



## “Game of Thrones”

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*November 25, 2018*

*John 18:33-37*

Did you know that today is the last Sunday of the Christian year? It is, indeed. Christ the King Sunday is the pinnacle moment before we barrel towards the season of Advent. And we, at Royal Lane, like to put a twist on the name calling it Reign of Christ Sunday to take the masculine and overly harsh political rhetoric out of the title. I even like to call it a kin-dom, rather than a kingdom, because Christ’s reign, to me, has more to do with relationship or kinship, rather than rule. But, today is called Reign of Christ Sunday because Christ, through God, does indeed rule the world but does so in a drastically different way than we might expect, not with harsh power and hurtful tactics, but with mercy and grace and love. Jesus doesn’t rule over our lives from a gold throne, bedecked in jewels with glitz and glamour. No, Jesus rules our lives in sacrifice from the throne of wood where he was nailed. He was executed for being thought a political king of this world, but Jesus says, in the Gospel Lesson for today, that his throne, his kingdom is not of this world. God rules over a world that is filled with love, with hope, and with justice.

And so, the Christian year begins next week. It begins with Advent and our preparation for the birth of Jesus. Then comes the celebration of his birth at Christmas, the coming of the magi at Epiphany, the showing of his nascent power at the wedding at Cana, and finally his mystical transfiguration. Then, as he comes down the mountain, he sets his face toward Jerusalem and we are plunged into the days of Lent – of suffering, sacrifice, and self-denial – the betrayal and death of Holy Week, the silence of Holy Saturday, the miracle of resurrection at Easter, and then the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. And finally, after Pentecost, the church moves through ordinary time, and we are called to reflect on the Kin-dom of God, the relationship of God with us in everyday life, moving us to the last days when God’s reign is forever and there will be crying no more.

So, here we are at Reign of Christ Sunday, when we are supposed to see kingship with a different vision, where we perceive the distinction in the Gospel reading for today between the rule or reign of the worldly political leaders and God’s vision of kinship and relationship. We see that Jesus ushered in another kind of kingdom. “My kingdom is not of this world,” Jesus said. Not of this world? That’s just not what the first century people were expecting, Jesus’ followers were anticipating, or how we today recognize authority. To understand the kingdom language of Jesus in our Gospel Lesson today, we have to know something about the game of thrones Jesus was playing. We have to know something about Jesus’ world and the leadership structure of his day.

You see, Jesus’ way of ruling the people was in direct contrast with another king and leader, King Herod. One commentator gives us insight about Herod. “Herod died the year Jesus was born. Jesus was born in a cave in an out of the way town named Bethlehem. Herod was buried about three miles east of Bethlehem in a massive mountain fort, the Herodium. Jesus’ birth, despite the significance we attach to it, was a quiet affair. Herod’s burial was just the opposite;

he literally had a mountain constructed in the flat desert. He wanted people to think of him and revere him long after he had died – in fact, you can see the Herodium all the way from Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives. The Herodium is impressive, and a few people visit there, but not like the crowds that flow into the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.”

But we know of many more destructive, kingly games played by King Herod before he died. He heard of the birth of Jesus and ordered the massacre of the innocents. And as we know, this action sent Mary, Joseph and their newly born child, Jesus, into Egypt. And as I did more research, I found that Herod’s powerful presence is still seen in Israel today. He built the city of Caesarea, known as Caesarea Philippi, on the coast, near Tel Aviv. He built Masada, an ancient fortress in the Judean desert. And, strangely, he rebuilt the Jewish Temple. A portion of that temple survives today, known as the Wailing Wall, or the Western Wall. These are massive architectural structures that Herod constructed during his thirty-four-year rule.

So, as we approach Advent and the birth of Jesus, we realize that Jesus was born into this kingdom of Herod, into a kingdom and reign of manipulation, grandeur, suffering, and struggle. But Jesus quickly pronounced that his way of leadership would not be Herod’s. “My kingdom,” he says to Pilate, “is not of this world.” Jesus’ throne, his rule would be one of inclusion and peace, not force and power like Herod’s and Pilate’s. Of course, the temptation of Jesus would have been to copy Herod’s techniques, to rule from a golden throne with an iron fist. And we see that Satan wanted Jesus’ reign and Jesus’ throne to be like Herod’s, to be like the world’s. Do you remember when the devil tempted Jesus? He took Jesus to a high mountain, and showed him “all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor, and said, ‘All this I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’” The temptation of Jesus was to adopt the leadership strategies of Herod and to sit on a throne of majesty and might. But Jesus didn’t play that game. Jesus chose a different way.

In his book “The Jesus Way,” recently deceased theologian and author, Eugene Peterson wrote, “So why didn’t Jesus learn from Herod? Why didn’t Jesus take Herod as his mentor in getting on in the world? In the world into which Jesus was born, no one has done this kingdom thing better. It’s true that Herod was not interested in God, but everything else was intact. All Jesus had to do was adopt and then adapt Herod’s political style, his skills, his tested principles and put them to work under the rule of God.”

