***WHAT KIND OF KING?***

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Texts: Jeremiah 23:1-6 and Luke 23:33-43

Thursday evening Karen and I went to Richmond to see the Broadway production of *Hamilton*. As many of you know, it is a non-stop, fast-paced musical account of the life of Alexander Hamilton with a cast of characters that includes many of the founding fathers of our nation. Not surprisingly, Thomas Jefferson and George Washington were big hits with the Virginia audience! Those founding fathers and mothers fought to rid us of the tyranny of a king, specifically King George, who was brilliantly portrayed in all his royal glory on Thursday evening. His songs offer comic relief while also emphasizing his tyrannical ways as he sings to the rebellious colonists:

*You’ll be back like before*

*I will fight the fight and win the war*

*For your love, for your praise,*

*And I’ll love you till my dying days.*

*When you’re gone I’ll go mad*

*So don’t throw away this thing we had*

*Cause when push comes to shove,*

*I will kill your friends and family to remind you of my love.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Not all kings are as difficult and demented as was King George, but there have been more than a few whose reigns have been marked more by violence and oppression than by benevolence and wisdom. Presidents are elected by the people, but not kings. They ascend to the throne by right, some by divine right as they claim God-given roots to their authority, even if they prove to be sinfully human.

Israel had a mixed history with kings. The people clamored for a king in Samuel’s day; and after warning them of the consequences, God relented and had Samuel anoint Saul as king, but he soon followed the path of King George into madness. So God then had Samuel anoint young David as king in Saul’s place. It was David’s reign and that of David’s son Solomon that marked the glory days in Israel’s history. Under their rule the twelve tribes were united into one nation, Jerusalem became the capital city, and the temple was built to the glory of God. But after Solomon’s death things began to unravel with a series of kings who were largely weak, ineffective, and unfaithful.

By the time Jeremiah was bringing a word from the Lord to the people around Jerusalem, Israel’s kings were proving to be pretty pathetic. Jehoiakim and Zedekiah had both strayed far from the God they claimed to serve. Caught between warring powers to the north and south, they were willing to make idolatrous compromises to hold on to their thrones. As a result many of the people fled Israel in anticipation of the conquest to come, destruction that eventually came at the hands of the Babylonians.

The king was supposed to serve the Lord by serving the people – protecting the vulnerable, providing for those who were poor and weak, doing justice, and being a righteous example of God’s reign on earth. But the kings of Israel abandoned those divinely-appointed responsibilities; they feared the power of their neighbors and looked out for their own interests, not the interests of God or the people.

*“It is you who have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them,” says the LORD. “So I will attend to* ***you*** *for your evil doings*.”

No one wants that kind of divine attention! The king was the representative of YHWH among the people; he was to be loyal to the Lord alone, to trust the Lord alone. Israel’s kings had abandoned that royal responsibility out of fear. “Our problem, in regard to fear, is that we fear the Other more than we fear the God who commands, ‘love each other,’” writes Will Willimon.[[2]](#endnote-2) That was certainly the problem for Israel’s kings, and perhaps for us too.

Some say that the opposite of fear is courage. Jon Meacham suggests that the opposite of fear is hope that works for a common good and unifies rather than divides.[[3]](#endnote-3) In their fear the kings had stopped hoping in God. But it has also been said that the opposite of fear is love, and in fear of their enemies, the kings stopped loving God and the people. It was, declared God, a situation that demanded a divine remedy.

*“The days are surely coming when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch; and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land,” says the LORD.*

The remedy for the royal ills that plagued Israel was divine intervention. God did not plan to scrap the whole enterprise and abandon God’s royal promise to David. But God vowed to raise up a new king, a righteous king, a just king, a faithful king under whom Israel might prosper and live in peace. “T*his is the name by which he will be called, says the LORD: The LORD is our righteousness.”* That name is a Hebrew wordplay on the name Zedekiah; Zedekiah means “My righteousness is the LORD”; the new king would be called, “The LORD is our righteousness.” The focus would be upon the LORD, not upon the king. This new king, chosen by God, would reign in right relationship to God and with justice toward God’s people. It was that king who the people of Israel were awaiting after the Babylonian conquest, and that king they were still awaiting when Jesus was born in Bethlehem 600 years later.

