



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
November 25, 2018 Sermon

Here is Your King: The King Descending

Scripture Lessons: Philippians 2:5-11 John 18:33-37; 19:1-5, 12-16a

This is the first Sunday after Thanksgiving, and the last Sunday before Advent begins, but also—on the church calendar—*Christ the King Sunday*, which is a real challenge to preachers, at least here in America. You see, here in America, we don't do kings and queens; we don't have royal families, we don't do royalty. The delegates to the first constitutional convention in 1789 decided that once and for all, and who am I to question their wisdom simply because it would make my job today a little easier? No, no, no. Royalty: may it come no closer to America than the cover of *People* magazine.

Speaking of which, however, have you ever noticed how frequently we use the terms “king” or “queen” in our popular culture? Just to name a few, we have: the king of rock n roll; the king of swing; the king of the North; and the King of Pop. Not to mention: the Queen of soul; Queen Latifah; Queen Cersei; and well, Queen.

Which would be Elvis, Benny Goodman, Game of thrones, and Michael Jackson, respectively for the kings. And for the queens: Aretha Franklin, hip-hop's First Lady, Game of Thrones again, and a British rock band, subject of the recent biopic, *Bohemian Rhapsody*, and entirely to blame for sports fans in US arenas forever wailing, “We are the Champions.”

Maybe we Americans *do* do royalty, after all.

And not just metaphorically, either. You may not have noticed, but, apparently, about six months ago, there was a royal wedding. And (this came as a real shock to me) apparently a fair number of Americans (29.2 million in fact) woke up (as early as 4:00 am eastern) to watch (on no less than 15 networks) the soon to be Duke and Duchess of Sussex (otherwise known as Harry and Meghan; we're all on a first name basis) tie the knot. And this American fascination with British royalty wasn't just a one-off with that wedding. Why just this past Friday, USA Today (that's *USA Today*) ran a “Royal Report,” informing us that, on the day before Thanksgiving, the “royal mum-to-be,” Duchess Meghan, volunteered at the Hubb Community Kitchen, “taking off her burgundy wool-blend coat from Club Monaco and tying a black apron around her burgeoning bump which she cradled while conversing.”

I don't know about you, but my holiday weekend would not have been complete without that information. Maybe we Americans *do* do royalty, after all. And actually, the concept of kingship in our popular culture is very close to the Biblical concept of a king.

As Elvis is to rock 'n roll, as Aretha is to all female soul singers, as Queen is to all arena anthems, so the monarch of Biblical times was to all of a people's lives. You see, in the Bible, the king or queen wasn't just the head of state. No, the monarch was the one who set the standard, who made the rules, who, in his or her very person, defined the realm, *was* the realm. In Biblical times, as in our

popular culture, people looked to the king or queen of a particular realm to see what's what and what it's really all about.

And Pontius Pilate really doesn't want to crucify him.

The charge, at least the charge of the moment, is sedition, setting himself up as king, setting himself up as a rival to Tiberius Caesar, the emperor in Rome. That's the charge of the moment because that's the charge that really matters to Rome, and the one that the religious authorities in Jerusalem, who feel threatened by Jesus, can pin on Jesus, like a ready-made, pre-established narrative, to force Pilate's hand.

Pilate resents being played like this. And besides, this man seems innocent—or at least innocent enough. And Pilate's tired, tired of all of them and all of this, tired of their endless, incomprehensible religious bickering and their petty, fractious religious factions. What he really wants, of course, is for this whole thing to go away. Or better yet to go away himself. He's sick of this backwater outpost: all he wants to is draw his pension so he and his wife can retire to their timeshare outside of Ostia.

And speaking of his wife—for the past few weeks, she's been having the same awful dream over and over, the dream in which which she hears all those voices—millions and millions of voices, saying the same thing over and over, saying her husband's name over and over—"suffered under Pontius Pilate, suffered under Pontius Pilate, suffered under Pontius Pilate"—echoing down the corridors of time.

So Pilate has him flogged, and then brings him out before the crowd. "Here he is: **Look at him!**" he shouts. Look at him, look at him tottering there, because, if the guards weren't holding him up, he'd fall over. Look at him: He's been beaten within an inch of his life—flogged 39 times because 40 was thought to kill a man. Look at him: His lip is split; one eye, swollen shut. The blood from the crown of thorns is drying on his face, but that from the blows is still fresh, running together with the spittle of the soldiers. By bringing him out, Pilate is in effect saying, "Look at him—isn't this enough? Isn't this enough for a man we all know is innocent?"

And as for the accouterments of royalty?—the purple robe, the crown of thorns, the bowing down before him—it's all mockery of course: as if, as if this man, *this man in this condition*, could be king. And so Pilate, growing ever more frustrated and angry, shouts, with palpable sarcasm, "Look at *him*—look at *your* king!" In other words, "What does it say about *you*, you as a people, that *this* man, in *this* condition, is *your* king?"

Exactly. Look at him—look at your king. What does it say about *us*, us as a people, that *this* man, in *this* condition, is *our* king.

