

The Ruler of the Kings of Earth

The Art and Architecture of Faith, Part 11

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Psalm 98

¹O sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory. ²The LORD has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations. ³He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God. ⁴Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises.

⁵Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody. ⁶With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD. ⁷Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it. ⁸Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy ⁹at the presence of the LORD, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.

Revelation 1:4b-8

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. ⁷Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. ⁸“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

The first time I ever walked into this Sanctuary, was about three and a half years ago, when I came to interview to serve as one of your pastors. The space felt instantly familiar to me, not just because I had been living in Egypt and visiting other grand and majestic temples like Karnak and Luxor - glorious space like this in which the gods were believed to make their dwelling place. But because I grew up in a church that feels very similar to this in the east end of Pittsburgh - built just a few years after this building was built in the late 1920s.

While growing up in Pittsburgh meant that I was deeply embedded in the largest community of Presbyterians in the United States, growing up learning to worship in a space like this meant that I didn't really have a good sense of historic Presbyterian architecture until I went to seminary and learned more about how our Calvinist sensibilities are supposed to shape our life and worship.

We like to joke that John Calvin and Martin Luther would roll over in their graves if they knew that here at Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church we have encased them in the same kind of stained glass windows that they thought were idols and distractions from the true worship of God. For in a very traditional Calvinist sanctuary, everything was to be plain, and simple, bare and not distracting. The only things that were to catch our attention would be the table and the font where the sacraments were to be rightly administered and the pulpit where the word was to be rightly proclaimed. These were the marks of the true church.

But another key tenant of our Reformed Tradition is our deep belief in the sovereign majesty of the triune God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. A God who is to be worshiped and praised, honored and glorified. So sometimes as Presbyterians we build these kinds of breathtaking sanctuaries that display to the world and to ourselves the sheer enormity of our God.

It is on Sundays like Christ the King Sunday - a specific day at the very end of our liturgical year- that we hold these two essential pieces of our faith together: the Kingship of Christ as Lord of all heaven and Earth in world where so many other things too often distract us, claim our attention, our loyalty and our praise.

This particular sanctuary space has evolved over the 90 years since it was built, as has our chapel. When you look at some of the original photos of this space it is especially interesting to watch how the congregation and its leadership has continued to shape this space into a better and better venue in which we can be the community gathered for worship.

My favorite story about how this space has changed is the one I always tell anytime I am giving tours of the church to other clergy. It is about a significant change that David Watermulder made when he began his tenure as the pastor of this church in the 1962. In the original chancel up here these ridiculously large chairs that your pastors sometimes ironically refer to as thrones, used to be placed exactly in the center of the space. This is not all

that uncommon in the history of where a preacher or presider might sit during worship, likely because as the bearer and interpreter of the word and the celebrant of the sacraments, this would be a place of honor and a reminder to the congregation that these are the two things that should be our primary focus.

But David knew, and I would guess that we all know as well that as human beings we can be easily distracted in our loyalties and there needs to be a separation between the message and the messenger. And there is an important distinction between the means of grace offered through the sacraments and the one who extends them on behalf of Christ.

So before his first Sunday preaching David and another young member of the pulpit committee came in here and moved these large chairs over to the sides of the chancel, somewhat out of view, and in their place, eventually, was hung a cross, to be the primary focus of our worship together.

On Christ the King Sunday we join our voices and our sensibilities to generations of Christians who have not just given praise and central place to Christ our King, but who have also sought to witness to what it means to declare allegiance to our heavenly king in specific historical moments in time when we have been distracted in our loyalties by one thing or another.

Our passage from Revelation this morning - John's opening doxology- frames a letter written to very specific Christians in what we would now call Turkey at a specific historical moment in time as they were trying to work out their own identity and allegiances. In the period after the catastrophic war in Palestine between the Romans and Jewish freedom fighters, Christians in the region experienced increasing social and political pressures and experienced their own conflicts within the church itself.

