

Rev. Debbie Gara
November 25, 2007
Christ the King Sunday

Jesus: Our True KING

Jeremiah, writing 600 yrs before Christ, a passionate and courageous prophet who grieves with God for a wayward people and proclaims God's word. Jeremiah calls us to respond to a loving God who passionately desires our good...

***Jeremiah 23: 1-6-** Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture says the Lord. Therefore thus says the lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, not shall any be missing, says the Lord. The days are surely coming, says the Lord, 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. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."*

Luke 1:68-79

⁶⁸"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. ⁶⁹He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, ⁷⁰as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, ⁷¹that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. ⁷²Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, ⁷³the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us ⁷⁴that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. ⁷⁶And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. ⁷⁸By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, ⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Three days ago I sat at the Thanksgiving table with my mom and dad, my brother, my husband, and my daughters. In the spring of this year my 73 year old healthy and active mom had a routine colonoscopy, and in a thankfully unusual surgical error her colon was perforated, causing seepage into her body and infection that was out of control before it was discovered and repaired. For several weeks, around 40 days, my mother lay in the intensive care unit with a condition called A.R.D.S. Her lungs were stiff and her prognosis was grim. I spent a significant period of that time preparing mentally for her death. I discovered the imagination of that reality was very painful.

Thankfully, it was not one that came to be. My mom is recovering fully and the joy of being in her presence, particularly around the table at Thanksgiving, was indescribable. Her recovery is described by us in terms of what felt and feels like a miracle.

But what if this story had gone another way, as it does for so many in the world and for many of you and your loved ones? What about the many prognoses and outcomes that are not happy and joyous, and so many that raise the possibility of loss, pain, death?

What does ANY of this have to do with the celebration of Christ the King on this Christ the King Sunday?

If I am to embrace Christ in my most meaningful encounters and relationships, Christ cannot be separate on some kind of a kingly throne. As we examine the meaning behind the scriptures for this Sunday, indeed we discover a new and wonderful understanding of Christ as King. A Christ that *is* intimately present in my intense gratitude for my mother's presence, a Christ also present around and in the intense loss in the death of a loved one, as well as beyond, above, below and around each of our encounters in life. Christ the King of all, with a height and depth above all of the political and religious rulers through all time. A love and a resurrective power and promise that absolutely invades all darkness and pain offering the promise of new life in all things. A Christ who I would stand and celebrate even in a different outcome, one that we are all able to embrace... even in times when the outcome is different than that which we desire.

Theologian Sallie McFague, in her book Models of God reminds us that a focus on the Kingship of Christ (and God) does not invite the destabilizing, inclusive, nonhierarchical vision of fulfillment for all of creation. The intimacy I have sought to describe is not one in the royalty models that are distant and "untouchable", relating externally, essentially different and apart.

How important it is for us to acknowledge the inherent separation in this royal imagery, and to examine the true meaning of the kingship or majesty of Christ that opposes lording of one over another. It is also important for us to acknowledge the presence in our world of dominant, exclusive, and unjust rulers in power today.

About 600 years before Christ, Jeremiah predicts the coming of a just, wise, righteous King to replace those who have not been attentive to the safety and the needs of *all*, sending them scattering in fear! The royal language, the monarchical model, was important for understanding in the times of the people.

Jesus brought a new model of domination. In Jesus Christ we are given a rich combination of power and gentle care, the pastoral king, the royal shepherd.

Let us embrace and acknowledge the new kind of King that came to us in Christ and that is with us in Christ, that we are invited to move forward through today and prepare the way for in our lives again.

A king who had no sons to succeed him posted a sign inviting young men in his kingdom to become his adopted son and rule after him. There were only two qualifications. The boy must love God and neighbor deeply. A young peasant boy felt moved to apply, but he lacked decent clothes for the interview. Finally, he saved enough money for clothes. As the boy neared the palace, he came upon a shivering old man begging for clothes. The boy was moved to pity and gave the beggar the clothes he had brought for the interview. Then the boy went on to the castle, wondering if he would be admitted in rags. The boy did gain admittance. When he was in the throne room, he could not believe his eyes. On the throne sat the shivering old man. The king smiled and said, "Welcome, my son."

This kind of love and intimacy means that we learn to trust. When we have not been formed in a trusting environment, for whatever reason, the barriers to allowing anyone into our lives, including Christ, can be strong. Thanks be to loving people and to the work of the church, who at their best assist us in peeling the layers to reveal the nature and dominance of Christ within, around and through all.

A beautiful baby kitten was born on a street in Pasadena one ordinary day a couple of years ago. Somehow surviving and weaned at a few weeks she scrounged enough protein from street trash, rats and mice, and perhaps a hand out here and there. Within a few months she became pregnant at least twice producing more mouths to feed, knowing only the deep instinct created inside to feed and love her offspring, entirely and completely on her own in a dark and dangerous world. A sheltered church basement beckoned, and mama cat and her six kittens lived for weeks until they were discovered, surviving only by instinctive persistence, on the verge of spreading into the urban streets only to multiply in a world of danger, cold and distrust. We know that this is a frequent occurrence, and the explanation of the thousands of unwanted dogs and cats who are euthanized routinely. But, this particular case would be different. Along came persistent humans who would discover this feline family, among them more than a few cat loving souls. Kittens adopted, wild, skinny, untrusting *angry* mama cat trapped and delivered to the humane society where she was spayed and officially adopted back by these cat loving souls. If you were to somehow and most cruelly create an environment that would foster distrust on any other living being it would probably not be more effective than what this mama cat experienced prior to her adoption, including the loss of most of her tail at some point in her dangerous formative months.

