

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
“Hoping for Christ as King”
By Eric Howell
Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14
November 22, 2009

DaySpring, like many churches, follows the church calendar, and we follow readings from scripture that reflect the ‘season’ of the calendar. Like the weather seasons of the year following one another, and like the twelve-month calendar with which we are all familiar, the church calendar is like a wheel. It goes around and around. Just as Winter follows Autumn, and January follows December, Christmas follows Advent, which is then followed by Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and so on. Each year, it goes around and around like a circle. If it can be said that there is a beginning and end to a circle, this Sunday is the end. Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent, when the circle begins again. Today is the last Sunday of this church year. If next Sunday is the Alpha, this is the Omega, the capstone, the crown of the year. Appropriately, it is Christ the King Sunday. It comes every year. One Sunday a year. Some churches call it the Reign of Christ Sunday to avoid the masculine language. That’s ok. It points to the same thing, suggesting that there is a capstone to this journey, not just the journey of the year, but the journey of all of creation toward a fulfillment of its reason for existence—a capstone that is a throne and Christ is seated on the throne. There are a variety of ways this theme plays out in Christian thinking . . .

With as much attention as is given by books and preachers to the end times with its vocabulary of millennium, rapture, second coming . . .

With as much ink as has been spilled on trying to understand apocalyptic literature like the second half of Daniel, parts of Ezekiel, Mark 13, and Revelation . . .

With the sincere and formative belief of the first generation of Christians that Christ was coming back to rule in their lifetimes . . .

With our favorite passages in the next few weeks being ones like this one from Isaiah, “To us a child is born, a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulders, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

With the sense that someday, perhaps a day not too far away from now, Jesus will be known by all as king of the universe . . . and ruler of the nations.

With all of this as part of the Christian literature, expectation, identity . . . it is surprising that there is a single Christ the King Sunday. What is surprising is that the liturgical year only suggests one Sunday per year with this designation. There are four Sundays of Advent, two of Christmas, five of Lent, and seven of Easter. There are 28 Sundays of ordinary time, for crying out loud. You don’t mean that we couldn’t sacrifice a few green Sundays for more gold? We shouldn’t designate say four Sundays, say the month of November, to exploring and worshipping in the light of what it means to confess Jesus is king? Granted, we do this in a sense every Sunday. In a sense, every Sunday is Christ the King Sunday. Just as every Sunday is a little Easter—a celebration

of the resurrection. But the point of the church calendar is to give texture and focus to the year, to give us rhythm in worship in light of the confession that Christ is always raised as on Easter and Christ is always king as today. Yet, wouldn't it make sense to have a whole season during which we focus on Christ the King and on the kingdom over which He reigns? We have lots of songs to sing:

Crown Him with Many Crowns

All Hail King Jesus!

All Hail the Power of Jesus Name

Come, Thou Almighty King

Crown Him King of Kings

He is Exalted

Jesus Shall Reign

King of Kings

Majesty

Rejoice the Lord is King

Not only that, but Handel seems to have written a little something, which says King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And he shall reign forever and ever indeed. Hallelujah.

So, it's not for a lack of music that we only have one Sunday. It's not for a lack of scripture sources either. The ones we read this morning are powerful enough.

Daniel's vision of one like a son of man being given honor in heaven.

The vision of Revelation of a heavenly scene.

The psalmist's cry.

And Jesus himself answering Pilate's question, "My kingdom is not of this world."

There is some rich material. Why not spread it out a little?

I wonder if part of the reason might be because for every scripture text that lifts our hearts in praise, there are others that are just scary. Take Daniel for example . . . with apologies to the wonderful children's book, this is where the Wild Things are. And crazy people take these images and read them literally and twist the words and demand interpretations and write best-selling Christian fiction based on taking a few passages out of context, and it's just easier sometimes for reasonable people to leave it all alone and stick to stories of Jesus gathering the little children, or Jesus healing blind people. He's just easier to imagine walking through the countryside than sitting on a heavenly throne ruling the universe today.

But I don't think that's the reason there's only one Christ the King Sunday or why we save it until the very end and then put it up against Thanksgiving so that a lot of people are out of town, kind of like we are tucking it in where it might not be noticed.

I think the reality is that we don't know what to do with this. We don't know how to reconcile Jesus Christ as King of the world with the world in the shape it is in. Not that the world is all bad. The world can be a beautiful place of sacrificial love, experienced grace, and moments of transcendence. Not only are there beautiful parts of the created world, but there are beautiful souls as part of that, too. But with a benevolent and all-powerful ruler of the world, we would think that the parts that aren't so good and aren't so beautiful could be resolved. Wouldn't we reason that a world under Christ's kingship would be a wonderful world?

