

Covenant Presbyterian Church  
“Before All Things”      Colossians 1:11-20  
Jeff Fox-Kline      November 24, 2019

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully <sup>12</sup> giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled<sup>[e]</sup> you<sup>[f]</sup> to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. <sup>13</sup> He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, <sup>14</sup> in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.<sup>[g]</sup>

<sup>15</sup> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; <sup>16</sup> for in<sup>[h]</sup> him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup> He himself is before all things, and in<sup>[i]</sup> him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup> He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. <sup>19</sup> For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, <sup>20</sup> and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Happy New Years eve! What are your new Years’ resolutions? I’m going to resolve to make sure I stay on top of my advent devotional. What about you all? Some of you may be thinking that a good New Year’s resolution would be for me to buy a calendar. But, today is actually the last Sunday in the church year. According to the church calendar, the new year begins in Advent, which is appropriate because as Christians, we hold that Jesus comes first. So today is New Years Eve for the church. Don’t worry, I won’t keep you here until midnight.

But what would the day be without a little celebration? That's right – it's Christ the King Sunday! Christ the King Sunday is a relatively new celebration in the church, started in 1925 by Pope Pius XI, to be at the last Sunday of October, but in 1969 Pope Paul VI moved it to the end of the year to make it even more notable. Here's a fun fact that I learned this week: The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Sweden, up until 1983 referred to this Sunday as the "Sunday of Doom", which doesn't sound like a particularly fun church service, but would be an awesome horror film.

So what is Christ the King Sunday? It's a chance to declare together that Jesus Christ is king and lord of all. It is to crown Jesus with the majesty that is due to him whom we declare as the firstborn of creation. What it means to crown Jesus as king is to celebrate him, to share his gospel through loving our neighbors, and casting aside idols that interfere with our praise and honor of Christ. The Heidelberg Catechism, an influential document in Christian history and part of the constitution of the Presbyterian Church opens with this memorable quote: "What is your only comfort in life and in death? A. That I am not my own, but belong— body and soul, in life and in death— to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ". Christ the King Sunday is us declaring that we belong wholly to Jesus Christ. Christ the King Sunday, especially coming right before Advent, also highlights the essential tension of the Christian faith, that we have a king who was born in a stable, who was born into squalor and died humiliated. The coronation of the king with a crown not made of gold, but of thorns. Not of martial triumph, but of peace. Not of a throne found in any one place, but one that sits in heaven. Christ the King Sunday is so many things, all of them point to the great Kingdom of God that, according to Colossians, "we share in the inheritance of the saints in the light".

I've been thinking a great deal about the inheritance of the saints. I've been thinking about what it is we inherit and how we inherit it. I've also been thinking

about Lord of the Rings. These two things are not mutually exclusive, and I hope you'll join me in a trip down Lord of the Rings mythology! In Lord of the Rings, there is a kingdom called Gondor. Gondor was the shining example of a kingdom, the greatest kingdom of men, ruled by a long lineage of kings, glorious in power. This line of kings ended when the king Earnur died in combat, extinguishing one royal line and leaving the other in hiding. Also in Gondor there were stewards who served the kings as their chief counselors. When the line of the kings died out the stewards took over the rule of Gondor. Note, however, that the stewards were not Gondor's kings. Rather, they watched over the throne until the hidden line of kings revealed itself. For generations they watched over the throne, capably caring for the kingdom as best they could. That included a period of decline, when the realm sat in relative peace, but not in a flourishing state. This was for generations until the time of the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy. The last ruling steward was named Denethor. Denethor was corrupted by the hopelessness of the forces of evil that were set against Gondor, until he gave up on the hope for the king, hope for deliverance, and ultimately he died by his own hand. This all happened mere weeks before the return of the king, who came and reclaimed his throne.

