

Church of the Crossroads
Reign of Christ
November 25, 2007
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WHAT IS GOD LIKE?

Jeremiah 26:1–6
Psalm 46
Colossians 1:11–20
Luke 23:32–41

We have just heard an anthem that celebrates the presence of Christ throughout all the seasons of our lives. It is an appropriate anthem for this day in the church year, a day that used to be known as Christ the King Sunday, but which the United Church of Christ, in its commitment to inclusive language, now calls the “Reign of Christ.”

It is a Sunday, I must say, that I have tended to avoid, not quite knowing how to deal with it. However, since this is my last Reign of Christ Sunday as your pastor, I thought I should try to “give it a try,” as the expression goes.

Each of the scripture readings for today points to an interpretation of who Jesus is. In Jeremiah, the Messiah that is anticipated is a kingly, powerful Messiah and many have seen Jesus in this light. In Colossians, Jesus the Christ is the head of the whole creation. In Luke, we discover a Jesus who suffers on a cross. These three interpretations have served to feed the imaginations of Christians throughout the centuries as they have tried to describe who Jesus is. However, as I spent time with the readings, I began to see that there is a question lurking underneath the readings that has to do not with Jesus, but with God. The question is: what is God like? Notice that the question is not *who* God is, but what God is *like*. If we were to approach the question, “Who is God,” we could get tied up in an endless philosophical and theological debate. Let’s assume that most of us who are gathered here today are ready to acknowledge in some way the existence of God, whoever God may be, or at least a spiritual realm beyond our knowing. Let us also assume that many who are here wonder more about God’s character than about God’s existence. In other words, we wonder what God is like? Is God a distant being? Is God all-powerful? A mighty God? Is God an all-knowing

God? A God who controls the affairs of earth? A God of judgment? A God of mercy? A compassionate God?

Now, if we want to know what God is like, we can consider Jesus. Colossians says that he is the “image of the invisible God.” That makes sense to me, because the word “God” is too vague without some point of reference. The word *God* can be traced back to the Hebrew word *Jahweh*, which simply means “I am who I am.” That doesn’t help us very much if we want to know what God is like. We would do best to have a point of reference, and that point of reference for us can be Jesus.

It’s the same with other universal words like “God.” Take the word *human*. If I want to know something about the concept of a *human*, I will necessarily think of particular human beings I know, and together these particular human beings will comprise my understanding of *human*. In the same way, our understanding of Jesus in his particularity can reveal to us what God is like. Or so we believe.

But, my friends, there is a problem, and let’s deal with it “head on.” The problem is that in the Bible we discover contrasting views of who Jesus is and what Jesus is really like. And these contrasting views can add to our confusion as to what God is like.

The conflicting views of who Jesus is and what Jesus is like can be summarized this way: Is Jesus a King who is a mighty and all powerful savior, or is Jesus a King who suffers and is powerless to rescue people from their suffering?

Certainly, there are Biblical passages that point to Jesus as a powerful King. We heard one this morning from the Book of Jeremiah.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

—Jer 23:5

Here, Messiahship is shaped in a kingly fashion. Jews in first century Palestine expected such a King / Messiah. They anticipated the arrival of a Messiah who would come as a mighty king to overthrow their Roman

oppressors. Such a mighty Messiah king would point to a mighty God, an all-powerful God, a rescuing God, a God in control.

This is the image of Jesus that was taken up by the Christendom of the fourth century. Christendom, in order to be pre-eminent in the world found such a kingly Christ suitable. Jesus, the powerful king, suited a Christendom and a Roman empire bent upon power. Such a kingly Jesus also suited the theology of glory that Christendom inspired. And we still find that image of Jesus in the church today.

This kingly Messiah is the image that is represented by the leaders who scoffed at Jesus on the cross. Surely, this could not be the promised Messiah. “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!” (Lk 23:35b) The soldiers join in the jeering and the taunting, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself.” (Lk 23:37) If Jesus fulfills the promise of a Messiah King, powerful and mighty, surely he can save himself. Ironically, it shows up in the inscription on the cross, “This is the King of the Jews.”

The first of the criminals hung with Jesus perceives that he is in need of such a powerful king if he is to be saved from his fate. He derides Jesus and says, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” He wants Jesus to be a mighty king. He wants to be rescued. But Jesus is not such a king. Jesus does not turn out to be an all-powerful, mighty King who is able to save people from their suffering. He turns out to be powerless to do anything of the kind.

Jesus is not a mighty king. He is a servant Messiah, a suffering Messiah, powerless to save himself and others. It is the second criminal who recognizes and acknowledges Jesus as a different kind of messiah, a messiah who is powerless to take away suffering. The second criminal rebukes the first: “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?” (Lk 23:40) He acknowledges that Jesus will die just as he will, that if Jesus is any kind of king, his kingdom is not of this world. “Remember me, Jesus, when you come into your kingdom,” he pleads. (Lk 23:42) But this kingdom is not the restoration of the Davidic kingdom that is promised in the Hebrew scriptures. This is a kingdom not of this world.

Jesus turns out to be a King who suffers. Such a king does not suit a Christendom bent upon power or a United States who behaves as an empire.

Such a suffering king does not suit a theology of glory, but rather a theology of the cross.

May I say that as I contemplate my own life in its totality and also the life of the world, the suffering Messiah is the Christ I need. (Remember that Christ is just the Greek word for Messiah) It is not necessarily the Christ I want. At times I desire a distant kingly Christ and a distant all-powerful, kingly God above and beyond all suffering. Then, I can go through the religious motions without being disturbed or troubled. I do know better, though. As I contemplate the life of Jesus, especially Jesus on the cross, I cannot help but realize that God comes to me and meets me in all of my particularity. Therefore, I cannot easily avoid the presence of God in my life.

Perhaps this is true for you as well. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said that “only a suffering God can help.” Only a suffering God can identify with us in our human suffering. And William Sloane Coffin said that we want God to be strong so that we can be weak, but God chooses to become weak so that we can be strong.

The Jesus who suffers is a human Jesus, a Jesus who chooses weakness rather than power, a Jesus who calls us to be strong. This is a Jesus with whom I can identify as I contemplate my own life, my hidden despair, and the despairing world that surrounds me. This is the Christ, the Messiah we need. Contemplating Jesus the Christ who suffers, we come to know what God is like. God is not that all powerful distant kingly God so revered in the theology of glory. Rather, God is a God who gives up power and kingliness and chooses in love to be present to us in our suffering, not to save us from that suffering, but to offer us hope and life in its midst. This is what God is like. All this is made known to us through Christ, the King who suffers. This is the Christ we profess this day. May he reign in our hearts forever.