



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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Thy Kingdom Come
John 18:33-40; II Samuel 23:1-7

We have quite a fascination with royalty, don't we? Especially for a country that was birthed by declaring its independence from Empirical sovereignty and has never recognized a hierarchy of nobility or royalty, we seem to be enamored with the pomp and circumstance of all things royal.

I know that, like me, many of you have set your alarms early to watch royal weddings and then followed the chatter about dresses and fascinators and who snubbed whom and all the rest. No doubt, you listen with great interest to news about Queen Elizabeth and the rest of the House of Windsor. If you've ever been to Europe, you have probably visited castles and palaces and cathedrals to drink in not only the surrounding beauty but also whatever interesting history you could discover of kings and queens, lords and ladies, and their grand homes and lavish lifestyles.

And as if all that weren't enough, we also fill our tv screens with historical dramas about real or imagined nobles and royals. O, come on. Don't try to deny it: I've seen some of you rush home on Sunday nights in time to catch every minute of *Downton Abbey* or *Victoria*, or you've set aside entire Saturdays to binge watch *The Crown* or *The Tudors* or *Reign* on Netflix. Perhaps our lack of a royal family has made them all the more interesting to us, even as most Americans would never want a monarchy of our own. Maybe it is the extravagance on display, or perhaps the lore which sparks our imaginations, but I suspect we are also captivated by ideas of what it would be like having so much power and prestige, that much wealth and privilege.

The ancient Israelites had their own fascination with royalty. For generations, Israel was ruled by God's law, interpreted through the prophets and judges God had appointed to speak on God's behalf. But the people became increasingly dissatisfied and insecure with this arrangement, no longer trusting in God's protection promised through the covenant. The elders of the land went to the prophet Samuel and demanded that he appoint a king so that they could be like the other nations. Though God sent a sharp word of warning about the dangers and demands of putting their trust in a king instead of God, 1 Samuel 8 reports, "But the people refused to listen to

Samuel. 'No!' they said. 'We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.'"

Their first royal attempt would be a royal disaster, as King Saul would prove to be disobedient to God and ineffective as a leader. But when Samuel anoints the shepherd boy David and God promises to establish an everlasting kingdom through him, we see the rise of a deeply flawed yet effective and beloved ruler. The reigns of David and Solomon were Israel's Golden Era, with relative peace and prosperity, military success, the building of the Temple, and the establishment of the nation God had promised to the chosen people. It would seem that God's dire predictions were off base then, that is, until Solomon's successor Rehoboam would fumble the handling of long-standing tensions between the north and south, and the kingdom would split in two. In the aftermath, we find in the books of 1 & 2 Kings a succession of ineffective, sometimes evil, rulers who abandoned God's covenant, formed unholy alliances, abused their power, and eventually ushered in Israel's downfall.

Given all that we know, then, about God's displeasure with the very idea of kings to rule over God's people, we might ask why God seems not only to tolerate David's reign but also to endorse, even bless it. After all, David was far from perfect, and on the surface, he was a thoroughly fallible warrior and politician like all the rest. So, how can we make sense of God's promise to establish David's throne forever (2 Samuel 7:16) and David's being called the one "after God's own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14)?

Today's Old Testament lesson from 2 Samuel 23, recorded as the last words of David, might give us some insight: (Read 2 Samuel 23:1-7)

As King David approached the end of his days, he reflected on his relationship with God and the significance of his life. He clearly understands that God has been speaking and working through him, and he relies on God's promises for his security and power. What strikes me most about David's oracle, however, are the images he uses to describe his kingdom. He is assured of God's blessing because he has dealt justly, even tenderly, with his people. In contrast to those who wield power with a rod and spear, David's reign is compared with the sunrise on a cloudless morning. Because he has feared God and been faithful to the covenant, David's kingdom foreshadows the hope and new life offered in God's kingdom. Just as first light breaks over the horizon at dawn, ushering in the vision of a new day, David's reign is only a glimpse of the light and hope and blessing that are to come when God's promises are fulfilled through his descendants.

Though there is no indication that David has any idea what shape the fulfillment of that promise will take, we, of course, know the rest of the story, how generations later one of his descendants would return to his ancestral home because the Emperor had called for a census. And Joseph would bring with him his espoused wife who was expecting a child, a son, and they would call him Jesus, a name meaning "God saves." The child would fulfill God's promise to David to usher in a new kingdom, and he would embody the reign of God's grace made available to everyone.

Each week when we gather for worship, we pray, as part of the Lord's Prayer, the words, "thy kingdom come." Thy kingdom come? What does it mean for us to pray for God's kingdom to come? When we plead for God's kingdom to be fulfilled on earth as it is heaven, surely we don't have in mind a return to a monarchical rule like that of David or the Roman Empire of Jesus' day or even the figure-head rulers of contemporary Europe. When the Israelites pleaded for a king, they desired an earthly ruler who would protect the sovereignty of their nation and defeat their enemies. While we would deny wanting such a ruler for ourselves, sometimes when I hear our rhetoric and see the people and things in which we seem to put our trust, I have to wonder if there's not something in us looking for that kind of security as well, something in us that says we trust God even as we belie those words with our actions and attitudes.

This kind of tension is nothing new for the followers of Jesus, of course. Jesus' life and teachings had a way of confounding everyone. His redefining of ideas about rulers and kingdoms is perplexing to his first disciples and to us because it defies our categories and assumptions about power and rank and status. When Jesus stood before Pilate and talked about his kingdom, he had the governor so confused that Pilate finally threw up his hands and asked, "What is truth?"