New Testament scholar Eugene Boring points out that the church in this moment was in a transitional and vulnerable situation, trying to find its way forward in the generation between the death of its apostolic leaders and the emergence of a new self-identity and structure. "What did it mean to be Christian, to try to follow Jesus as Lord, in such a place and time?"¹

John reminds his readers that though the rulers of the world seem to be changing and shifting around them, Jesus Christ is the first and last, the king who is, who was and who is to come. Whose sovereign rule extends over and beyond any the rulers of this world. John prophesies of more transformation to come than the world has ever seen, declares confidence in a power and authority that is greater than could ever be claimed by earthly rulers and promises more dignity for God's people as citizens of Gods' kingdom than the earthly rulers will ever recognize.

¹ *Revelation*. Eugene C. Boring. John Knox Press. 1989.

Our bulletin cover this morning comes from the window right above and behind the pulpit here in the sanctuary. Te Deum tis the official name of the window taken from the name of an ancient prayer written in the Fourth Century recounting the hierarchy of all those who give praise and veneration to God through Christ: Angels to Prophets, Apostles and Martyrs, and then the Holy Church throughout the world. The window shows each of those groups who have come to praise Christ the King on his throne, and specifically depicts Johns description at the end of the book of Revelation of the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, the church, coming down out of heaven from God as a bride adorned for her husband.

It was not just in the first century or the fourth century that Christians have had to re-articulate their allegiance to Christ as King and Lord of the church and of their lives, but throughout different real historical moments when this confession of Christ as Lord and King has been especially vital.

No example is better fitting than that of the Confessing Church movement in Germany during World War II.

In 1934, 139 delegates, clergy, academics and lay people, from Lutheran, Presbyterian, and United Churches in Germany gathered together in the city of Barmen to formulate a response not just to the growing movement of National Socialism and the Nazi Party which increasingly was infringing on basic human rights and practicing active and rampant anti-Semitism, but also a response to what was referred to as the German Christian movement that was willing to claim that Adolf Hitler and his vision for a racially pure nation was God's will for the German people.

In the statement that came out of that gathering, the Confessing Church, declared that they were unable in that moment to keep silent. They went on to systematically declare their rejections of the ways that some in the German church had begun to place more authority in the government than in Christ, given more credence to the words of their political leaders than the word of God, rejecting the mere suggestion that there could be areas of our lives that were not considered under the authority of God, as though we could separate parts of ourselves and our community under different authorities, rather than entirely under the authority and Lordship of Jesus Christ.

They wrote: As the Church of pardoned sinners, it has to testify in the midst of a sinful world, with its faith as with its obedience, with its message as with its order, that it is solely Christ's property, and that it lives and wants to live solely from Christ's comfort and from his direction in the expectation of his appearance.²

² The Theological Declaration of Barmen (1934) found in the Book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church (USA)

That Theological Declaration of Barmen, as it has come to be known, is a part of our theological heritage as Presbyterians, and so valuable that it is even enshrined in our denomination's constitutional documents.

Christ the King Sunday comes here on the last Sunday of the liturgical year as a way to give us a vision of the future Kingdom of God that is yet to come, just as we begin our journey all over again to Bethlehem next Sunday remembering that moment when Christ broke into our human history in the flesh and blood.

But Revelation reminds us, Christ the King doesn't just rule our lives in some future a-historical moment. Christ the King rules our lives even today in this moment in our history -this strange in-between the already and the not yet of the Kingdom of God.

In his book *The God of Life*, Peruvian Liberation Theologian Gustavo Gutierrez wrote of this need for Christians to be active and present in the recognition of Christ's presence in our own historical moment.

He wrote: "It is often said at Christmas that Jesus is born into every family and every heart. But these births must not make us forget the primordial massive fact that Jesus was born of Mary among a people at the time that were dominated by the greatest empire of the age. If we forget that fact, the birth of Jesus becomes an abstraction, a symbol, a cipher. Apart from its historical coordinates the event loses its meaning to the eyes of Christians, the incarnation is the irruption of God into human history."

