

November 22, 2020
The Last Sunday after Pentecost—Christ the King—Year A
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Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24
Psalm 100
Ephesians 1:15-23
Matthew 25:31-46

The last few weeks, we've been hearing from what's often called the "Little Apocalypse" of the Gospel of Matthew. Today's reading is its culmination; following today's reading is the beginning of the Passion narrative. Notice this: Matthew purposely casts upon Jesus' death the light of his promised return.

Remember, the term *apocalypse* comes from the Greek *apokálypsis*, which means "revelation." Apocalyptic writings generally do two things: one, they unveil truths that had been previously hidden; and two, they describe events that will occur at the end times.

It seems to likely me that the author of any particular apocalypse probably wrote at a time that to them felt apocalyptic. Picture a moment of historic upheaval, viewed through the eyes of a person there experiencing it. In such a situation, the person would seek both *understanding* and *remediation*. Of course, the events of that time didn't bring the world writ large to a literal end. But the person in the thick of things might certainly have experienced the end of the world *as they knew it*. By some mysterious means, our apocalyptic witness is convinced that God is not simply present but actively involved. Mystics write from the rubble, describing how that end came to be and speculating how God will repair it. Such speculation can come only from a hope that continues to glimmer.

We mark today, the last Sunday before Advent begins, as Christ the King or Reign of Christ Sunday. Some of us carry ambivalence about that imagery. We Episcopalians could probably ignore this observance, because it's relatively new, as church times goes, and its status on the Episcopal calendar is fuzzy. We could ignore it, but in my experience tussling with it invariably turns out to be helpful.

As you join me in this year's tussling, let's begin with two points. First, quoting from a Lutheran author, is this: "Pope Pius XI established Christ the King Sunday in 1925 to counter what he regarded as the destructive forces of the modern world: secularism in the west and the rise of communism in Russia and fascism in Italy and Spain, harbingers of the Nazism soon to seize Germany. Pope Pius intended to oppose the rule of Christ to the totalitarian claims of these ideologies."¹ Second is this: if we must use the language of kingship it's a kingship like no other. As that same Lutheran author describes it, instead what we have is "Jesus reigning from the cross."²

It seems to me that Christ the King Sunday invites us to consider the destructive forces of our own era, while using an even more expansive imagination in our search for understanding and remediation. Let me just say it: we are living in an apocalyptic moment. Truths are being unveiled; the world as we knew it is passing away. We are standing in the rubble. We are standing in the rubble, and God is with us. If we listen, we might even hear God speaking. Maybe, together, we find hope enough to speculate as to what God is bringing next.

Imagine if we wrote an apocalypse. It wouldn't have to include a king and kingdom. It's true that all four canonical gospel writers use the language "*kingdom* of God." But they were products of their era; monarchy was the only type of government they knew, and *kingdom* was the only language they had. The thing is, human language for God and things Godly will always be inadequate. So let's allow ourselves to be products of our own era and to toy with some other ideas. Here's one idea: how about a "nation of God" governed by Christ the President in partnership with a bicameral legislature of heavenly beings. Imaging the priorities and policies of this cosmic government helps us think about the priorities and policies of our own.

This line of thought reminded me of a book that came out ahead of the 2008 presidential election, *Jesus for President: Politics for Ordinary Radicals*, by Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw. I never did read the book, but I was quite interested in a part of it they were promoting at the time, what they called the "Jesus for President Litany of Resistance." To give you an idea of what's there, its many lines include these:

For our scorched and blackened earth, forgive us.

...

For our Caesars and Herods, forgive us.

...

From the ugliness of racism, deliver us.

...

From the violence of apathy, deliver us.

From the ghettos of poverty, deliver us.

From the ghettos of wealth, deliver us.

...

To the slaughtered lamb, we pledge allegiance.³

Returning to Matthew, let me say again: Matthew isn't tossing out Judaism. Instead, he carefully portrays Jesus as being in line with that tradition and fulfilling its ultimate promise. With that in mind, we might turn to the Hebrew Scripture reading for today, a lovely passage from Ezekiel. It's lovely, and it's tough. Ezekiel has its particular historical setting of destruction and exile, yet it continues to resonate. The portion we heard didn't include the opening lines of this passage, but let me read them now:

The word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.⁴

And then there's the line that we did hear that I just can't get out of my head: "I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice."⁵

Combine all that with Matthew—just as you did or did not do it to the least of these members of my family—well, I think we have a pretty good idea what a President Jesus would be about. Everything might be okay if that's who's in charge.

Part of our apocalypse we don't have to imagine, because we have concrete evidence: this week our nation hit the 250,000 mark of deaths due to COVID-19, and the curve hasn't yet flattened. This morning I looked at the map of case count density by U.S. county, and the mapmakers seem to be running out of dark enough shades of red.⁶ This seems to be the apocalypse through which we must live. Truths *are* being unveiled; the world as we knew it *is* ending. But let's be clear: it's not *the* end. As the old world dies, a new one is being reborn. We write our apocalypse in order to imagine what that change might bring, to help us imagine the pathway by which God will take us there.

Thanksgiving is next week. This year most of us will be staying home for a low-key event. We may have to do some deep digging to find gratitude. I never thought I'd say this, but maybe a little apocalypse would actually help.

As I said earlier regarding today's reading, what follows next in Matthew is the passion. But that's not where we're going. Today is the last Sunday of the church year. Next Sunday, Advent begins, and we switch over to Mark as our primary gospel source for the subsequent year.

Actually, it may very well be that this year Advent will feel more like Lent, as if we're all trudging toward the cross. But as I noted earlier, Matthew recounts Jesus' death in light of his promised return. Maybe the light of today's little apocalypse is good accompaniment for us this Advent. It might even be a source of hope and gratitude, if we remember who is in charge. *God* is removing the veils. *God* is making all things new.

Notes

¹ Frank C. Senn, “The Not-So Ancient Origins of Christ the King Sunday,” Lutheran Forum, fall 2007, available online at <https://www.lutheranforum.com/blog/2017/11/11/the-not-so-ancient-origins-of-christ-the-king-sunday> (accessed November 22, 2020).

² Ibid.

³ Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw, with Jim Loney and Brian Walsh, “Jesus for President Litany of Resistance.” It once was available on Claiborne and Haw’s *Jesus for President* website, but that website is no longer operating. As of this writing, it was posted at the website *Empire Remixed*, available at <http://empireremixed.com/resources/litany-of-resistance/> (accessed November 22, 2020).

⁴ Ezekiel 34:1-4 NRSV.

⁵ Ezekiel 34:16 NRSV.

⁶ “Covid in the U.S.: Latest Map and Case Count,” *The New York Times*, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/coronavirus-us-cases.html> (accessed November 22, 2020).