The king disappeared, and what was left was just some regular folks, tasked with overseeing the whole kingdom. Sound familiar? Jesus the king came to earth, the very image of the invisible God, and showed us the way to live as members of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus came, the head of the body the church, showing us what it is to look like God, to live like God. Jesus came and inaugurated a kingdom not of this world for us all to dwell in. But he died, resurrected, and ascended, leaving his followers on their own to discern how to best continue building his kingdom in his absence. When we talk about Christ as King, we need to recognize that we are his body, the church. We are stewards of his kingdom in

the absence of his physical presence. What does that mean for us? We need to see the world with kingdom eyes and recognize that any area of the world that is suffering from injustice, violence, oppression are places in which our stewardship is needed.

One example of this stewardship came earlier this month in Boise Idaho. An article came out in the Presbyterian Outlook about medical debt for uninsured people. Here's a quote from the article about Marci Glass, the pastor at Southminster Presbyterian Church in Boise: "She knows a young man from the church she serves who has struggled with substance abuse, but then turned things around — he found a job and was building a better life. Then he contracted pneumonia and ended up in the intensive care unit. Because he couldn't go to work, he lost his job and his health insurance — and now his medical bills are huge". So what her congregation did was to raise \$15,000 to donate to the organization "RIP Medical Debt". That \$15,000 was then used, through the convoluted maneuverings of the medical debt system, to forgive 1.5 million dollars of debt! In the Kingdom of God, we are no longer slaves to debt and poverty. The kingdom of God looks like helping people find their ways out of poverty, and those stewards at Southminster Presbyterian church honored the kingdom through their actions.

We are stewards of the kingdom when we treat our neighbors with kindness. We are stewards of the kingdom when we welcome strangers into our midst. We are stewards of the kingdom when we show God's love to those whom we know and care about. The king left us to be stewards of the kingdom. And sometimes we can be like Denethor, despairing of the evils in the world, overwhelmed by the enormity of the task before us. To be stewards of the kingdom is to accept a huge responsibility that places an incalculable burden on us. However, as the wizard Gandalf said, "it is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what

is in us for the succor of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till". As stewards of God's kingdom, we can only do what we can do, and trust in the stewardship of those before, alongside, and after us to make ready the return of the king.

But there's further good news to help us in our stewardship! Look at how the passage from Colossians begins: May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father". As stewards of the kingdom, we are not abandoned by the king. In fact, we have been sent the Holy Spirit to animate us. Everything we do to build the kingdom of God, we do suffused by the life giving Spirit of God. Every month we invite the Christ to dwell amongst us in the sacrament of communion. Christ's very body, the church, is doing the work of Christ, the king, to build the kingdom. We have Christ with us, we have the Holy Spirit, and we have each other, all of us together working to build a kingdom that we know is not of the world. Colossians says "He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything". In every moment of kindness, every act of justice, every loving gesture, we are declaring not only that we are stewards of the king who has first place in everything, but are commissioned by and collaborating with that king to bring about God's peaceable reign.

Our Gondor does not look like gleaming towers and monuments to our own greatness. Our Gondor, our kingdom, looks like the exaltation of the poor. It looks like comforting the widow and the brokenhearted. It looks like welcoming the stranger in our midst like family. As our year ends and the new year dawns we look at the coming of a king whose birth exposes the paradox of God. A king born in a manger, a life lived on the outskirts, a crown of thorns. This is the

kingdom that we declare. This is the king whom we follow. To be stewards of this king is to live in the way that builds a kingdom that follows God's paradox. But we don't do this alone, we do this together, in collaboration with God. In Lord of the Rings, the line of the king returns to Gondor, and the next steward in line says this to the king "The last Steward of Gondor begs leave to surrender his office." But the king rebuffs the last steward by telling him "That office is not ended, and it shall be thine and thy heirs' as long as my line shall last. Do now thy office"! the king is among us, resplendent in his servanthood, and we turn to the king and ask him what he would have us do. "That office is not ended...do now thy office". Let us go, stewards of the kingdom, let us do our office, and give glory to the kingdom.