – and ends with celebrating Christ’s reign over all that was and is and shall be. It came to be a part of our tradition just a little over 20 years ago with the adoption of the Revised Common Lectionary.

So, what is this day all about? Originally, it was established – in a particularly contentious time in our world - to counter what many regarded as the destructive forces of the modern world: the rise of secularism in the west, communism in Russia and fascism in Italy and Spain, and early signs of the Nazism soon to seize Germany. Pope Pius intended to remind Christians, and the world, of the ways that Jesus Christ upended what it means to be a King, a ruler, one who wields power. Christ radically redefined and transformed the entire concept of kingship. Jesus knew the oppressive nature of secular kings, and in contrast to them, he connected his role as king to humble service, and commanded his followers to be servants as well. Christ’s teachings spell out a kingdom of justice balanced with radical love, mercy, peace, and forgiveness.

Our scriptures this morning set up that contrast. The reading from 1 Samuel is not one of the usual readings for this Sunday, but I chose it in order to spend a moment thinking about how the concept of kingship began in ancient Israel. In the Ancient Near East, the concept of monarchy was already well established. All of the nations around the budding land of Israel had kings who were considered divinely appointed mouthpieces of their gods.

They held absolute power over their subjects, making and enforcing laws as they saw fit and claiming divine mandate to do so. According to the stories shared in scripture, the Israelites lived differently from their neighbors, as God had instructed them to do. The laws they followed, the God they worshipped, the ways they lived out their lives together – all of these were deliberately in contrast to the ways of those around them. Up to this point, they had not had a king – because God was their only ruler. God gave them the law, directly, and God was the arbiter of justice. They had leaders such as Abraham and Moses, priests like Aaron and his descendents, and judges to help the process along, but God was the only sovereign in Israel. Our story today opens at the end of the time of the judges in Israel. When we talk about judges here, we are not speaking of black robes and gavels. The judges in Israel, more often than not, were military commanders who rose up to lead the nation in a time of crisis and, yes, to serve as arbiters of disputes and intercessors with God. In between these times of crisis, there was not much central leadership beyond what was offered by God, the law, and the priests. According to the Book of Judges, “in those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25).

Admittedly, all the people doing what was right in their own eyes was often what led to the various crises that necessitated the rising up of a judge to set things back in order by reminding the people who their sovereign was. Samuel’s own rise to power illustrates this well. Many of us know parts of the story. Hannah prays desperately to God for a child. God answers her prayer, and a son is born. She dedicates him to God and leaves him with the judge and high priest, Eli, to be trained as a servant of God. When Samuel was still a young boy, he is woken from sleep by God calling his name. Eli eventually figures out what’s happening and tells the boy to listen to what God has to tell him.

And...that’s usually where we stop. That’s the story we know, but it is not the end of that story. You see, what God tells Samuel is that Eli’s sons, who Eli appointed to follow him as priests, had used the power they were given in blasphemous ways. They were cheating the people, engaging in licentious behavior, stealing the sacrifices that people brought to the temple and treating the offerings of the Lord with contempt (1 Samuel 2:17). And Eli did not stop them. Eli did not correct them. Eli gave them the power they were abusing. God told Samuel that Eli – and all of Israel – was about to be punished. Sure enough, the Philistines

soon arrive to take over Israel, steal the Ark of the Covenant, and kill over 30,000 people, including both of Eli's sons. When Eli heard the news, he fell over, broke his neck, and died.

After seven months, the Philistines returned the Ark – that's a good story, but I don't have time for it today – and the people of Israel rejoiced and returned to God, swearing to give up all their foreign idols. This is when Samuel – already a prophet and priest – rose up as a judge. He led the people to make full restitution to God. He gathered them all together to pray and sacrifice. The Philistines heard that all Israel was gathered and considered it a good time to attack. Samuel led the people in sacrifice and prayer, God roared in a mighty voice against the Philistines, and the Philistines ran away in confusion. Peace ensued, and things were good for a long while.