But when we get up and check out the news with a cup of morning coffee, we may feel a bit like Daniel: frightened, unsure of how to understand what is going on, unconvinced that the world is headed in the right direction. There's a lot of fear. It's not really that we don't know what a king is; it's that to claim Jesus is King right now suggests some questions that we don't have answers to:

If you are the King of Germany, why was Hitler allowed to reign his terror?

If you are King of Afghanistan, why the disorder and chaos?

If you are King of Kenya, Uganda, Somalia, why starving babies?

If you are King of the inner cities of America, why murders and cycles of extreme poverty? If you are King of the rural towns, why meth and despair?

If you are King of me, why do You let my allegiance so easily be given to the things of this world that take me from You? If you are King, when will Your Kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven?

See, if Jesus is just a humble carpenter or a first-century wisdom teacher, it's sort of easy to reconcile all of this. We can rightly use language like, He's walking along side us. He's there for us in the valley of the shadow of death; He's a companion, a friend, even a savior of our souls from the realities of this world. Or, if I personalize it and say Jesus is king of my heart, then I can remove Him from the cosmic realm and locate Him in the people on earth who are His. So that means that again, the problem sort of goes away.

But if we say Jesus is King the way the Bible says Jesus is King, doesn't that imply an authority to be wielded? Kingship implies that the king has power. And that's a little uncomfortable for us.

And it's not just that kingship, and for that matter queenship, has gone out of fashion in favor of democracy and egalitarianism and equality, though that might be part of our awkwardness at thinking of Jesus as king. Biblical language borrows heavily from what we already know. God as "Father." We know what a father is, even if imperfectly. The church as the body of Christ with a head, and eyes, and ears. You get the idea. Jesus used imagery a lot—of farmers and fishermen.

But we still have farmers and we still have bodies, but we don't have many kings left anymore, so to say Jesus is King requires us to some extent to first figure out what a king is and then to figure out what it means for us. What we know it means for us is that Jesus has an authority and sovereignty over those who follow Him that is absolute and complete. Ultimately, other metaphors for the role of Jesus in our lives fall short. At the

end of the day, when it counts the most, Jesus is not your president, not your CEO, not your Life Coach, not your buddy. Jesus is your King. And that's scary for us when we are quite sure that subjecting our hearts, minds, souls to Christ means something drastic—not to mention our bank accounts, daily calendars, and relationships.

And maybe this is what it comes down to. It's a matter of hope and faith. Jesus as King means that we have to put our lives where our talk is. Jesus talked a lot about the kingdom of God. It was the thing He talked the most about. And if we are in any way unsure of what that means or frustrated at its delay, or aware that we have misunderstood and misappropriated it, we are not the first. It seems like every time He talked about it, the reality of it was within our grasp, but just beyond our reach, kind of like trying to catch the wind in our fist. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that grows (Matthew 13:31) . . . it's like a pearl of great price that is worth the sacrifice of everything else (Matthew 13:45-46) . . . it's like treasure hidden in a field that you discover (Matthew 13:34) . . . it's like a net thrown into the sea and pulls up all kinds of fish (Matthew 13:47-48) . . . The kingdom of God has a character to it that has something to do with the world we already live in, but is sufficiently distinct to make its subjects square pegs in a round world. We just don't quite fit. If you've ever felt like you were just a bit out of step, like you can sense that something isn't quite right with the world and the way that earthly rulers describe reality and the meaning of life and your role in it; if you just can't quite squeeze your sense that there is something other, a different way of life, a reset order of priorities, a meaning beyond the history books, know that you are not alone. There is a whole tribe of people like you out here that aren't perfect and don't have all this figured out, but whose allegiance, if you get right down to it, is fundamentally altered by the faith they profess. It's more than in their heads. It's more than in their hearts. It has something to do with the way they understand and live their lives. And you can just sort of tell when you look at them long enough. Something is different about that one, that Christian. I can sense it. There's something sort of upside down about that guy—the way he listens to people and talks with them; the way he seems to think some things are really important and it's not what everyone else thinks is important . . . maybe it's the way he seems to be grounded but not morose, seems to be hopeful, but not disconnected. It's the way his life is re-ordered by something. The way he risks something big for something good. It's like he's upside down or inside out or something.

It's like something or someone has gotten hold of him and let him in on a secret message that has changed everything for him. He knows something about the make up of the world that is different.

It seems that worshipping Christ as King is hugely about hoping for Christ as King. We hope that His kingdom comes in the world and in us because we trust this King and His kingdom will be good and just; its rule will call its citizens to live life to the fullest. Its reign will be peace; its borders will be invitations of grace; its throne will be forever and ever. Its crown was once made of thorns and is now jeweled with worship. May this King's Kingdom come—in all the world and within us. May Your kingdom come soon and reign forever and ever. Alleluia.