He goes on "Christian faith is a historical faith. Believers cannot go aside into a kind of dead end corner of history and watch it go by. It is in the concrete setting and circumstances of our lives that we must learn to believe. If we are to dwell in the tent the Son has pitched in our midst we must enter our own history here and now. If we do so we shall experience in our flesh the encounter with the Word who proclaims the Kingdom of life."³

This is the work of the church in this moment and time, both the larger church and our own congregation - to determine what it means to declare Christ as Lord in our local community, the nation and our world. Lest you think that I am going to tell you what it means. Not just because I don't actually think I know for sure, but because I would rather point out to you the many places where we as a community are trying to figure it out together.

In any number of gatherings of our mission committee meetings such as our Refugee group working closely with a young woman from Guinea, West Africa, seeking asylum in the United States after suffering horrific gender based violence in her home community. Our local

³ *The God of Life*. Gustavo Gutierrez. Orbis, 1991.

mission efforts to continue to prioritize the education, health and wellbeing of vulnerable children in our communities impacted by the lasting damage that trauma does to the brain and the spirit. Our international mission work to better learn and understand the ways that our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ are responding to war, conflict, human trafficking, and poverty.

Faithful members of this church who gather together each month to understand what it means to follow the commandments of God in this specific moment in our history - to be good stewards of God's Creation, to beat our swords and our guns into plowshares, to feed Christ's sheep wherever any are hungry, to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves no matter their race or religious tradition.

As a congregation we are having conversations about who Christians are being called to be in this moment in time beyond our specific work of mission- as we talk about what it means to offer hospitality to our local community, what it means to offer a generous welcome to any who enter our doors, to raise our children and our youth to be forces of good in this world, and to teach them that they are more than good enough not just in our eyes but in the eyes of God.

I have noticed this fall in our Adult Education classes each week that, especially when we have welcomed an outside presenter, that there is always a moment towards the end of the class when someone - always someone different, ask in a variety of ways this essential question - How do You - you expert - think we, as Christians, are supposed to respond to what is happening in the world today? What does it mean to declare Jesus as Lord and King in this moment in history? How do we see beyond and have hope beyond all of the distractions and anxiety that we are facing every day?

None of them have really had a definitive answer either. But that speaks to the truth that this is indeed work that we are called to do together, each bringing our own experiences, our own convictions, our own expressions of faith, our own history, our own hopes for the possibility of experiencing just a bit of Christ Kingdom in this moment and time.

And while that is often hard and sometimes tension creating work where we might disagree, and struggle together to find our common voice. We are called as a community to regularly set aside those distractions and to return to and are be renewed by the work of praise to our King. Adding our voices to those of prophets, martyrs and saints, angels and archangels who forever sing to his glory.

Looking to those who have come before us who have written and recorded the liturgy of our praise - such as we find in Psalm 98 - declaring faith in a god who breaks into history to offer salvation and restoration - O sing to the lord a new song for he has done marvelous things - all the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.

Pastor and author Eugene Peterson paraphrased this psalm for our modern ears: “Sing to God a brand-new song. He’s made a world of wonders! He rolled up his sleeves, He set things right. God made history with salvation, He showed the world what he could do.”⁴

I am guessing though that it is English writer Isaac Watts paraphrase of Psalm 98 that is likely the most familiar -a declaration of praise not just from men and women, but a resounding praise from all of creation - taken from his collection *The Psalms of David*.

Joy to the World, the Lord has come, Let Earth Receive her King: Let every heart prepare him room and heaven and nature sing.

Never intended to be a Christmas poem or Christmas Carol, but an acknowledgement that all of our ancient promises have been realized today in this moment in our history through Christ our King, the first and the last, the Alpha, and the Omega, who is and was and is to come, rulers of all the nations of the earth. Amen.

⁴ *The Message*. Eugene H. Peterson. NavPress, 1995.