After many years of peace and prosperity under Samuel's leadership, however, Samuel grows old, and the people begin to worry about what will happen next. Just like Eli, Samuel has appointed his sons to follow him, and just like Eli's sons, they have misused and perverted the power bestowed on them. The people remember what happened when Eli's sons were allowed to carry on in this way, and they are not eager for a repeat. So, they go to Samuel and ask him to appoint for them a king to rule over them.

On the one hand, this seems a reasonable request. They see injustice being done by Samuel's sons and they want to prevent the violence and bloodshed that occurred the last time they were in this position. But there is an important phrase here. The elders say to Samuel, "appoint for us a king to govern us, like other nations."

Like other nations.

The whole point of God's call to Israel is that they are not like other nations. They are different, set apart, chosen. They do not have a king because God is their king. God has made the laws, and God serves as the one who makes sure those laws are carried out. Samuel is upset by this request that Israel establish a monarchy, so they can be like other nations. God's not real thrilled about it either but gives the people what they want – along with a warning. Power – when understood by the values of the world - corrupts. Power uses. Power fails.

The people will have the king they have asked for. And he will have the power to take their sons and daughters, to demand payment, to demand fealty, to demand labor. The establishment of a monarchy will bring with it the establishment of a hierarchical class

system in which the rich will get richer on the backs of the poor. The king will have the power to reward those who he prefers and to punish those who speak against him. The king, and all the kings to follow, will have the power of life and death, of wealth and poverty, of freedom and enslavement and they will use it.

Power corrupts. Power becomes a weapon. Power fails the very people who need its protection. That is what the story of Israel tells us over and over again. It is what our history tells us over and over again. A world in which some have power over others is never going to be a world of justice and equity. We see this not only in the kings of Israel, but also in the monarchies around them, the Roman emperors, the kings and queens of Christendom, the secular rulers of the modern world, leaders of businesses and churches and even families. This is the warning God gives through Samuel and the lesson God continues to try to teach us over and over again. So, what's the alternative? Can power exist without corruption? Can authority be used for the benefit of all? Is there a different kind of king? A different kind of power? A power that does not fail?

And so, we turn to Jesus, in the court of Pontius Pilate. And we see a very different view of power and of leadership. We find ourselves in Pilate's headquarters. Pilate is a representative of the Roman empire – the supreme political authority in that space. Jesus – a Jewish carpenter - is brought to him, bound as a prisoner by the religious authorities of his own people. I want you to really notice the power differential here. Pilate appears to hold all the power.

He summons Jesus and asks, “Are you the king of the Jews?” I have to believe that the tone of this question was more like, “So, you're the “King of the Jews,” are you?” This was not a question meant to get at the facts. Pilate knows Jesus holds no position of political power. Israel had no king at this time. Herod (the son of the Herod we will hear about in coming weeks) was not a king, but a nominal ruler over the region of Galilee, which was really under the rule of Rome. Anyone claiming to be a king would be directly challenging the power of the empire – and thus, would be easily condemned to death.

Jesus responds in a surprising way, considering the power dynamics in the room. He doesn't seem bullied or afraid. He seems totally in control of the situation. His reply to Pilate

is hardly deferential. Pilate asks, “Are you King of the Jews?” Jesus replies with his own question, “Did you come up with this on your own, or did they tell you to ask me that?”

Jesus turns the tables on Pilate. He is king of nothing but stands before Pilate as though he possesses some power that Pilate knows nothing about. In contrast to Jesus, Pilate looks weak. In even continuing this trial, he bows to pressure from the people over whom he is supposed to maintain control. He is put on the spot, and he doesn’t like it. He tries to turn it back on Jesus – “Your own people have turned you over to me? What have you done?”

