

Reign of Christ

Sermon 11.20.16

Scripture: Colossians 1:11-20

Luke 23:33-43

The people wanted a king. Long ago, back when they were just becoming a people at all, they wanted a king. They'd just received the Law and were figuring out how to administer it. They had just settled in a promised and promising land—this, which they'd won after a lot of conflict, warfare. They'd been led by Moses and then by priests. They'd been governed by judges and then by Samuel, one of the earliest prophets according to Scripture. But, when Samuel's sons were appointed judges so to take the mantle of leadership into the next generation, it was clear the sons weren't up to the task and maybe the position itself had become obsolete.

The people wanted a king. They clamored for a king.

And who can blame them? The world was complicated, perhaps more complicated than they'd realized. And it was only more so now that they were carving out a place in it for themselves. When they were slaves, things were simple—miserable but simple. No one asked them what they should do. No one expected them to know anything about governance or statecraft or whatever it might have been called then.

And, as it turns out, there was a lot to know. With Egypt in the south, Babylon to the east, Syria to the north, and the Hittites still further to the north, they were surrounded by nations that had imperial aims.

Now, though, *right now*: each of those powers was distracted by its own internal strife. So, now was the moment for Israel-Judah to get its act together, to become a United Kingdom—which means they needed a king. Yes, now was the moment for them to become a nation among nations, perhaps even an empire among empires.

So they told Samuel, insisted to Samuel: "...appoint for us...a king to govern us, like other nations." They didn't want to be exceptional anymore; they wanted to be like other nations. They didn't want God to be their king and they didn't want some abstract Law to be their only guide; they didn't want this confounding system of judges and law courts to discern and decide their way together as a people. They wanted a man for that role, a strong man, someone behind whom they could just fall in line.

Samuel, as it happens, wasn't in favor of this, assuming as he did that God wouldn't be in favor of this. But, when Samuel had prayed about it, when he had come so close to God and God had come so close to him, he realized that God wouldn't stand in the people's way. Instead, God responded like this: "Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them... Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall also solemnly warn them of the ways of kings."

So Samuel did. He told them, "This is what a king is good for. He will take your sons and make them either soldiers for his war-making or slaves for his well-being. He will take your daughters and make them either concubines in his harem or slaves in his household. He will take your property for his court and your livestock for his stable; he'll tax you to fill his treasury. Perhaps worst of all, he'll become king instead of the Lord your king, and on the day when you cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, the Lord won't answer you."

I'm sorry to say the people accepted these terms. So, Saul, then David, then Solomon would be king—each anointed by God; and it would make for a good century or so. The Temple would be built. The Ark of the Covenant, now with the conquering Philistines, would come back home. Jerusalem would become an enviable city. Other kings would follow and they would make for a good enough three centuries. This United Kingdom would indeed become a nation among nations, negotiating with foreign powers, waging war when that didn't work. And, yes, things would then eventually fall apart. Yes, first Israel, then Judah, at last Jerusalem, would all fall. But that's the way of things.

Today is Christ the King Sunday. The last Sunday of the church year, today is the day when we contemplate the eternity of Christ's reign as king. Someone whose reign isn't about concubines and war craft, someone whose reign isn't compulsory or exploitive, is instead compelling and freeing, this is a king whose throne is the cross of self-giving love.

That's why we look back on this Sunday when we're to look to the future, when we're to look to the end, the final end. That's why we look back to an historical event when we're meant to look to the eschaton in which all is peace and thanks and praise, in which all promise and possibility have been fulfilled and all that seems lost or wasteful or in rebellion has been redeemed and reconciled.

During other years—during Year A, during Year B—we hear readings about this end, this future time that dwells beyond time. But during Year C, we always look back, we look to the cross—and for this reason, that in the cross of Christ we glimpse the eschaton, we glimpse his realm. We glimpse what sort of king he'll be, what sort of king he *is*—serving instead of being served, ministering instead of being ministered to. If earthly kings rule in such a way that distance themselves from the vulnerability and suffering of everyday life, then Christ the King rules in such a way that puts himself in the center of that vulnerability and suffering, so his subjects might enjoy grace and peace, freedom and fulfillment.

The break from monarchy as a predominant form of government was, I'm beginning to suspect, a radical rupture in the history of human civilization. Democracy, of course—that is, the self-rule of the people, of the *polis*—is a classic idea and practice, coming to us from ancient Greece. The idea that the people could formulate a politics of consent and consensus has long been with us at least in theory. But the practice lay dormant for centuries, all the while kings reigned; and then, in the West, kings reigned with the assent of the church.

The Modern Era, though, would configure things differently. With the help of such thinkers as John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and the additional spurring of the scientific revolution, the social revolutions of the 18th century changed so much of what had come before. Unseating monarchs (and sometimes beheading monarchs) and then putting in their place houses of parliament and representatives so the people could rule themselves: things would never be the same. “The world turned upside down,” as the lyrics of the musical *Hamilton* put it. “The world turned upside down.”

And this is all good, right? This is *good*. We as Americans know this to be true—that this historical rupture from monarchic rule to self-rule was and is for the good. We know it so absolutely that we don't even see it for the article of faith that it is.

