

<Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 46:1-11; Luke 23:33-43>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

"Rags! New rags for old! I take your tired rags! Rags!" (*Ragman*, Wangerin Jr, 1984)

A story is told of a man observing a ragman go about his day, walking the streets of the city with his call, "new rags for old! I take your tired rags!" While it's a fictional, allegorical story, it remains poignant to our faith. Watching and following along, the ragman is seen going to those who are in need - hurt, injured, addicted - and as he takes an old rag from them he offers them a new one, but something more happens, as well. With each rag exchanged, so too is the ailment or malady. This ragman takes not only the old rags of the ones he encounters, but he takes, as well, their illness, their injury, their addiction, leaving each one with a new reality of wholeness, health, vitality.

"Rags! New rags for old! I take your tired rags!"

Eventually, this ragman - now bleeding, sick, drunk - comes upon a homeless man who has died. And yet, this does not stop him or even slow him. Taking the old, worn blanket he was wrapped in, replacing it with a new one, the Ragman himself takes on death, and leaves life for the one who previously was dead. And in this, with the close of the story, we see Christ evident.

"Rags! New rags for old!"

When you've been in ministry long enough, you begin to ask the same kinds of questions throughout the liturgical year. I find that is never more true than at this time of year as we recognize and celebrate Christ the King Sunday. What does it even mean to think in terms of following a king to someone of the 21st century in a country which has never known such rulership?

Each year, approaching this Sunday, I must first address my own presuppositions when I envision a king - someone robed in rich, ornate cloaks and clothing; a heavy, highly-bejeweled crown and a scepter; an ornate throne. Much of my concept of a king comes from the history of England and Europe, and reminds me of stories of the crown jewels and their worth. For me, at least, and perhaps for you, as well, the concept of a king or queen is defined and wrapped up in economic wealth and privilege, supported both by history and by popular stories.

Even in the context of Scripture we must address this initial perspective, given the presence and role of a king among the people of God. While Israel initially began as a people, a country led by judges - individuals raised up for specific time and purpose - and guided by prophets - individuals called upon to proclaim the word of God for guidance and correction - the people eventually determined that they wanted to be led by a king. Looking at the nations around them, seeing how they operated, they turned to

God and said, 'we want what they have. We want to be like them, with a king to rule us and determine our foreign relations.' And though it grieved God, God relented and allowed them what they wished for, and raised up kings for them.

And if we remember our Biblical history, we remember that that was a rocky history. Time and time again, the king of Israel would start off strong but would eventually go astray: Saul became jealous and was driven by anger and insecurity; David lusted after another's wife and then had him killed so he could marry her; Solomon married a foreign queen and then adopted her country's pagan practices and viewpoints. Time after time the king did not set an example of right living, right ruling, or right behavior as a delegate of God.

All of this is to say: if we are going to look at and celebrate this Sunday as "Christ the King Sunday," then we must acknowledge where our primary understanding of kingship comes from, and how it is lived out. And much of that is wrapped up in fallible and imperfect individuals in history who were given great power, and who ultimately did not live up to hopes and expectations.

And it is in understanding this that we are able to then move on to hearing, truly hearing, what God is proclaiming and calling upon by bringing a new understanding of 'king' to our faithful attention.

Jeremiah knows that the people of God will need a new understanding. Writing to the exiles of Jerusalem while they are still held in Babylon, Jeremiah seeks to assure them of God's continued presence, but also to help them understand where they strayed - leading them toward exile - and how God will do a new thing once they are returned. It will indeed be a new understanding, because Jeremiah proclaims to them a new kind of king. This will not be a king as they have had, or as they have seen ruling in other countries. Rather, this king will reign and "deal wisely and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land." But to underscore just how different this will be from what has previously been experienced, God frames this new king, this "righteous branch of David," in the terms of a shepherd.

Whereas kings were symbols of wealth and power through might, a shepherd is a symbol of servitude and discomfort, of sleeping outside and being dirty. Shepherding is an inglorious, dirty profession. And yet, it is the way through which God means to truly be a king to the people God loves.

Not as of kings of old. Not with glory and opulence and power. As a shepherd, in the field, among the sheep. Among the people. Among those who are being cared for and guided. To build up and to heal, to support and to lead in righteousness, to make things whole and new and right once more.

"Rags! New rags for old!"

We see this dynamic taken further, as we look at Luke's gospel, and the indirect proclamation of what it now means to be a king of God's own design and making. Jesus, as our new king, is the one who offers his life and submits to humiliation, led to a cross to be unjustly condemned as a false criminal. His crown is not one of jewels and gold but of thorns and ridicule. Why? Because something new, something greater, is coming.

If you're familiar with The Lord of the Rings stories, you know that Aragorn has many names - Strider, Longshanks, Isildur's Heir...but there is yet another name by which he becomes known: The King of Broken Things. We might think that this is dismissive term, and is meant to undermine his authority and role. Aragorn is the wielder of a broken sword, the leader of a broken fellowship, the last of a broken lineage. In any other sense, he would be dismissed as incapable.

But Tolkien had another understanding, and this may be one of the reasons why his works continue to speak to us all these years later. As King of Broken Things, Aragorn is, in fact, a healer. In Tolkien's own words, "the hands of a king are the hands of a healer." Aragorn's kingship and rule comes to be known by his acts and ability to heal, to bring together, and to restore what was once cast aside. Drawing from his own understanding of faith Tolkien knew the truth of this, and expressed a leader who heals more than destroys, who upholds more than tearing down.

Lewis, likewise, wrote the character of Aslan - a lion, the king of the beasts - to be one who brings about life and renewal through suffering and sacrifice. Again, Lewis was influenced by his faith to offer a kingly figure who reigns in all the ways which are counter to the common and cultural understandings.

And the same is true for us, today, as we look to Christ as our King. Not as one who rules through power and dominion, through wealth and political savvy. Rather, Christ reigns through his willingness to be our shepherd, the Shepherd above all others, who leads and rules by being among the people, sharing in their plight, and offering healing and wholeness. It is no wonder that we might struggle to understand Christ the King Sunday, because Christ is anything but the kind of king we're used to seeing throughout history. Christ, as King, brings healing. Christ, as King, bring life.

"Rags! New rags for old! I take your tired rags! Rags!"

We come again to the edge of the Advent season, and as we look ahead toward what will come with it, we remember that we prepare to receive a King. Not one who will rule as we might think, but One who will reign in such a way as to bring healing and wholeness to the world, to the people, to all who are in need. One who will bring life and abundance. One who will truly shepherd, and in so doing, will lead us to the Kingdom that is worth gaining. Let us offer our old, tired rags, and receive that which will lead us toward Life. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*