

The Reign of Christ Sunday

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Introduction

I didn't grow up in a church that followed the liturgical church calendar. We mostly just celebrated 2 special days: Christmas and Easter. And, sometimes, we celebrated the 4 weeks of Advent leading up to Christmas with the lighting of the Advent candles. I know I'm not alone in this experience. For those of us who attended non-liturgical churches, we missed out on many sacred days on the church calendar and even the very rhythm of the cycle through the church year.

Just as the seasons change outside (like in the Midwest where we get 4 distinct seasons) the church calendar has changing "seasons".

I really appreciate the changing seasons in nature and how they help me reflect on the changing "seasons" in my life. Calling forth something that is happening in my life that matches each season. For example, I find in the fall a flurry of activity, just like watching the squirrels rushing about to store up for winter, I find my schedule filling up with activities before the winter weather hits. And just like many creatures that hibernate in the winter, and plants that lie dormant, I find my soul and body ready for a restful season.

Likewise, I am learning, the church calendar gives us an invitation to help us find rhythms in our faith walk throughout the year. Seasons of Excitement, Repentance, Grief, Joy, Faithfulness, and Passion.

This time we were just in was called "ordinary time". Ordinary time is just that, living in our everyday ordinary lives, with our Christian faith feeling very ordinary, quiet, mundane even. Almost like on the back burner.

And just like the seasons are changing outside, we find the church calendar about to change too! We will begin the new church year with the 4 weeks of Advent starting next Sunday. We will be in a season of hopeful waiting in expectation for our Savior. During that time we get to ponder the expectancy wrapped up in Christmas, participate in the awe and wonder of the season, and relish the joy Jesus brings with peace on earth.

But today...today...we get to have a special day of celebration. We are at the end of the ordinary time, we celebrate the Reign of Christ. Today reminds us that Jesus is the ruler today and for eternity. Jesus reigning guides how we do justice in our world today. How we look at our civic lives, how we look at politics. It focuses our attention to the ultimate king and kingdom and to the promises yet ahead of Jesus bringing justice to all.

And so, today, we do get to celebrate with a taste of what is yet to come. We have gotten through this ordinary time. Jesus has been with us, even when we barely can tell, when we feel like nothing spectacular may be even happening in our lives. Today we remember that Jesus walks with us through our ordinary everyday lives. And invites us to partner with him in transforming the world with love.

Today we remember that the Kingdom of God is here among us now.

The Promised Reign

Daniel's vision

Our scriptures today were assigned in the Revised Common Lectionary.

Earlier in the service, we heard a passage from Daniel's glorious vision of Jesus coming to rule.

As a reminder, Daniel was among the Israelites that had been carried off as prisoners into exile. Daniel and his fellow Israelites were struggling to maintain hope amidst the realities of Babylon having plundered Jerusalem and their temple. They were living as exiles in the land of their conquerors.

So Daniel's vision of the Ancient of Days taking up court and the anointing of one like a human coming to reign, must have been awe inspiring. It would have been something I believe that would have brought hope to Daniel and the people of his day.

As Daniel describes the glory of the coronation event, I can't help but wish I had been a fly on the wall to see what he saw. With that type of promised kingship, one can't help but feeling hopeful.

But when we look around today we may feel like Jesus didn't really achieve what the vision revealed. And that can leave us feeling discouraged.

I can see why back in the day Jesus' disciples were also confused. Daniel's vision has an image of all "Rule, glory, and kingship [being] given" and the promise that "all peoples, nations, and languages will serve him [Jesus]."

The vision goes on to say "His rule is an everlasting one— it will never pass away!— his kingship is indestructible."

But, when the disciples looked around, they saw the political and religious leaders of the day trying to kill Jesus. Their current surroundings did not match what the vision promised. At least how they saw things.

And it wasn't just one passage of scripture that raised their hopes. There were many many other passages they would have known. And I'm sure the Israelites of Jesus' day would have been familiar, if not have memorized, King David's final words. As we often hold on to the final words our loved ones and great leaders say.

David's last words

David's last words as recorded in 2 Samuel 23 and 1 Kings 2:

2 Samuel 23:2-5 CEB/TIB

"The Spirit of YHWH has spoken through me; God's word was on my tongue.

The God of Israel spoke, the Rock of Israel said to me:

"Whoever rules rightly over people, with justice,

whoever rules in the reverence of YHWH,

is like the light of sunrise on a morning with no clouds,

like the bright gleam after the rain that brings grass from the ground."

Yes, my house is this way with God!

YHWH has made an everlasting covenant with me,

its terms spelled out and faithfully obeyed; God will ensure my complete success, and bring my every desire to fruition."

And to his son, Solomon, David commanded:

1 Kings 2:3-4 CEB

"Guard what is owed to the LORD your God, walking in his ways and observing his laws, his commands, his judgments, and his testimonies, just as it is written in the

Instruction from Moses. In this way you will succeed in whatever you do and wherever you go.

So also the LORD will confirm the word he spoke to me: 'If your children will take care to walk before me faithfully, with all their heart and all their being, then one of your own children will never fail to be on the throne of Israel.' "

This promise of a leader that stays faithful to God, that rules the people with justice, that brings refreshment like morning dew, and life like a sunny morning, this is the king they are looking for, waiting to see. The type of kingdom they expect to live within.

