

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

November 20, 2022

Our King

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The concept of kingship is an odd one if you stop to think about it. At the most basic level a king is a male ruler of an area whose only qualification to be the ruler is winning the birth lottery. I suppose one could argue that history illustrates that a king must be savvy or brutal enough to hang on to their throne throughout their life. But really...the concept seems like a pretty poor one when examined. And history seems to bear that judgement out.

Throughout human history there have been corrupt kings, ineffective kings, oppressive kings, sadistic kings, and all sorts of other negative adjectives. How many really "good" kings can we think of from history? Even the kings generally lauded cannot be called "good" in my mind. Charlemagne is considered by many to have been a "good" emperor. But he was good in that he was an effective military leader and created a mighty empire in Europe. Ask the people he conquered if they thought him "good." Or ask the pagans he converted to Christianity at the point of a sword if he was "good."

God even warns the people of Israel that there are no good kings when they beg for one. We read in 1 Samuel 8, "So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, 'These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots, and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves and the best of your cattle and donkeys and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And on that day you will cry

out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you on that day.”¹ Kings, according to God, are good for only two things: war and taxes.

God knows how human kings operate. But the people of Israel didn't listen, and it goes exactly as the Lord forewarns. Even the two greatest kings of Israel, David and Solomon, could not really be called “good” kings. David was a military genius and inspiring leader, but he also ordered the murder of Uriah and committed adultery with Bathsheba. Solomon's wisdom was renown and his diplomacy saw Israel's borders at the largest they will ever get to be, but he worshipped idols and taxed the people severely to build the Temple (and his huge palace). And after these two, the quality of the kings will crater quickly.

Modern kings are not much better. For the most part the ones that remain are largely ceremonial, yet how much wealth and other resources do those ceremonial monarchies suck away from the nation's people? Then there are the few remaining absolute monarchies: Saudi Arabia, Brunei, Oman, Eswatini, the UAE, Vatican City, and a handful of smaller Emirates. How many of those could be described as “good”? I cannot call any of them “good,” even Vatican City and the Papacy, seeing as it sits on roughly \$30 billion in wealth that otherwise could be serving the Gospel by helping people. Frankly, helping people is just not what kings do, as the Lord warned.

God even tries to get the kings to be “good.” The Hebrew Bible is full of prophets warning various kings that they are not being faithful to God or to their call to execute justice and protect the orphan and the widow.² By my count we hear that a king of either Israel or Judah “did what was evil in the sight of the Lord” directed at no less than twenty-one kings.³ Do they listen? No. And there are consequences to their obstinacy. Israel falls first into internal strife and then it is conquered and ruled by foreigner empires for generations. The sins of kings lead to terrible consequences for the people too!

¹ 1 Samuel 8:10-18 (all scripture citations from the NRSVUE)

² Isaiah 1:23; Jeremiah 5:28, 22:3, Zechariah 7:10, Malachi 3:5

³ Solomon (1 Kings 11:6), Nadab (1 Kings 15:25-26), Baasha (1 Kings 15:33-34), Omri (1 Kings 16:25), Ahaziah (1 Kings 22:51-52), Jehoram (2 Kings 3:1-2), another Ahaziah (2 Kings 8:25-26), Jehoahaz (2 Kings 13:1-2), Jehoash (2 Kings 13:10-11), Jeroboam (2 Kings 14:23-24), Zechariah (2 Kings 15:8-9), Menahem (2 Kings 15:117-18), Pekahiah (2 Kings 15:23-24), Pekah (2 Kings 15:27-28), Hoshea (2 Kings 17:1-2), Manasseh (2 Kings 21:1-2), Amon (2 Kings 21:19-20), Jehoahaz (2 Kings 23:31-32), Jehoiakim (2 Kings 23:36-37), Jehoiachin (2 Kings 24:8-9), Zedekiah (2 Kings 24:18-19)

But despite mountains of evidence that kings are generally a bad idea, we humans still seem to desire them! Though sometimes we try to check the power of our leaders, that can often fail. The old adage about power corrupting has been proven by presidents, prime ministers, premiers, chancellors, and every other title for a head of state. And it's not just heads of state. We are all too willing to set other people up on pedestals and treat them as kings. We cede altogether too much power and influence to celebrities, athletes, musicians, CEOs, the wealthy, and politicians.

Into this very broken human reality comes Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, the Messiah who never claimed the title king for himself. Sure, others called him that to mock him. It was even the charge laid against him to justify crucifying him. But the only time he was ever asked if he was a king he demurred, simply responding that "You say so"⁴ when asked by Pilate. Instead, he claims (in John's Gospel at least) to be the source of "truth"⁵ rather than a king.

Can you imagine if humanity set truth on a pedestal? Can you imagine what our world might be like if truth were our leader? And not just any truth, but rather the truth of God. The truth of compassion, grace, and love. The truth of acceptance, inclusion, and community. The truth of who we were made to be, the truth of how this world was made to be. But no, when offered that choice we bow to other kings and lift truth up on a cross as a warning to those who would threaten the world's systems with it. We sacrifice truth to maintain corrupt and broken systems. We'd clearly rather serve other kings.

As Christians, followers of the Way, we must grapple with this reality. Who do we serve? Who do we worship? Who is our king? Is our king Jesus Christ? Is our king God's very truth? Or is our king, the figure we serve and lift up, someone or something else? Is it a politician? A preacher? A celebrity? A CEO? Is it a worldly truth? Is an ideology our king? Is capitalism our king? Is a whitewashed history our king? Is being a part of the in-group our king?

These questions bring to mind the challenge Joshua laid before the people of Israel upon entering the Promised Land, "choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living, but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."⁶ On this festival Sunday, when we

⁴ Mark 15:2, Matthew 27:11, Luke 23:3, John 18:37b

⁵ John 18:37b

⁶ Joshua 24:15

remember the odd kingship of Jesus, whose throne was a cross and whose crown was thorns, we must ask ourselves if we truly want Christ to be our king. Dare we lift up the truth of God as what we will serve above all else? Dare we try to live out the teachings of Christ even when that puts us in opposition to worldly kings and powers? Is Christ truly our king? And if so, what does that mean for who we are and how we live our lives? Amen.