Yes, we pray for God's kingdom to come, but when we begin to discover what the Reign of Christ really means for us and our world, we are often left as confused as Pilate. Or when we realize that the king God has sent is a vulnerable infant who would grow up to speak of loving our enemies, praying for those who persecute us, living as a servant to all, and volunteering to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of peace and justice, we may, like the ancient Israelites, shake our fists at God and demand a different kind of king, a king who will prove our superiority by advancing our causes, protecting our interests, and smiting our enemies. Perhaps we want a ruler who will wipe out the evil and suffering in the world and make things right, but it would appear that we also want one who will take our side and declare that we are right and God favors us above all others. The problem is that the others are

pleading for that kind of king, too. We are someone's enemy, too, and since God is Lord of all, where does that leave us?

What Jesus shows us, what he says as he stands before Pilate, is that his kingdom is unlike any we have ever conceived and is not of this world. Jesus knows that we need a ruler who understands that more violence will never save us from our addiction to violence, that more wealth will never cure us of our greed, and that we are likely to use any status we achieve to elevate ourselves further by keeping others down. We need a king who knows that there are no winners in the world's games of power and territory and position. We need a Savior will save us from ourselves not by playing by a different set of rules but by refusing to play our games at all.

Jesus came to show us that the kingdom God promises will never be found in any earthly domain, never in any particular nation, government, party, or leader, not even our own. Because all of them—ALL of them—no matter how mighty they are, no matter how benevolent we think they are, no matter what ideals they seek to promote; all of them are ultimately powers and principalities of this world. All of them are, in the end, human constructs subject to the whims and abuses of human greed and pride, of corruption and shortsightedness.

Now, human rulers and powers, their leaders, and the people who hold them accountable can and should be held to high standards and the ideals of protecting human dignity, liberty, and justice. They can and should seek the good of all and cooperate as responsible participants in the community of nations which share and depend upon this planet. They, and we, can and should use the power available to them for good and not for harm.

But when we put our trust in these powers to save us, when we equate them with the Kingdom of God or seek to use their power to enforce our vision of the Kingdom of God on others, we have made of them an idol and granted to them exactly the kind of authority and power Jesus stood against.

The real power of God's kingdom is not to subject or subdue others, not to coerce or manipulate to promote our own interests, not to put ourselves first at the expense of anyone and everyone else. No, the true power of God's kingdom is to love in the face of hate, to stand against the powerful in order to defend the powerless, to walk humbly with God instead of in the company of the proud, to speak with courage for whose without a voice. The real power of God's kingdom is found in standing with Jesus as he looks the powers of this world squarely in the face and refuses to bow to them because,

as followers of Jesus, our loyalty is not to their influence or wealth or might, for we have professed our allegiance to the Prince of Peace.

Today we reach the end of the liturgical year by raising our voices in praise to the Christ who reigns on high. We sing boldly, "O worship the King, all glorious above," and "O praise the mighty Lord, our God. He reigns in majesty." As we should, we recognize the power and splendor of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

But next Sunday, we begin again. We will come to the start of a new church year by preparing our hearts to welcome the humble Christ child. We will begin again by joining our voices with the heavenly host declaring "Peace on earth and goodwill to all," and by falling on our knees in wonder before a lowly manger. We do this every year because we need this every year. We need to be reminded that the Christ now seated at God's right hand in the kingdom and before whom we bow, comes to us, not in robes and chariots, not on a grand throne in an opulent palace, not wielding the threat of the sword, and not using power to claim God's favor for one group over another.

We need to be reminded that we bow in praise and gratitude before the Jesus who came to us in the coos and cries of a helpless infant, born in a stable to working-class parents from the wrong side of town under disgraceful circumstances. We need to be reminded that we fall on our knees in humility and dedication before the Jesus who welcomed those the world had rejected, loved in scandalous ways without caution or propriety, submitted to the worst that humans are capable of without seeking violence or vengeance, and who brought a message of peace and forgiveness and wholeness that has the extraordinary power to change the whole world, and maybe even change our hearts.

Our good and gracious God, who reigns in majesty yet dwells with us in the ordinariness of life, for the gifts of grace and love, for the bounty of land and sea and air, for the richness of relationships and experiences which are peace-giving and life-sustaining, for all gifts great and small, we offer to you our highest praise and deepest thanks. For bestowing such abundance into our human hands, we are more than grateful: We are humbled by your trust and confess our inadequacy to tend these treasures faithfully. We pray for your wisdom and strength to protect these gifts from misuse and neglect, and we ask for your help in preserving and extending them to all people— for generations yet to be born, for children whose names sound foreign to our ears, for people who do not look or think or believe like us but who are also a part of the wondrous human family you have created.

In this season of Thanksgiving and every day of our lives, may we be claimed again by your love and transformed by your grace, that we might respond to the needs around us with even a small measure of your unlimited generosity and compassion. Grant us tender and open hearts to respond to the challenges of our world and the needs of our neighbors, that we might awaken anew to the demands of living out our thanks-giving.

Too many of your children suffer persecution because of religious or political convictions. Grant us courage to work for their freedom, knowing that none is truly free until all of us are free. Too many around the world suffer because of hunger, disease, or violence. Give us compassionate hearts and unselfish spirits, that the needs of others might move us to respond. Too many in our own community feel the pain of loneliness or hopelessness. O Lord, so fill us with your grace and hospitality that they cannot help but overflow through our lives, that our actions and attitudes may bring healing and reconciliation. Make of us messengers of your hope and agents of your peace, with the knowledge that by your power, we can bring light and life to a dark and hurting world, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit forever. Amen.

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