Because he is, of course. Now I know, I know: we're not accustomed to imagining Jesus as king in this way. When we envision Jesus as king, we tend to picture him . . . well, as he's depicted up there in the *Te Deum* window, where he sits on his throne, with a rainbow behind him, in his heavenly exaltation. We don't think of him tottering next to Pontius Pilate, in his earthly humiliation. But, even if we're not used to it, that's the first image I want to put before you on this Christ the King Sunday.

Here's the second: it's from Mark Twain's novel, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. The title of the novel pretty much says it all: Hank Morgan, an engineer living in late 19th-century Connecticut, somehow (don't ask how) travels 1300 years back in time to King Arthur's Court in early

medieval England. It is the comedy of incongruity—the down-to-earth, practical, get-er-done, scientific, Yankee pragmatism of Hank contrasted with the high-flown, chivalric, honor-bound, medieval, English romanticism of Arthurian legend. The contrast gives Twain opportunity to exhibit the inhumanity and folly of both historical eras, as different as they might otherwise be.

But there's this one scene where King Arthur and Hank go out into the country, disguised as peasants, to discover how the poor really live. Arthur is shocked and moved by what he sees: the country is ravaged by poverty, starvation, disease, and exploitation—all brought about by the cruelty and indifference of both the church and the nobles.

The pair come upon a peasant hut so desolate and in such disrepair that it seems uninhabitable. But then they hear a woman's voice crying from inside, "Water!" While Hank runs to fetch some, the King enters and lets the light in.

When Hank returns, he sees just how desperate the situation is: the woman is lying there, dying . . . of smallpox! Hank has already survived the disease, so he's immune, but not the king. Hank tells the king: "We have to leave— now—otherwise, you may soon die as she does!—leave now!!!"

The King, however, will hear none of it. He will do the right and honorable thing: he will aid and comfort her. He listens to her story, and then attends to her dying wish. Her daughter—in the loft above,—oh! that they could be together, that she could see her, touch her, hold her, hear her voice one last time. Once again, Hank's urgent warnings are to no avail. The King climbs the crude wooden ladder, and disappears into the loft. A moment later, Hank hears a sound:

It was the king descending. I could see that he was bearing something in one arm, and assisting himself with the other. He came forward into the light; upon his breast lay a slender girl of fifteen. She was but half conscious; she was dying of small pox.

Seeing this, Hank cannot help but compare *this* Arthur, the disguised Arthur of the hut, with the *other* Arthur, the King Arthur he saw in the lists of Camelot, with the flags waving and trumpets sounding, the crowds cheering, bedecked in knightly armor, competing in the jousting tournaments of the day. Hank says this:

Here [in this hut I saw] heroism at its last and loftiest possibility, its utmost summit; this was challenging death in the open field unarmed, with all the odds against the challenger, no reward set upon the contest, and no admiring world in silks and cloth of gold to gaze and applaud; and yet the king's bearing was as serenely brave as it had always been in those cheaper contests where knight meets knight in equal fight and clothed in protecting steel. He was great now; sublimely great: a king in commoner's garb bearing death in his arms that a peasant mother might look her last upon her child and be comforted.

And then as the girl dies in her mother's arms, Hank adds this:

I saw tears well from the king's eyes, and trickle down his face.

Look at him—look at your king: weeping.

The trick—no, it is more than a trick—it is the essence of faith . . . the essence of faith is to see both and both together—both the lowliness and the majesty, both the humiliation and the exaltation, both the compassion and the power, both the servant and the Lord, both the peasant and the king—to see them both at the same time, in the the same person, in the person of our king. But it's not easy: In this fallen world, when we see goodness suffer, we are apt to conclude that goodness is weakness. But goodness is not weakness; it may suffer, but it is not weakness.

If like me, you've ever held the hand and looked into the dying eyes of the one whose goodness defined your life, gave you your life, the one loved you best and did his or her very best for you, if like me, you've looked into those eyes, and seen not fear of death, not the concern for self, but only love for you and concern for your life, then you know what I mean: goodness may suffer, even suffer death, but it is not weakness.

If we have eyes to see, the eyes of faith, we can see that. Goodness not only has the strength to endure death, but also to conquer it—on earth, for us. It's *in* the lowliness, the humiliation, and the compassion that we see the majesty, the exaltation, and the power. It's *in* the servant and the peasant that we see the Lord and the King. There, together, is the goodness and the power—the wonder and the glory—of his love.

He is the king of glory, the lord of lords, the king of kings. All other earthly royalty—whether actual kings and queens or only their celebrity equivalents (and really is there any difference anymore?)—are at best distant approximations, at worst, perverse pretenders to the throne. The founders of this nation were right to banish royalty from our political system. There is only one true king: the one before whom not just kings, but angels fall.

And we are his people: the people of God, the body of Christ. The ones who live here and now under the rule of this king. This king Jesus is the one who sets the standard, who makes the rules, who, in his very person, defines the realm—for us. We are to look to him to see what's what and what it's really all about. So how do we do this?

And all he said was this: "This is my commandment: that you love one another as I have loved you."

And so as the church, as those who live under the kingship of Jesus Christ here and now, We must be a friend to the friendless, a home to the homeless, an advocate for those who have no advocate, and a hope for those who have no hope. Because when we were friendless, homeless, with no advocate and without hope, he became such for us. Such was, and is, his heavenly, kingly, and earthly love.

Look at him: Here is our king: the king descending.

Amen.