But Jesus found himself at the end of his life, standing before Pilate not proclaiming to be king; rather, he immediately spoke not about himself but his community, calling it a kingdom, a kingdom of relationship with the divine. And standing before Pilate, bound and scourged and beaten, Jesus’ game of thrones revealed a different realm of God than that of Herod. Herod’s kingdom used power and authority for selfish ends with no concern for the building of community, and certainly not a community guided by love and truth. Herod hoarded power and lorded it over people even to the point of killing people on the cross. Jesus’ kingdom empowered others and used his authority to wash the feet of those he led. He spent his life serving his friends, even to the point of death. He gave his life to bring life. Herod’s kingly rule brought terror, while Jesus’ kingdom brought peace. Herod’s followers and friends, including Pilate sought to imitate him by using violence to conquer and divide people by race, ethnicity, and nations. Jesus’ followers put away the sword in order to invite and unify people, as Jesus did when he said “And I, when I am

lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” Herod’s authority originated from the will of Caesar while Jesus’ authority came from doing the will of God. In essence, Jesus could’ve chosen to sit on a throne of gold, rather than be hung on a throne of wood. Ken Carter says, “On Christ the King Sunday, the church is called to resist the same temptation that faced Christ, the temptation to adopt the leadership strategy of Herod.”

And the temptation of Jesus, which he firmly rejected by knowing the Bible and by loving people, was also a temptation for his followers. Remember, as we’ve gone through the Gospel of Mark on Sundays and Wednesdays, the disciples wanted to be at Jesus’ right and left hands, they argued about who was the greatest, they didn’t believe that he would suffer and die, and they shouted “Hosanna” over him as he paraded into Jerusalem. But, as we also know, Jesus gave them a clear teaching about an alternative vision of leadership, about a different throne. He said in Mark, chapter 10, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.” That is the reign and rule of Christ that is most important for us to remember today. We must not bow our knees to the rulers of this day that seek to hurt people and keep people on the outside and force people to be in danger and make fun of people and lie to people. No, we are called to bow our heads and our hearts to the Christ who sits on a throne of love and justice and hangs on a throne of wood. We are beckoned to profess Jesus as our Lord, not as we would do to other leaders today, but as the one who came to establish an alternative kingdom, a kingdom opposite that of Herod. Jesus set up a kin-dom not of the love of power but the power of love.

Love is God’s kingdom, not a place. Jesus is God’s kingdom, not a place. The place of God’s kingdom is the relationship we have with the divine. Professor Karoline Lewis says that “Jesus’ kingdom is not about amassing additional amounts of control. Jesus’ kingdom is not about his ultimate rule over and above others. Jesus’ kingdom is about relationship. ‘My kingdom is not from this world’ because it is from God. Pilate attempts to construe the boundaries of Jesus’ kingdom in terms of those perpetuated by the kingdom to which he is beholden. But Jesus’ kingdom is from God, just as Jesus is from God and Jesus is God’s kingdom.” The concept of kingdom is radically reoriented in the Gospel of John. Kingdom is changed to kin-dom, from kingdoms that strain and sever relationships to a kin-dom that puts relationship front and center. That’s a whole different perspective on the reign of God. “When kingdom is construed from the truth of relationship and not rule, from the truth of incarnation and not location, from the truth of love and not law, then Jesus as truth will ring true.”

And Jesus didn’t set up a kin-dom of relationship so that he could be the only one that ruled and reigned. No, Jesus clearly gave his presence, his spirit, his authority, to his followers then and now, to spread his influence, his teachings, his divine goodness upon this earth, to bring in the Kingdom of God right here and right now. And so, on Reign of Christ/Christ the King Sunday, everything we do today, the readings, the litanies, the hymns, and the prayers, calls us to worship a savior on a wooden throne and be a people who establish the kingdom of God upon the earth here and now. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven!”

So, what does Jesus' different kind of rule and different kind of throne represent? What does it mean to follow king Jesus? We follow king Jesus by realizing that the leadership of Christ is always servant leadership. And just as Jesus laid down his life to receive the power that came from God, we see that Jesus' rule came to him as a gift from God. Jesus emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, as Paul wrote, for God had highly exalted him. The self-emptying life of Jesus was a life given for others.

As we end the Christian year, we find that the whole Christian story moves toward a climax of Jesus being hailed "King of the Jews" and being bound and whipped and covered in a purple robe and a sharp crown of thorns on his head. The kingship of Jesus was not about political dominance but about sacrifice, not about selfish rule but unselfish love, not about political power but servant leadership that led to the cross. It is at the cross that we see the true kingdom of God.

For the kingdom of God is about relationship. And we are to find a God that loves us not in the form of a powerful ruler but in God made flesh brought low as a newborn baby. Jesus was no longer enthroned in the heavens but, in John's Gospel, we find that Jesus made a home in our lives. And since Jesus made a home with humanity, we find our servant king every time we welcome the stranger, visit the imprisoned, care for the sick, and feed the hungry. Jesus was a king who never rose so high that he couldn't see those who were down low. Even today, we see Jesus in tent cities where refugees live together after losing their homes to war and famine. We see Jesus in public housing where people are anxious about not having the money to pay their utility bills. We see Jesus in shelters where women have sought refuge from their abusers. We see Jesus on the sidewalk where those without houses suffer in the cold. For if we want to see Jesus, we should look in places kings seldom go. When we see the kingdom of God in other people, that is when Jesus reigns in our lives and sits on the thrones of our hearts.

And so, Reign of Christ Sunday is the end of our Christian year and the completion of a long journey where we have followed Jesus to the throne that is a tree. And in this end of a season is a new beginning, in this throne of wood we find that Jesus is born in a manger of wood and straw. Next Sunday we will begin the journey of anticipation, and waiting, and preparing for hope, joy, peace, and love. So, this week, be on the lookout for how Jesus sits on his throne! Be on the lookout and recognize that Jesus' kingdom is not of this world. There is a game of thrones afoot! Which ruler will we follow?

Amen.