Move ahead 16 months...months consistent with a supply of fresh food and water, clean bed, shelter; no abuse, the distant voices of caring humans. Repeat this for days on end.

First came mama cats lingering presence and observation from a stair or a landing. Mama cat, by now, is her designated name. Next came the hesitant brushing against legs and the slow but sure allowance of some to offer a pet. Now, today, trust has grown enough to sit on a lap, to rub and purr and seemingly open

herself to the understanding of her true nature, to be intimate with living creation, to trust in the compassion of others. It took months of consistent safety to build this kind of trust.

It takes time to trust in the safety of love, particularly when messages have been contrary to the risk giving yourself to another when you have been hurt; ...to allow Christ to hold you and reveal yourself; to reveal your pain, your weakness, your disappointment, your anger. To allow Christ to be an intimate and present, most dominant figure ruling all in your life, means simply that the constant seeking of compassion and love in every situation is the preeminent goal above all else. Forgiveness is always possible. This is the true kingship and majesty of Christ, rather than that of a king on a throne that is inaccessible and certainly unobtainable in that dominant place.

Find and trust the true Christ in your life who has beckoned through times and beckons now. The Christ whom God sends to be **like** us and to show us how we are to live in and through his actions of compassion and forgiveness.

The Epistle lesson for today is Colossians 1: 11-20. It is written by Paul in response to teaching that threatens the supremacy of Christ. I share this version from the Message, a translation by Eugene Peterson:

God rescued us from dead-end alleys and dark dungeons. He's set us up in the kingdom of the Son he loves so much, the Son who got us out of the it we were in, got rid of the sins we were doomed to keep repeating. We look at this son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels—**everything** got started in him and finds purpose in him. He was there before anything came into existence and holds it together right up to this moment. And when it comes to the church, he organizes it and holds it together; like a head does a body. He was supreme in the beginning and —leading the resurrection parade—he is supreme in the end. From beginning to end he's there, towering far above everything, everyone. So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the cross.

This winter, several of us are committed to a pilot small home group format with the intention of bringing the opportunity of this home group to all of you.

Our chosen study material is called Living the Questions, which places emphasis on the wisdom of struggling with questions rather than claiming certainty in life.

John Spong, one of the guest theologians in this series, encourages us to journey forward, walking with trust **into** the mystery of the majesty of Christ. Why Christ? As Christians, we must have an entry point. As Christians we start with the faith tradition that is native to us. Jesus is our doorway. We must journey past

the literalizations of dogma, of doctrine, of words, past the Kingly royal separate imagery of Christ and God, into the fullness of Christ, trusting and embracing the mystery of the majesty. As we do this we will know the wholeness of Christ, who promises to come again to us in the vulnerable birth in the humble place, that we might be at one with Christ in our unworthy nature crying out for love, compassion and meaning.

In the words of Rob Bell, our inspiration in Spritseekers Sunday school class,” You don’t have to live like this” “You don’t have to live like this” “You don’t have to live like this”

I end with a story discovered in my research on the majestic nature of Christ in the forming of this sermon on Christ the King Sunday. A story that also honors the life of Rev. Katherine Gara, Dan’s first wife who died in 2001.

She included this in a sermon to help illustrate the true nature of Christ’s majesty.

A woman had grown up “religious’ but found the church absurd. She found no meaning in Christ and did not relate his story to her life. She was a person who sought truth, integrity, understanding, and so, she found integrity in staying home while her husband and children attended worship. This particular Sunday brought a freak snowstorm to their isolated farm house and a flock of birds, frightened and lost in the sudden snowstorm, crashed into the window of their house and lay fluttering, lost and freezing, in the snow. Observing this, she was greatly distressed, knowing that the fluttering birds would freeze and die in the snow. If only, she thought, she could bring direction to them so that they would fly and escape the deadly snow. She tried to herd them into the air to no avail. She decided to turn on the light and open the doors of the nearby barn, that they might be directed to that warm and inviting light for warmth, shelter, recovery. This action was also unsuccessful. In her attempts to save the life of this flock of birds, she thought in desperation, “If only I could become a bird, perhaps I could lead them in the direction of safety.” Suddenly she understood the true meaning in the majesty of Christ, God wants us so much that God **chose** to be fully present in Jesus Christ, to become one with each of us, leading us to safety through compassion and grace.

May we trust in a love such as this that we may be of this love and truly live.

May you find this Christ in your life.

As we move forward into Advent, may we remember who we are preparing to welcome into the world and into our lives. Thanks be to God for the majesty of Christ in our lives.