So, I can see why those waiting for the Savior King were excitedly expectant and why there was some confusion when Jesus didn't overthrow the occupying rulers and take over by physical force and rule the people. Isn't that what they wanted? Isn't that what we all long for—all that is wrong in our world to be righted. Right now.

And yet, Jesus invites us to a different way of thinking of the kingdom rule. A different way of seeing. Not to disappoint us, but so we can have freedom and victory with Jesus in a different way right now, in the midst of it all.

And that is what today is all about: the reign of Christ Sunday. Which parenthetically, is actually a new (less than 100 year old) tradition in the church calendar. This reminder of Jesus reigning over all was needed for the church in the 1920's in Italy. They were struggling under oppressive rule and the church helped point the people away from focus and feelings of defeat over the ruling powers of their day and instead onto the eternal ruling of Jesus reigning over all now.

Jesus' Perspective

When the corrupt religious leaders of Jesus' day couldn't take his disruption to their system anymore, they arranged to have Jesus arrested. When taken before the occupying government leader, Pilate, this is how Jesus replied about his reign:

John 18:33-38 TPT/TIB

....Pilate asked [Jesus], "Are you really the king of the Jews?"

Jesus replied, "Are you asking because you really want to know, or are you only asking this because others have said it about me?"

Pilate responded, "Only a Jew would care about this; do I look like a Jew? It's your own people and your religious leaders that have handed you over to me."

So tell me, Jesus, what have you done wrong?”

Jesus looked at Pilate and said, “The royal power of my kingdom realm doesn’t come from this world. If it did, then my followers would be fighting to the end to defend me from the hands of the Temple authorities. My kingdom realm authority is not of this world.”

Then Pilate responded, “Oh, so then you are a king?”

“You are right.” Jesus said, “I was born a King, and I have come into this world to prove what truth really is. And everyone who loves the truth will receive my words.”

Pilate looked at Jesus and said, “What is truth?”
silence filled the room.”

First, of note is that Jesus cleared up what his reign looks like and doesn’t look like. He clarified that it wasn’t about overthrowing the religious or the occupying leaders of the day. It was not “of this world”. It was all about bringing truth to the world.

And Pilate rightly asks Jesus, what I thing we all what to know “What is truth?”

What was this Truth that Jesus came into the world to show us?

The truth of who God is (Jesus says if we see him we see God...we know God’s character)

The truth of who we are—image bearers of God, made in God’s image to show one another who God is

The truth of God’s kingdom, among us, eternal, other

What this text in John tells us, is that Jesus is a leader like no other. The rules by which other leaders lead don’t apply to Jesus. To follow Jesus is to learn to be like him. And in this story, it means being willing to embrace a complicated truth over a comfortable lie: Glory and Suffering intermingle.

CONCLUSION

A dear friend sent me a little booklet entitled “The Wonder of His Name, Journal: 32 Life-Changing Names of Jesus” by Nancy DeMoss Wolgemuth. It’s pretty simple. At the top of each page is a name for Jesus, a scripture verse and a journal prompt.

If you recall from Lent season, I shared a similar story. A booklet on prayer. Again from these same dear friends. So you would think maybe I would have been more expectant about the gift this time. But, I almost didn’t read it. At first, I thought it was almost too simple...like almost just tossed it, kind of simple.

But then, I opened it up and began to use it. And, if you recall my story from the other booklet, you might guess the outcome. Yep, even though I started out feeling like it couldn’t really impact me in any meaningful way, it had a profound impact on me.

And while I’m being honest, let’s go further to the point of why I didn’t know if I wanted to read it: I really didn’t know if I wanted it, Jesus, to impact me in any meaningful way. See, as maybe you can understand, and I know the disciples of Jesus’ day can relate to—Jesus is not easy to follow. Jesus’ way, and His idea of what it means to reign and the kingdom of God to be among us, well his way of victory is not salvation from suffering, but victory in the midst of suffering. And that just doesn’t seem like enough some days. It seems overly simple to the point of not being helpful.

AND YET...

Isn’t that where we all find ourselves? Whether in our personal lives, or more globally...in the midst of some kind of struggle/trial/difficulty...with seemingly impossible solutions. Waiting for salvation. Working for freedom. Isn’t that where Daniel and his fellow Israelites found themselves? And Jesus’ disciples? And the Christians in Italy a hundred years ago?...In the midst of situations they wanted to not be in? And isn’t that where Jesus comes in with the truth—the truth that we can live free now, overcoming the world, just as he modeled?

Going back to that little booklet, on one of the days it says “Prince of Peace”. The verse is John 16:33 of Jesus’ words to his disciples: “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

How can Jesus say he has overcome the world? Especially in that moment...hours before his arrest, trial, crucifixion? We like that first part about peace. That’s comforting. We may even like Jesus being the one to be our peace. But we definitely don’t like the promise that we will have deep suffering in this world.

AND YET...

Jesus says he has overcome the world.

Overcome the trials, the temptations (to live selfishly, to act defeated). Jesus doesn't stop remembering who he is and whose he is: he came as our king to remind us of who we are and whose we are. We are children of God, Image bearers of God. We too can overcome the world's way and live a different way: full of love, mercy, and justice for those around us.

So, even though it's different, The Reign of Christ is better than what we can hope for. Glory in the midst of suffering, not away from it. And that is why today we have a reason to celebrate.
