

The Goal of History and of Our Lives

Revelation 1:4b-8

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When you walk into a gothic cathedral you are facing east, and the first thing you see is the cross. Your focus is the fact that Jesus suffered and died for us. But as you turn to leave the church and face west, what you see is an image of Jesus on his throne. It is often in a large rose window over the exit. The Christ there looks different from Christ on the cross. He sits in power and glory. He is the one the Byzantines called “Christos Pantocrator,” Ruler of All. When we come into church we need to be reminded of the love of God made known to us on the cross, but when it is time to face the world we need to be reminded that Christ is reigning, that he is in charge. The turning point of history, and the thing that turns our hearts, is the cross; but the end of the story and the goal of history is Jesus ruling as the King of Kings.

In our worship today we have been thinking about the end of the story. You may not be familiar with the observance of Christ the King Sunday since it is not as common in Baptist churches and often gets swallowed up by Thanksgiving. It is the Sunday at the very end of the Christian year, just before a new year begins on the first Sunday of Advent. It seems natural as a way to conclude the year, to focus on the end of history and the triumph of God. But it is a modern innovation, first established by Pope Pius XI in 1925 as a way to battle secularization and the loss of faith that had occurred in the early decades of the last century. By 1930 the celebration of Christ the King was being adopted by Protestants as a way of asserting the authority of Christ against rising Fascist and Communist governments in Europe. As it had been from the beginning, the confession “Christ is Lord” was understood to be subversive. Naming Christ as the Ruler of the world meant that there is a limit to the power of human governments. It meant that our loyalty to Jesus is deeper than our loyalty to the state.

Our reading from the first chapter of Revelation reminds us that Jesus was understood from the beginning not only as the one who died for us and rose again but also as “the ruler of the kings of the earth.” The risen Christ has “made us to be a kingdom” in which we serve God rather than Caesar or any earthly power. He is coming to reign, and when he comes those who deny his authority will wail. The vision in chapter 18 says that his name is “King of Kings and Lord of Lords.”

Earthly rulers often claim more and more power for themselves. We have seen that this past week in the actions of President Morsi of Egypt. The previews of the new film *Lincoln* show him reminding fellow politicians that he is the President of the United States, “clothed with immense power.” And yet Lincoln reveals in his speeches that he understood the Civil War as a judgment of the Almighty upon the nation, with a power far exceeding that of the President.

An old *Wizard of Id* comic strip shows the king, that pint-sized tyrant, opening his mail. “This is to notify you that you have been chosen to be presiding king at the kings’ conference this year.” The little guy starts jumping up and down, shouting “I’m the king of kings! I’m the king of kings!” In the next frame a bolt of lightning strikes him. In the last frame a char-broiled king hears a voice booming from a dark cloud: “In your dreams, buster!”

[www.gocomics.com/wizardofid/2004/08/01].

Why would it matter to modern people in a democratic society that early Christians saw Jesus as a King? Americans really don’t go in for kings. That’s why we had a revolution. The reason the Christian vision matters is that we still worry about who’s in charge. We still wonder

how this story is going to turn out. The culture at large and the daily news conspire to make us think that nobody's in charge and we are about to run over a cliff—in more ways than one. But the Christian message, most pointedly in the book of Revelation but all through the New Testament, is that Jesus the Messiah is in fact in charge. He was in the beginning as Creator, he is now reigning from a throne in heaven, and he is coming again as judge and king to restore the world to its right and intended order. I love the story told by a Christian mother from California who was tired of struggling with her strong-willed 3-year-old son Thomas. She looked him in the eye and asked a question she thought would surely bring him in line: "Thomas, who's in charge here?" Not missing a beat, the toddler, who'd been in Sunday School all his life, answered, "Jesus is."

