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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
11/22/2015, Christ the King
John 18:33-37

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

³⁷Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” (John 18:37, RSV)

There stands Jesus before the Roman governor. Jesus has been interrogated through the night, first by the high priest Annas and then by the high priest Caiaphas. When Annas – the first examiner - had questioned Jesus concerning his doctrine, Jesus had suffered a blow on the face from one of the officers, who judged that Jesus had not answered the high priest respectfully enough. The subsequent examination by Caiaphas seems to have lasted until dawn – until the rooster crowed, causing grief in Peter as he realized that he had in fact denied his Lord three times.

Jesus had known for a long time that his end was coming. He had spoken of it back in John 10, back when he said that he lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:17-18). So Jesus had anticipated his end. Now it is drawing near. He stands before Pilate, alone, forsaken by his disciples, probably exhausted, perhaps with a face swollen because of the blow of that officer. He stands there before the Roman authority who asks him, “So you are a king?”

If you and I had been there, I hope we would have answered up for Jesus: “Yes, he is a king. He is my King!” And if Pilate had then asked, “Then is he a lord?” I hope we would have been bold to answer, “Yes, he is a lord. He is my Lord! Indeed, he is King of kings and Lord of lords, and I am completely his!”

We are Americans. We are people of this world’s longest, continuing democracy. We are not really used to kings and lords. This morning, on Christ the King Sunday, let us think some about what it means to have Jesus Christ as our King and our Lord.

AN OLD STORY

I begin with a story from my past. Some of you might have heard me tell this little story before. It happened back when I was a young man, a year or two before going to seminary. I was living down south at the time, in Atlanta, Georgia. A stranger came walking into our little church, Messiah Lutheran Church in a suburb of Atlanta called Decatur. The stranger came marching up the center aisle during the sermon, interrupted the sermon, and asked our Pastor whether he could give a testimony to Christ. Pastor George Fischer said, Yes, he could give his testimony. So, the stranger did.

And it was alright, for a while. He talked about being true to Jesus, not just in word, but also in all of life. We could say Amen to that. But the more he talked,

the more he seemed to get wound up. The tone of his talk began to change. As I recall it, he began to speak of us as hypocrites and to warn us of hellfire. Well, that was probably good for us to hear too, but we didn't much like hearing it from this stranger. Eventually the ushers came forward, took him by the elbows and escorted him out of the church.

Naturally, we were all uneasy after this little event. You come to church on a Sunday morning, doing the best you can. And this stranger begins blasting you. On the other hand, we were polite Lutherans, and we did not like having to escort someone away.

It turns out that this stranger had recently been released from some kind of a facility – I do not recall whether it was a mental health institution or a prison or what. In any case, he had recently been released and he had made himself a vow to visit all the churches in town and give his testimony. Later we found out that a Catholic priest had punched him in the nose. And at another church, he was thrown down the steps so hard he broke his arm. Then we felt a little better that at least we had tried to be courteous.

Anyway, at the time when the ushers escorted the man out of our church, we were troubled in spirit. And I will always remember that dear, old Pastor Fischer climbed back into his pulpit and before picking up his sermon again, he simply said, "The Holy Spirit is not a God of confusion, but of peace." And he encouraged us to try to collect our thoughts and return to the sermon and the liturgy for the day.

I like my pastor's saying about our God not being a "God of confusion." That's from 1 Corinthians 14, where St. Paul writes this:

For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace... (1
Corinthians 14:33, KJV)

This is a nice thing to think about on Christ the King Sunday. We have a King who is not an author of confusion, because, in the end, he simply is not confused. Jesus does not think contrary thoughts. He does not believe incompatible things. He believes what he believes, and we know a good deal about that from the Bible, and our job is try to adjust our own beliefs and convictions to match up with his, our King.

OUR DAILY FAILURES

When we come to church on Sunday mornings, I bet that each of us has reason to fall on our knees at the Confession and to admit that we have sinned this past week "in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone." And if ever a piece of theology seemed right to us *by personal experience*, it rings true that "we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves." Indeed, I suspect that for many of us, if someone searched the whole compass of our moral beliefs and our personal behavior, they would find that we functionally

say to Jesus, “Lord, I just cannot go with you there. Maybe someday I will, but for now, I just can’t go with you in this matter of, say, obeying my parents or sexual morality or whatever.”

Consider a poor man, for example, who is near despair over his ability to feed his family. He might say, “God, forgive me, but I am going to have to steal, else my family will starve. I know the Seventh Commandment forbids me to steal, but I feel that I must in this case.”

Or consider the young person who says, “In this day and age, I am never going to be able to gain a wife or a husband unless I depart from the old ways of the church. I am going to have to take matters into my own hand.”

Perhaps each of us does this sort of thing more than we would like to admit. Maybe, come Judgment Day, all any of us is going to be able to do is to lay our case before Christ the King and ask for his mercy.

The Kyrie. It is probably my favorite prayer. I walk the sidewalks of our town often praying for mercy, again and again: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner. Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me a sinner.”

