“Let Love Reign”

Psalm 132:1-18

Philippians 2:1-11

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Happy New Year!

Now that I have your attention and/or have you panicking that somehow you went to sleep last night and woke up in 2022, an explanation.

This is the final Sunday in our liturgical calendar.  Next Sunday, we’ll move into a new lectionary year — Year C, for those of you who are dying to know — and we’ll begin our year as we always do with the first Sunday of Advent. So \*technically\*, it’s New Year’s Eve, but we’ll be all Advented up by next week and might forget to wish each other a happy New Year.

And while we may be itching to begin the Advent season, to start to anticipate our Savior’s birth and all of the celebrations that surround it, it’s important that we pause to observe \*this\* special Sunday first.

The final Sunday of our liturgical year is always Christ the King Sunday or Reign of Christ Sunday for folks for whom the word “king” connotes imperialism and colonization.

Today, we remember and celebrate that it is Christ who is Lord of all.

When it comes to special days within our liturgical year, this is one of our newest. Unlike the Advent traditions which have been celebrated at least as early as 480 CE or our Lenten traditions which date back even earlier, Christ the King Sunday was introduced by Pope Pius XI in 1925 as a response to the growing influences of secularism and nationalism that he had been observing in the years between the two World Wars.

Christ the King Sunday, therefore, was meant to help redirect the focus away from any human entity - government, individual, ideology, etc — and to direct the focus on Christ who is Lord of all creation, the ultimate example of what love incarnate looks like. It celebrates the very real power of love, and not the power of might or brute force.

Humanity has a long history in wanting and expecting a leader, and the people of God are no exception. After their time spent wandering the desert for 40 years and following the time of the Judges, the people of Israel began to ask for a king, for a monarchy. This would be the first time that the people of God were led in such a way. Up until this point, God had raised up different leaders — Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Deborah, to lead the people through different trials and battles.  None of these involved coronation. In fact, many of them were only in power while Israel was experiencing a particular conflict and then their time in power was over.

But now, the people began to cry out for a king to lead them.  God directs Samuel, the prophet, to anoint Saul as Israel’s first king. But Saul has flaws. Saul doesn’t listen to God like he should and thinks he knows better than God. And so God instructs Samuel to anoint a new king — a young shepherd named David.

Our Psalm for today tells us that David was a great leader because of all the hardships he endured for God. The Hebrew word for “hardships” can also mean extreme self-denial. David had refused to rest until he had provided a dwelling place for God in Jerusalem. He’d given up all of the comforts that came with being king so that he could fulfill the promise he’d made to God and to God’s people: that Yahweh would be enthroned in Jerusalem.  And he made good on the promise, erecting a tent in the newly conquered Jerusalem in which to house the Ark of the Covenant until a permanent temple could be built. That’s what today’s psalm, a psalm of ascents celebrates: the arrival of the Ark in Jerusalem.

But while David is revered in both Jewish and Christian traditions as a “man after God’s own heart” and in Islam, he is known as the prophet-king and is lifted up for his zeal for daily prayer, he was still a flawed individual.

While in power, he commits murder and adultery. And the temple in Jerusalem that David wants for God? God never asked for it. This is David thinking he knows what is best for God.

In 2 Samuel, God responds to David’s desire to build a temple by saying to him, “Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle.” God then further tells David that because of his sins, he will never accomplish the building of a temple in Jerusalem. The best that David will manage to do is to erect a tent there.

But today’s psalm closes with God looking to the future, beyond David. God tells David, “One of the sons of your body I will set on your throne. If your sons keep my decrees that I shall teach them, their sons also, forevermore, shall sit on your throne.”

The ending of this psalm is a “yes, and.” Yes, God is talking about David’s son, Solomon, who will accede the throne, and Solomon *will* build a temple in Jerusalem for God. Yes.

*AND*, God is talking about further down the line to Jesus. As our Presbyterian women are studying this year, we can trace Jesus’s lineage in the beginning of Matthew all the way back to David.

God tells David, “I will cause a horn to sprout up for David; I have prepared a lamp for my anointed one.” Or in Hebrew, a lamp for my Messiah.

While we can look to David as a starting point for what makes a great leader — someone who willingly undergoes hardships and self-denial for the good of the people, it is to Jesus, Immanuel, God with Us, who ultimately embodies what true servant leadership means. Because while human leaders will fail us at times, Jesus never will.

Throughout Christ’s life, we see example after example of what it means to be a servant-leader.

When we look at his dinner and conversation partners, we see a leader who will cross barriers to greet people. When he insists on welcoming children even though the disciples don’t think they deserve a place at the table, we see a leader who looks for those on the margins and welcomes them in. When he physically lowers himself at the Last Supper, to take the place of a servant and wash his disciples’ feet, we see a leader who doesn’t let his title as the anointed Holy One of God stop him from serving others.

And in our text from Philippians, Paul reminds us of how far Christ went to put God first and foremost in his life. Paul tells us that Christ “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.”

While we are certainly flawed individuals ourselves, we can still do the best we can to live into what it fully means to worship Christ as King.  And while hopefully we won’t be called to be obedient to the point of literal death, we are still called to be of the same mind as Christ Jesus, to look not to our own interests, but to the interests of others.