But, I wonder.

On this Christ the King Sunday, I wonder, *is* this good?

Is it good and right that we the people self-rule? Can we actually handle the responsibility of this? Can we actually bear this burden, heavy, heavy as it is? After all, we're doing so in a different milieu these days than when it first dawned on us to give it a try. We're doing so these days in an utterly disenchanted world—and I think humans need enchantment.

What's more, I think an understanding of the world as enchanted is a truer understanding of the world as it is—haunted by the Holy Spirit, haunted by God who insists, *insists*.

When self-rule first presented as a solution in the 17th century, and when it was given a try in the 18th century, there was yet a notion that the transcendent realm was real and had something to say to us. There was a shared faith in a moral order that is eternal and absolute, is just and humane. What's more, this transcendent moral order was available for reception amidst this immanent realm by way of revelation. It was ever revealed to us, and we might ever open ourselves up to it, for perceiving and discerning of. Finally, it was to be our guide, our bellwether as to what is good, as to how to order the *polis* with an aim for the common good.

To repeat, this transcendent order, eternal and good, was ever revealed to us and was something we could receive and perceive. Actually, this was felt to be the true source of wisdom—wisdom being something that wasn't generated among people or within the individual human mind, but something that was given so to be discerned.

But secularism proved a powerful force—this being the move to giving primacy to consideration of the life within in an imminent frame, the world of materiality or provability. In other words, the world became less and less charged with meaning; whatever meaning a thing or occurrence might have was increasingly thought to have such things because some human mind granted it such things. Things had meaning because, and only because, someone said so.

To repeat, it was in *our* charging a thing with meaning that it had meaning. It is in my ordaining something with significance that it has significance. No longer might we perceive meaning or discern significance. Now we grant such things, for only we are. We are all there is. There is no other realm but this one.

I have a friend who is a political theorist, and a Libertarian. He said once, in an off-the-cuff way, that religious feeling and discernment is a sort of psychosis.

This is a long way from the political theorists who, though champions of individual liberty, yet had a sense of a transcendence that binds us—to one another, to an eternal and good order, or simply binds us by conscience.

But this unbinding was also there in at the foundations. It was in the mid-17th century that Thomas Hobbes developed such fundamentals of liberal thought as the right of the

individual, the natural equality of all men, the view that all legitimate political power must be “representative” and based on the consent of the people, a liberal interpretation of law which leaves people free to do whatever the law does not explicitly forbid, and the artificial character of the political order.

And it’s this, it’s this, that I think is especially difficult these days, especially heavy for carrying around: the article of faith that swears by the *artificial character* of the political order, the article of faith that would have us believe that every human construct is just this—art and artifice, an artificial human construct. Nothing metaphysical about any of it, nothing of the transcendent order breaking into the imminent order, the realm in which we live and move and have our being is but self-made, self-constructed; and it is all there is.

Disenchantment is the word people are using these days. Dutch political philosopher, Marin Terpstra, defines it thus: “By disenchantment I mean the impact on the structure of society [by] those individuals who are totally devoted to *this* world, those who are leading a life based on a pragmatic and realistic approach to things...Disenchanted humankind thinks and acts on the basis of empirical observation, rational calculation, utilitarian planning, and freedom of choice; and the result is a society based on functional operations.”

It’s a result whose hold on us is ever the greater. According to him, and to Charles Taylor who wrote in his book, *A Secular Age*, and to James K.A. Smith in his digest of Taylor’s work, *How (Not) to Be Secular*; according to these and I imagine many other theorists and theologians, from the middle of the 20th century onward, we’ve seen a hastening of this disenchantment such that, what was just sixty or so years ago unimaginable (that there is no God,? no abiding metaphysics? no transcendent order that forms and informs the immanent order? Unimaginable!) is now the only the thing imaginable—that of course there is no transcendent truth revealed in time, no metaphysics whose perfect order gives shape to the physical order in which we live, no eternal God whose providence creates meaning and provides significance and reveals a way to us that is good.

Of course not—for all is social construct. All politics, all society, all order and framing, all law and justice, all cult and culture, all governance and liturgy and coming together in any and all forms—all is social construct. Even those social comings-together whose origins seem mysterious, whose original cause seems given or revealed or received as if on high: even those come down to the people suffering some collecting blinding. They just didn’t know better than

to examine their own motives. They just didn't have the moral courage to analyze their own internal processes and to recognize that this is all there is: each person's will to power, and nothing else; each individual's self-determining, and nothing else.

This is what it means to live in a disenchanted world—such that I can hardly blame us if we seek to re-enchant it. Through some act of will, through some act of denial or forced ignorance or mythologizing or magical thinking, were we to impel a re-enchantment of the world: for this I could hardly blame us.

In fact, I think that's what's happening. I think that's what's happened.

I'll admit I am deeply confused by the election last week. I am deeply and painfully mystified as to why we together, as an electorate, chose as we did. I'll admit I've spent significance psychic energy trying to understand something that keeps contradicting itself out of clear understanding.

