

“The Child Who is King of the Jews”  
Matthew 2:1-23  
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The Rev. Christine Chakoian  
First Presbyterian Church  
Lake Forest, Illinois

“With a baby at Christmas,” scholar Fred Craddock says, “with a baby at Christmas, it’s very easy for our perspective to shrink to the size of a crib.” The gospel of Matthew doesn’t let us stay focused there for long: the visit of foreign dignitaries from the East...the threat of King Herod...the slaughter of the innocents...the flight to Egypt: all of these lift our eyes from the cradle to the global stage. All of these point our sight to Christ not just as infant, but Christ who is our King.

Christ’s Kingship is radically different than the world’s sovereignties, caricatured by Herod’s corrupt power and his devastating genocide. The King that we worship is not like the “powers and principalities” that demand obeisance. Christ is rather the promised Messiah, the righteous ruler celebrated in Psalm 72:

*Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king’s son.  
May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice...  
May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,  
give deliverance to the needy and crush the oppressor...*

Obeying this King means fulfilling his agenda. Not blithely mouthing the platitudes of purported faithfulness, but living justly. Christian writer Jim Wallis, in his marvelous God’s Politics, reminds us:

*In our own American history, religion has been lifted up for public life in two different ways...One invokes the name of God and faith in order to hold us accountable to God’s intentions – to call us to justice, compassion, humility, repentance, and reconciliation...The other way wrongly invokes God’s blessing on our activities, agendas, and purposes.*

As a positive example he cites Lincoln in his second inaugural speech:

*Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bonds-man’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.*

And, Wallis reminds us, it was Thomas Jefferson who said, “I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just” (p. 150).

While no era is easy for those who would be faithful, I suspect that there are particular times that call for a choice between the Kings we would obey. It is telling that Christ the King Sunday was established in 1925 just as the fascism of Mussolini and Hitler was beginning its evil ascent. Their destructive ends were only possible because a desperate people – still reeling from WWI and caught in the grip of the Depression – allowed them to flourish. We are always in danger when unquestioning loyalty is demanded of us.

Love the questions, Rilke said, and when raising questions is considered unpatriotic, we are in the gravest danger. Questions can be threatening – “Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?” – and the powers quake. “When did we see you hungry?” – and we are held responsible. But woe to us all if we no longer dare to ask them.

Our true worship of this King is a matter of constantly questioning our loyalties, our orientation, our commitment. It is a matter of discipleship. Ethicist James Gustafson understands this total claim on our lives when he writes:

*The Christian moral life is a life of discipleship to Christ. It is not to be determined by one's own powerful desires and interests, but to be under the obligation to scrutinize and direct them in obedience to them. It is not to be determined by one's loyalty to the community of family, or university, or nation, or ecclesiastical affiliation, but to find one's way in and through these in loyalty to him. It is not to be determined by the mores of one's group, but to bring them under his judgment and direction. It is not to find one's integrity in an image of oneself as principled man (sic), or as emancipated man, or as serious man, or as joyous man, but to find one's selfhood integrated around what [Christ] is and means...It is not to find perfect coincidence between my wishes and his commands, between my nation's wishes and his requirements, but to live in faithfulness to him both when there is coincidence and when there is discord between them.*

*...One's manner of life, and intention, or the settled beliefs that cast the beam of light into the future and direct the will's achievement are all subject to the Christian's loyalty to Christ (pp. 270-1).*

And in the end, there is, in this season of the New Year, reason enough for exceedingly great joy. For unto us a child is born; unto us a son is given, who is called King of the Jews, who is called the Son of God. And earthly rulers do not hold ultimate power.

And leaders are accountable to heaven for the welfare of their people. And no matter how flawed human governments may be, Christ's sovereign power will one day redeem us all. Not through capricious power, or even the power of our own will and loyalty, but through the power of the cross: the Kingly standard lifted high, the standard of strength through weakness, the standard of glory won through humility.

There is a story the preaching professor Tom Long tells of an ancient Korean man he had once in a summer class – a Presbyterian minister on the liberal side, thrown into prison by a right-wing president. He would not be released until and unless he would express his allegiance to the government. At first he was very strong, but gradually he weakened. He had even stopped reading his Bible. He was ready to give in. The next time he was brought to trial before the authorities, he was surprised to see in the back of the court his wife and a few members of his congregation. And before he opened his mouth his wife screamed out to him, "God is alive!" They whisked her out...but it was enough.

God is alive, and a Savior has been born, and the powers and principalities will not have the last word, even when they send the innocents to their death; even when the faithful find themselves running to Egypt in fear. God is alive, and there is one who has been born who is called King of the Jews. So even as the strains of "Silent Night" fade, perhaps it is time to strike up another song: Let us sing hymn #260, *A Mighty Fortress in our God*.