Again, Jesus takes control of the conversation, refusing to rise to Pilate’s bait, and instead continuing the thread about his identity. “My kingdom,” says Jesus, “is not from this world.” My kingdom has nothing to do with your politics or power plays. My kingdom is not about power or domination. My kingdom is something completely different. My authority comes from beyond you, beyond Herod, beyond Caesar – and anything the powers of this world can throw at me.

There are some who believe that this statement tells us that the kingdom of God is to be found in heaven – in the life to come – and faith in Christ means that we focus on what is to come in heaven, rather than worrying about what is on earth; on a personal relationship with Christ, rather than communal responsibility for one another. The church is no place for statements about politics or social issues. But if we look at Jesus’ ministry, that is clearly not what he is about. When he speaks of the kingdom of God, he is speaking of a present reality – one not quite fully realized, but one that we are continually called to work within and towards.

Jesus’ statement here - “My Kingdom is not from this world” – is not an expression of limitation. It is not about the extent of Jesus’s rule and authority, but its origin. Where does it come from, who authorizes it? Jesus’ power does not originate in this world; it is not made of the same stuff as the kingdoms of this world. Jesus’ power and authority rest on a completely different foundation than the power and authority of Rome. And that leads to different tactics and different outcomes.

“If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here” (18:36). Jesus is saying, “I refuse, I reject, the use of violence, power or coercion to win the world to

my kingdom.” Jesus rejects the power of this world – the power that corrupts, the power that fails – in favor of power that does not come from this world – the power of truth and love. Truth and love originate with God, and truth and love cannot be trumped by the powers of this world.

Pilate, of course, completely misses the point. “So, you are a king then?” he asks. Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

Pilate huffs and puffs – “What is truth?”

Now, there’s the big question. The one that sets Jesus’ kingdom and Jesus’ reign apart from the political powers of this world. Truth is not simply about the veracity of facts. Truth is not multiple perspectives on the same story. Truth is not from this world. For Christians, Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. And when we lose sight of truth, we lose our way completely and we lose our hold on the abundant life God calls us to lead.

It almost seems ironic to talk about truth in the context of power – about truth as power. Our political leaders have long been known to massage, hide, or outright ignore the truth if it means they can maintain their positions of power and the alliances that profit them. But the pervasiveness of lies in today’s political climate is such that truth has completely lost its power. We have completely lost our grip, as a society, on the value of truth.

So, where do we find truth? Not in the halls of power. We find truth in the same places we find Jesus – with the Samaritan woman, with the lepers, with the poor and hungry, on the outskirts of town feeding the thousands who come, hungry for food and truth, kneeling on the floor to wash the feet of his followers. We find truth – and we find the kingdom of God - in tent cities and homeless shelters, in the eyes of the abused and the outcast, in survivors and in people who suffer from addiction, in refugees. And we become a part of the kingdom of God when we refuse to accept the biggest lie this world tells us – that power, wealth, education, position, gender, sexuality, skin color, nationality, or any of the other walls that we erect to separate us somehow entitles us to have more, to be more, to achieve more than our neighbors, including strangers and those we consider our enemies.

We cannot find truth in solitude. We cannot find truth in the echo chambers of people who think and look and believe like we do. Truth is collective. Love is collective. Jesus came

into the world to testify to the truth – he is the truth – but the truth is even bigger than the individual nature of Jesus. It is about the community of belonging, the community of love that he built and continues to build through his body, the church. Borrowing the words of Rodger Nishioka - “The reign of God is larger than any individual, even Jesus himself. Surely the kingdom is present wherever Jesus is present. It is present wherever we experience the reign of God through God’s invitation, healing, restoration – but our belonging is not up to each one of us alone. Our belonging is up to God. That is the new reality that Jesus proclaims. That is the new truth to which all of us – the community of those invited, healed and restored – belong.”<sup>1</sup>

And, friends, that is the truth we find around this table. The truth that calls us to this table. Power fails. Love endures. Heaven shall not wait.

Thanks be to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Rodger Nishioka, “John 18:33-17,” *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4, p 336.