What Christ the King Sunday asks us to remember is not only that Jesus is in charge in a heavenly realm but that human history is moving toward a climax when Christ will reign on the earth, when the peace and justice and healing we pray for will be reality. In most indigenous cultures the religion says that history is cyclical—that everything moves in a big circle and comes back round to where it started. That's true from the most primitive to the classical. In modern times skeptics have asserted that history is random, with no order or purpose at all. But the gift of the Jews to the world was to say that history has a direction, that there is a God who acts in history and moves—however slowly—to bring about his own reign and purposes. Christians adopted this idea from the beginning, starting from Jesus' own teaching of the kingdom of God. Sometimes this idea has been too simplistic or optimistic, as if progress is inevitable. Perhaps Toynbee was right in saying that history is not so much a line as a spiral, but the direction ultimately is in the direction of God's purpose. The 19th century abolitionist preacher Theodore Parker said—in words quoted by Martin Luther King—"The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

What the book of Revelation gives us is a glimpse of "the end of the story." The end is the victory of God, the victory of the one who loved us and gave himself for us. The end is peace, and a new earth, and no more crying. It is everything the prophets dreamed of, everything for which we have hoped, if we have hoped in God. One minister tells the story of playing pick-up basketball during his seminary days in a school gym. Whenever he was able to go to the gym at night he'd see the school janitor, an older African-American man, sitting patiently reading his Bible, waiting to close up the gym. One night the seminary student went over to see what the janitor was reading. He was reading the book of Revelation. The seminary student asked him, "Can you understand that? I'm in seminary and I don't understand it!" The janitor answered, "Sure I understand it. What it means is: God wins!"

The end of the story is that God wins. Not that Christians win and beat up all the other people—but that God's love and justice triumph over the forces of hatred and oppression, both human and supernatural. What we see in the final frame is that the one sitting on the throne is the same one who hung on the cross. What we see is that what wins is not the way of empire and army but the way of the Lamb, the way of suffering love. The Lamb who was killed is the one who reigns. The one who loved us without limit is the one in charge.

Sometimes life is scary, and it helps to know the end of the story. Becca tells me that she couldn't watch *The Wizard of Oz* on TV when she was young because she was so scared of the flying monkeys. Did any of you feel the same way? It must be common, because I came across a discussion by a group of seminary professors about how many times they had to see the movie through to the end before they could bear to stay in the room during the scary parts. Only seeing the ending multiple times enabled them to be able to tolerate the frightening scenes on the way to

that ending [<http://worshipingwithchildren.blogspot.com/2012/11/year-b-proper-29-reign-of-christ-or.html>]. If we thought that history was completely open-ended—if we thought that flying monkeys and the wicked witch might really rule the planet in the end—we would be filled with anxiety. But what has been revealed to us, what the resurrection demonstrates and the spread of the gospel illustrates, is that in the end Jesus Christ will reign, so we can live in confident hope.

Who is this Jesus according to Revelation 1? He is given three titles. First, he is the faithful witness. That's not the first description we would come up with, but it's important for the Christians in western Turkey near the end of the first century who were facing persecution. Jesus was a witness to the truth, as he said to Pilate his inquisitor in John's gospel, at the same time that he admitted to being a king. And Jesus was faithful. That not only means that he had faith in God his Father but that he didn't give up, he didn't run away from suffering, he never turned aside from his mission.

The second title he is given is "firstborn from the dead." Not only did Jesus die, not only was he raised from the dead, but he was the first of many brothers and sisters who will be "born" after they die through resurrection. Early Christians did not understand Jesus' resurrection as a one-time unrepeatable event, unique in history (as I myself have described it in Easter sermons). For them the key thing was that Jesus' victory over death was the beginning of a new age, the messianic age of the kingdom, in which the promise would come true that God would raise those who are right with him to eternal life. If Jesus had been raised, but we were all left dead in our graves, it would have been no big deal. The point of Jesus being raised was that he was the firstborn of many—that we too will be raised to new life.

The third title he is given is "ruler of the kings of the earth." Now the book has gotten subversive. This is the kind of thing the Chinese would block from Google. Jesus Christ is now and forever a higher power than any state power on earth. He rules over Caesar, over Herod, over the very people who put him to death. He rules over every government in the world today. You can't say this without getting into trouble.