Someday we are going to have to give an account of ourselves before the King of kings and Lord of lords. We are going to have to try to explain to Jesus someday why we disagreed with him and try to persuade him that maybe we were okay in disagreeing with him.

So, I ask us this question: Is it rational for us to imagine that we can wrestle with the Lord, as Jacob did at Jabbok, and walk away from the encounter with the awe-struck testimony: I have survived!

Jacob named the place Peniel, ‘Because I have seen God face to face,’ he said, ‘and have survived.’ (Genesis 32:31, NJB; Genesis 32:30, RSV)

The man walks with a limp after wrestling with God, but he has survived!

Again, is it reasonable for us to think that someday, when we kneel before Christ the King, we will be able to convince him that we were in the right in doing what it felt *we had to do* even if it seemed to conflict with the traditional teaching of the church?

I get some hope about this when I think of the magnificent defiance of Moses when the LORD was ready to destroy the people of Israel:

³¹And Moses returned unto the LORD, and said, Oh, this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them gods of gold. ³²Yet now, if thou wilt / forgive their sin; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written. (Exodus 32:31-32, KJV)

The only intercession that tops that one is that of Jesus, for he was not only willing to give his life, but he did!

There are other examples of people arguing with the Lord and getting away with it. I am thinking of Abraham's intercession for Sodom, Job's long protest of his innocence and his eventual submission to the Lord, the Samaritan woman at the well, and Saint Peter's painful reconciliation scene with the resurrected Jesus. In each case, the patriarch or saint dared to speak up for his or she really believed, and lived to tell the story.

But then, I do note that in each of these cases, the patriarch or saint was inclined in a godly direction, as if reminding the Lord of what the Lord already believed.

I think you can sense that I have nothing definitive to say about whether we should disobey Christ the King and hope to get away with it. Chiefly what I am trying to do is to lift up for us that Jesus is King and not we ourselves. We are not used to kings and we might imagine that we can vote or lobby or organize or somehow convince Jesus of something. I am not so sure we can do that. I think it would be better for us to adjust our own ways and our convictions to match up better with those of Christ the King.

So, that is the first part of this sermon: Jesus Christ is king and not we ourselves.

IT IS GOOD THAT JESUS IS KING

The other theme on my heart is that it is good that Jesus Christ is King. It is good news for us in a tough world. Jesus Christ is King, and therefore all our enemies had better watch out! We have a good and strong King to defend us.

For Martin Luther, the heart of the Gospel is that Jesus Christ "is my Lord." That is how Luther puts it in his explanation of the Second Article of the Creed – the article about Jesus:

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord. (Martin Luther, Small Catechism, The Creed, Article 2, Kolb/Wengert)

Luther then explains what it means that Jesus "is my Lord." Luther refers both to the duty of a lord to protect his subjects, and to the duty of the subjects to obey their Lord. So Luther speaks of our Lord Jesus as one who saves us:

He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned human being.

Prisoners of war and kidnapped victims can be redeemed. If all goes well, the family pays the ransom and the lost person is restored. But Luther points out that Jesus does not redeem us lost and condemned people with money:

He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned human being. He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death.

Jesus, then, is a lord who cares about his subjects to the utmost degree. If it means laying down his own life in order to save his people, then he does it. He gives not silver or gold, but his own precious life for us.

Our world is changing. Many people in our world are happy and fairly carefree, and I hope you are among them. I hope that you are enjoying a season of peace in your life. Still, it seems to me that we live in a tough world. The violence in Paris, in Syria, in Nigeria, and the threat of violence everywhere is wearing people down. The most fundamental laws of humanity are being cast aside by terrorists. Despair haunts people. The human heart, as Jeremiah put it,

...is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? (Jeremiah 17:9, KJV)

The human heart is tempted to say, “If there is no God, then all things are possible,” including great wickedness. And what is to become of a world in which it becomes the settled stance, both in children and in great intellectuals, that there is no God? What are we in for?

Against all such cynicism and despair, Christ the King Sunday rejoices to think that in the end, Jesus is in charge. He really is. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. He is the King of all Creation. Doubting him does not change a thing. He is still Christ the King. Rejecting his ways cannot change a thing. He is still Christ the King. Criminals can do nothing that Jesus cannot undo. All the criminal gains is terrible, terrible regret in the end.

Indeed, if things should seem so bad to you that it puts you in mind of the chaotic end of the ages spoken of by Jesus in Matthew 24, please remember how that passage ends, with its call to faithful endurance:

¹⁰Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. ¹¹And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹²And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³But the one who endures to the end will be saved. (Matthew 24:10, NRSV)

Let us endure to the end, knowing that we belong to Christ the King.

So, Jesus stands there before Pilate, who asks him, “Are you a king?” Indeed he is! He is the one King in this world who willingly dies for everyone one in sight, even for Pilate, even for the soldiers who pound the nails into his flesh. He

is the one king who loves his people with a profound love — a love that pours itself out to save others. He is the one King in the world who will never give up till peace and justice prevail on earth. And he is the one King worth living for. He is *our* true and deserving King, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.