I simply do not know why we chose as president someone who has no experience in elected office, no evident capacity or interest in building consensus, and no policy proposals that a majority of experts in each field agree would have the proclaimed desired affects. Military leaders expressed a deep distrust of him as commander in chief. National security experts warned of him as reckless. Foreign policy professionals gravely cautioned that he'd be destabilizing of geo-politics the world over for being casual about such bedrock agreements as the North American Treaty Organization and brutal as regards the fact of American power in the world. Most basically, he flouts the social values we as a society profess to hold, have long professed to hold even when we haven't managed to live by them—values such as honesty, personal responsibility, intellectual consistency, and simple kindness.

One thing that stays with me though—the confidence many people, many ordinary people of the populace, have in him to do what in fact cannot be done.

A short video produced by the news outlet *The Guardian* featured the town with the highest density of Trump supporters, one of the poorest towns of impoverished West Virginia. The people there in that once coal-mining town nearly all believed Donald Trump would bring back their jobs—jobs without which there is nothing at all. Nothing. No money to spend and nowhere to spend it, nothing to do and nowhere to do it. Nowhere to go and no way to get there. Nothing.

But their jobs have been lost mostly to automation, and more recently to the extraction of natural gas further north and west, which is a cheaper, safer, and cleaner source of energy. In other words, these jobs are not coming back. Plus, many of the people who long for their return are now too old or too unwell to do them. No matter: they voted for Donald Trump because they believe he can do what simply cannot be done.

This video has stayed with me because, aside from the compassion it engenders, it points to a larger possibility that people's vote for and confidence in Donald Trump is based on magical thinking. That he'll bring back our jobs—though to do so would necessitate a reversal global trends that cannot be reversed; that he'll get rid of outsiders and keep them out—though to do so would be either unconstitutional (as in a registry for Muslims), physically impossible (as with an impenetrable wall across 2,000 miles of desert), economically devastating (as with a mass deportation of undocumented laborers), or personally painful (these are people many documented Americans know and care about and rely on and would terribly miss); that he will make America great again—though he says neither what this would actually look like, nor what this said greatness is (when it was, when it ceased to be), nor how he would get it done.

It's magical thinking. We want the world not to be as complicated as it is—so we elect someone who has no apparent notion of these terrible and terrifying complications. We want life to be safer and more secure than it is—so we elect someone who talks big and has managed to keep himself at least very safe, out of war, out of harm's way, out of court, out of any serious circumstance. Most of all, we want it to be the case that we're not really all there is, that it doesn't really come down to us mere humans—our ingenuity, our tireless efforts, our intelligence and attentiveness, our informed sense of reason and attempts at making it all work, our management of all variables and tinkering with the edges of details while slowly, slowly, it all just falls apart anyway.

It's enervating.

It's incapacitating.

All our efforts are already spent.

All our ideas are thoroughly exhausted.

We don't want reality, we want a reality show, because, as it turns out, disenchantment is simply more than we can take—and for it being so much less than we need, for it being so impoverished when compared to what fullness of promise and possibility we *need*.

Is America a good idea, I asked a friend who's a writer and whose husband is another political theorist, a recently naturalized American though originally from Zimbabwe. "What does your husband think," I asked her. "Is America a good idea?"

We finished our sandwiches in disbelieving silence.

I think among those who voted for Donald Trump there are people who voted for a king—a king of the old fashioned sort, a king whose power is evidently unassailable, a king who rules by "divine right" or at least by some sort of confounding wizardry.

I think these people are expressive of a wider-spread despair—that we're tired of doing it all ourselves, that the problems we face outsize the solutions we have at the ready and that have worked in the past, for a time, for a time.

I think Donald Trump is but one elected leader amidst a vast system of elected leaders. He is, yes, one who could be a radical departure from what we've seen before, one who might thoughtlessly, or gleefully, energize social groups that are destructive and hateful to the larger social order. On the other hand, he might be just as constrained as any president was designed to be constrained, frustrated by the checks and balances, held accountable by activists and groups like the ACLU. He is but one elected leader in a history of elected leaders.

But I also think Donald Trump is a signal that something is being lost—if slowly, yet irretrievably, lost.

I'm not alone in thinking so. People on podcasts as divergent as one put out by *Foreign Policy* magazine and another put out by *Mars Hill Christian Audio* wonder if the internal contradictions at the foundations of the modern West—liberal, secular democratic ideals of republics built on human reason in the service of self-rule—are at last, after four hundred years, unable to hold.

This sounds dire, I realize, but I'm not afraid. The end of the Modern Era means the beginning of something else—and that something else is something we could participate in designing. And it might be better. And it might be providential of God's insistent good will. And it might lead us in a still more excellent way toward a yet more perfect union whose king is self-giving love that among the subjects there might be powerful reconciling peace.

The enchantments of old are lost to us, gone forever. But transcendence yet reigns. God yet speaks. The Holy Ghost yet haunts this lonely, tired world. And we of the church are charged ever anew to abide in faith, work in hope, and trust in the power of love to fulfill its promise in this world and the next.

Thanks be to God.