And during this past year and a half, that call has been more important than ever.

Before the pandemic began, I had a pretty good habit of filing away all of the emails in my inbox. My goal was to have an empty inbox except for issues and events that were still ongoing. Once I’d responded to a request, I’d take some joy in filing it away in the CE folder or the Outreach folder or the Nursery folder. I even kept a folder labeled “Happy” which are filled with sweet notes from congregants that I can read whenever I’m having a down day.

But when the pandemic began, I got out of the habit. Emails just kept filling my inbox and I just did my best to keep up with everything.

Over the past week, though, I’ve decided to tackle the inbox and get it back down to zero. I mean, hey, Advent starts next week...what else have I got going on? Why not add to my do-do list?

So I set a goal of filing or deleting 100 emails a day. On the first day of the process, I went back to my oldest emails. There were a couple that I’d kept in there that were possible projects that I wanted to present to different teams. There were a couple that were saved passwords and helpful info that I needed to access frequently.

But then the emails that needed to be filed started. Beginning around March 2nd 2020, I started seeing the same kinds of emails: emails from congregants sharing that they’d seen other churches closing their buildings and moving online. Emails from congregants with suggestions for keeping folks safe in worship and Sunday school.  Emails from colleagues in churches around our nation seeking advice for when they should close and what technology to buy.

Then around March 10th, the Covenant cancellation emails started. Choir was cancelled. Sunday school was cancelled. Youth group was cancelled. And eventually, the one announcing that worship was cancelled.

Going through my inbox this week, I realized how traumatic that time was for me. Uncertainty reigned supreme. I remember waking up every morning and checking the news right away to see all the Covid updates. I’d look at the images coming out of Italy and New York City and pray and pray that we’d never see anything like that in our valley. I’d pray fervently for our congregation each morning. I’d wonder to myself, “How many congregants will we lose?” It was truly a dark time for me and seeing all of those emails still sitting in my inbox was almost like living that uncertainty all over again.

But then as I continued through my inbox this week, I started to see a shift in tone. I started seeing emails from folks in this congregation reaching out to each other, sharing recipes, sharing virtual school tips, volunteering to check in with our homebound members.  I saw emails from Sunday school teachers wondering how they could support the kiddos in their classes. And I saw a lot of emails from so many of you, saying that you were praying for John, Laura, Jeff, Chris, and me during these crazy days.

It was a time in which it would have been easy for you to turn in on yourselves and hunker down. It would have been easy to say, “I’m doing the best I can during this time of isolation; I’ll see you when this is over.” But you didn’t, Covenant.

And you still haven’t. Those emails that I filed this week were back when we thought we were going to quarantine for two weeks and then open everything back up. And as you all know, it’s been much longer than that.  And still, you’ve kept it up. For almost two years now. Not two weeks. Two years.

I had coffee with a mother of two young ones this week and she commented offhand about receiving cards in the mail from her children’s Sunday school teachers. I didn’t know anything about it. It was just the teachers looking not to their own interests, but to the interests of others.

I recently learned of a church member who regularly went to the grocery store and picked up a grocery order for an older church member every single week during the worst of the pandemic. She was willing to brave a second trip to the grocery store, because she knew that her fellow congregant was more at risk. She was practicing Christ-like selfless love.

And when we opened back up to worship in-person, you all readily agreed that until the numbers in our area are down *and* our youngest friends can be vaccinated, we would all wear masks, vaccinated or not. You put the health and safety of our children and vulnerable adults first and not your own comfort.

When this is all over, I hope that we can have a time to come together and share these stories and remember how, when others were hoarding toilet paper and other tangible items, when other congregations ignored the guidance of health experts, we insisted on remaining loyal to Christ by loving our neighbors in the scariest of times.

Our affirmation of faith today is one that we don’t use very often in our congregation, but was written during one of the darkest times in modern history.  It is known as the Theological Declaration of Barmen.  This declaration was composed in 1934 by Christians in Nazi Germany who opposed the antisemitic, racist, and nationalist views of the German Christian movement which had made the German Evangelical Church subservient to the State and not a servant of Christ.

It was a dangerous statement to make as the Declaration’s six theses directly confronted and opposed the teachings of the Nazi movement and especially rejected the teaching that the Church needed a Führer.  Its message is clear: Jesus alone is Lord of all.

It is interesting to note that this Declaration was written only 9 years after Pope Pius first introduced Christ the King Sunday. Obviously, we need constant reminders that Jesus is Lord.

Thankfully, we do not live in Nazi-era Germany, when we would have to decide whether or not to take a stand against a fascist regime.

But we do have opportunities each and every day to say “no” to any power that would pit one group of God’s children against another, to any power that would encourage selfish thinking, to any power that would deny the goodness of God’s creation, to any power that would claim ultimate authority.

That’s the point of Christ the King Sunday — that when everything falls apart, when we lose faith in our leaders, when justice does not roll down like waters, when the world feels completely out of control, we can take comfort in being able to say, “Jesus is Lord” and adjust our lives and our focus accordingly.

As we look back over the past liturgical year and see all the ways in which we have followed Christ, may God give us the courage and the strength to continue to say no to any misplaced allegiances and yes, always, to Christ.

All praise be to God.

Amen.