The thing that got early Christians into so much trouble was their refusal to say "Caesar is Lord." It was a simple thing, like pledging allegiance to the flag. But the Christians would not do it, because they had made a commitment to Christ as Lord. Jesus was their real king, and their responsibility to Rome was relative and conditional, not absolute. A historian (Robert Louis Wilken) wrote a book in 1984 called *The Christians as Romans Saw Them*. At first they were invisible but gradually people came to see them as an anti-social movement on the fringes of society. Tacitus called them "haters of mankind." They scorned Roman traditions. They didn't go to the games because they were violent. They refused military service. A book written in the third century by a lawyer named Minicius Felix complained that Christians "do not understand their civic duty" [www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20121119JJ.shtml].

This is why praying the Lord's prayer is a subversive act. "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." May your rule—which is already complete in the heavenly realm—be realized on earth. Your rule, not Caesar's or Obama's or Romney's or Netanyahu's or Morsi's. Our agenda is the agenda of the kingdom, not the agenda of a political party or an economic system. What we want is for Jesus to reign and for the world to be governed by the one who gave the Sermon on the Mount. What we want is for love to win, and forgiveness, and justice, and peace, and for outcasts to be given a place at the table and for the lame to walk and the blind to see, and for the prisoners to be set free. Your kingdom come.

Nowadays when someone prays the Aramaic prayer *Maranatha*, or in English "Come, Lord Jesus," we automatically think of a nut-case who reads *Left Behind* novels and has a

bumper sticker saying “In case of rapture this car will be unoccupied.” But that’s not what the prayer is about. It is a prayer for Jesus to come and reign. It is a prayer for him to come and take over. Jesus is coming to reign, not to rescue. This idea that Jesus is going to return the first time and “rapture” all the believers out of this world is a way of reading the Bible that was invented in the 19th century. The natural way to read the Bible is that Jesus is going to come back to take over as Messiah. When he comes back surrounded by clouds—using Old Testament imagery—those who love him will go up to meet him and welcome him, much as the people of Jerusalem went out of the city to meet Jesus when he came riding into town on Palm Sunday. “Come, Lord Jesus” means “come and reign.” Now, no doubt this has been watered down by the church through the centuries in order to get along with the other kings they had to serve, but if we recover New Testament faith we recover a hope that was subversive at root.

Who is this Jesus who reigns? In the doxology found in verses 5 and 6 of Revelation 1, the three titles for Jesus are followed up with three things he did. First, he loves us—in the present tense. Second, he freed us from our sins by his blood. So far, this sounds pretty much like the conventional Christian message today. But the third thing gets subversive again: “he made us to be a kingdom.” When he saved us by the cross, Jesus made us the people of God who are not ultimately citizens of any earthly kingdom but of the kingdom of God. We used to be worried about electing a Catholic president who might answer to the pope; a few people worried this year about electing a Mormon who would answer to the Temple in Salt Lake City. But what they ought to be worried about is electing a Christian whose ultimate loyalty is not to national security but to Jesus.

We watched the classic movie *A Man for All Seasons* this week, the story of Thomas More, the lawyer and philosopher who refused to take an oath to support Henry VIII’s divorce and remarriage. Everyone around him, including his family and friends, told him to compromise and just say the words in order to save his life. But Thomas More refused to violate his conscience and his loyalty to the church in order to serve his country’s political interests—or even to save his own life.

Most of us try to live in two kingdoms, trying to get the best of both worlds. We are like the lady I read about, Cecille Bechard, whose house straddles the line between Quebec and Maine. The house was there before the boundary was finally settled in 1842, so Cecille sleeps in Canada but goes to her refrigerator in the United States. She is a Canadian citizen, but she spends half her day in the U.S. and goes back and forth a dozen times a day [Andrew Malcolm, *The Canadians*, 1991].

Is that what you are trying to do? To live in the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of our God and of his Christ? Knowing the end of the story, do you think that is wise? Someday every knee will bend before him and every tongue will declare that Jesus Christ is Lord. That is the end of the story. Me, I want to be on the winning side.