Some of the people in Jesus’ day thought he might be that One for whom they had been waiting. They hoped he might be the One to kick out the Romans, unseat Caesar, and claim the throne as God’s righteous king. They wanted it so badly that they could not hear what Jesus was saying about the kind of king he might be – a king who did not rely on military power or violence, a king who had no palace or trappings of power, a king who reigned in faithful obedience to God by living in love. The people wanted a powerful king with an army of angels; instead they got a humble king who offered less judgment than forgiveness, who inspired less fear and offered more love, who came not to be served but to serve. Jesus was not the king they expected, and perhaps not the king with whom we are fully comfortable either.

For, our images of a king still hearken back to power, fear, and absolute authority, not humility, sacrifice, and love. Too many of us still fear our neighbors and want a king who is strong enough to beat them into submission whether they be Romans or Russians or poor immigrants seeking a home. Jesus doesn’t fit that mold. The Romans mocked him as a king because he seemed so ill-suited to that title as he hung on the cross: poor and powerless, naked, beaten, crucified, bleeding, dying. “This is the King of the Jews” read the sign nailed to his cross, but what it really said was, “What kind of pathetic excuse for a king is this?” Or more directly, “This so-called king is no king.” Who in the world would call the crucified Jesus king and mean it?

There was one, says Luke, a criminal being crucified beside Jesus; a man who, by his own account, was justly condemned. As he hung there dying, he alone said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” What made him think there was any kingdom into which the crucified Jesus might come? What made him think ***he*** might be welcome there? What made him think that the crucified Jesus might be a king?

Did he see in Jesus something others failed to see? With his dying breaths did he recognize how transient earthly power is and understand that Jesus offered something more? Was he just grasping at straws, or did he grasp something of what the Kingdom of Heaven might be? Did he see in Jesus’ unrelenting love, even for those who were crucifying him, a glimpse of something divine, something of who God is, a glimpse that offered a glimmer of hope for his own broken body and life? What led him to ask of the man who was broken, bleeding, and dying beside him, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom”? God only knows.

But God also wonders: Do you need or even want a king like Jesus to remember you, or did you reject that concept with Alexander Hamilton and George Washington 200 years ago? Today is *Christ the King Sunday* on the church calendar. It is not an ancient high holy day. It was first observed in the mid-1920s, instituted by Pope Pius XI out of concern for growing secularism and rising fascism in Europe. In establishing the feast he offers this optimistic statement:

*When once men recognize, both in private and in public life, that Christ is King, society will at last receive the great blessings of real liberty, well-ordered discipline, peace and harmony.[[4]](#endnote-4)*

What he suggests is that if we were to recognize Christ as king in our lives, then we might change the way we live together. We might value Jesus’ teachings and his reign over us above the dictates of all those other kings and queens who compete for our loyalty, whether they be nationalistic presidents or partisan politicians, sultans of swag or potentates of power, cultural idols or wizards of wealth. If Christ is our king, then our first loyalty is to him and to him alone – to live as he calls us to live, forgive as he calls us to forgive, love as he calls us to love, welcome all those he calls us to welcome, serve as he calls us to serve, and even die as he calls us to die – with hope and confidence in the God who raised him from the dead. He is no King George, no Elvis or Arnold Palmer or Lebron or Queen Elizabeth or Queen Latifah or any other human being who is anointed with a royal title. He is the king who was crucified two thousand years ago between two criminals, the One who was raised from the dead, the One whose kingdom is not like any other in this world. That is who he is, but is that who he is to you? Is he your king – or just the friend you have in Jesus? For, it makes a difference for how you live and how you face death if you claim him as king. It might even lead you to pray with that crucified criminal: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom?” What then would you have him remember – about you? Amen

1. Lin Manuel Miranda, “You’ll Be Back”, *Hamilton the Musical,* 2015 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. William H. Willimon, *Fear of the Other*, Abingdon Press: 2016, p.39 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Jon Meacham, *The Soul of America*, Random House: 2018, p.16 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Jill Duffield, “Looking Into the Lectionary: Christ the King Sunday”, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, November 18, 2019 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)