

A Different Kind of King

By: Stephanie Doeschot

November 24, 2019. In Luke 23, Jesus is humiliated, derided, and brutalized. How could he be considered a king then, when this is not how kings act? Pastor Stephanie preaches on Jesus' humble beginnings and the unexpected way he brought salvation, and how as his followers we are called to operate in a way that seems counterintuitive. For his is a different kind of kingdom, and Jesus is a different kind of king.

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Grace to you and peace from the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Now, I know this is a controversial thing. But I'm going to bring it up anyway. It's about putting up Christmas decorations, so you can exhale if you were too worried. I'm not going to go into anything that causes fights, but you have to admit: when you start talking about that, people have very strong opinions about when is the appropriate time to put up decorations. Well, our daughter-in-law loves to get Christmas decorations up at, or even before Thanksgiving in any year. But this year she's pregnant and growing every week. So let's cut her some slack, okay? Andrew and Nicole's son Jack, our three-year-old grandson, came into our house a few days ago and saw that unlike their house, which is now fully decorated, we have no decorations up yet. He says to me, "Where is your baby God?" Because at his house they have the child-friendly, manipulable nativity scene at the base of the Christmas tree, quite appropriately, I think. The best gift of all, in a place of prominence among the other gifts there, is the place for the baby God, the baby king, Jesus. Even last year, Jack could say "baby G" for baby Jesus, but this year he's just come up with baby God. Hold on to that thought, if you will. We'll come back to it.

Now, as I pondered what to say on this Christ the King Sunday, otherwise known in many circles as Reign of Christ Sunday, there is a theme that captures me based on this gospel reading. It is the utter vulnerability of Christ hanging on the cross, stripped naked, the soldiers gambling for possession of the only earthly possessions he has left: his garments. He's been deserted, humiliated, beaten ferociously, wears a painful crown of thorns on his head. And now, at this point, he's hanging in a most miserable condition, with spikes driven through his hands and feet. This is about as vulnerable as one can get.

How then are we to find kingliness in this picture? And as you recall, many of the people around him added insult to injury. Not only was he brutalized physically, but they also verbally assailed him. Their scorn and derision was particularly around the assigning of kingship on Jesus that had become a popular title among the crowds who had admired him. By contrast, we have three examples of how he was treated with verbal assaults on the cross. As the people stood by, the leaders scoffed at him saying, "He saved others. Let him save himself if he's the Messiah of God, his chosen one." The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, "If you are the King of Jews, save yourself." There was also that inscription over him that says, "This is the King of the Jews." One of the criminals who was hanging there also kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us."

Three times, three groups of people, three different ways Jesus had it flung in his face, that he was certainly no king in any way that anyone there could comprehend. In fact, how could he be a king at all? First of all, what king would allow himself to be crucified? In our mentalities it doesn't fit. Where

is his might and strength? Secondly, what kind of king would forgive the very people who have condemned him to death? It's a king's prerogative, everyone knows, to exact revenge and make enemies pay for their treachery. Thirdly, this kind of king, while hanging bleeding and suffering on his cross, grants salvation to the criminal on the cross next to him, assuring him of a place in Paradise. Who would do that? This is no king that is recognizable in our world today. This is a king like no other we have ever known.

Now you can travel back with me to the baby God. As we've said, next week is the beginning of Advent, the beginning of the church year. So of course that makes this Sunday the last Sunday of the church year. The year begins next week with a king who is born as a very vulnerable baby. The Magi saw his star and came to worship him as a newborn king. He is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, but he came to this earth in a most lowly, unimpressive way by the world's standards. And the church year ends this year with this baby king now grown up and dying in the most demeaning, lowliest way a person could die -- on a humiliating cross between thieves. Why, we ask ourselves, does God go through such lengths to come and live among us from birth to death in the most humble, vulnerable ways? It just seems counterintuitive. It's so much easier in this world to gain attention and a following by being flashy and commanding. But Christ made it clear, to any who would listen, that his kingdom was not of this world. It's an entirely different kind of kingdom than they had ever experienced. And that is because he was a different kind of king. He had a different kind of mission and message.

I submit to you that the beginning and end of Jesus' earthly life are entirely consistent with his entire message. As Paul has written in Philippians 2, we are urged to let the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death -- even death on a cross. That's why he told us that it's better to give than to receive. It's his way. That's why he patiently explained and demonstrated that he came to serve, and not to be served. It's why he described the way to follow him is to die ourselves, take up our crosses and follow him.

Those who follow Christ are called to operate in a way that seems counterintuitive. We are called to be vulnerable as our king leads us to pursue justice and righteousness. We are called to be trusting on the journey toward pursuing what is good and true, because it is also risky and uncertain as to how we will get there at times. We're in good company when we go that way. After all, our king is the one leading us in a different kind of way, to show the world what true righteousness is.

Now, November 9th this year marked the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Because it was in the news, I learned an interesting story related to it that I'd never heard before. A Lutheran pastor, Christian Führer in Leipzig, was deeply impacted by the sorrow of families who were separated from their loved ones as the years went on. His congregation was weary of the oppression under which they lived. So Monday night prayer services began in 1980, with a small group who gathered to pray for peace, where division had so long been their reality. As the weeks and years went on, the prayer services grew to include tens of thousands of participants. Every week, week in, week out, Monday night prayer service. Knowing there could be altercations breaking out at any time, Pastor Führer and the leaders of other churches and organizations that had joined them in the meantime, gave very clear instructions. They were to resist violence and never return evil for evil. I think you know from whom they got that direction. As good citizens of the Kingdom of God, they took it to heart. As the Stasi, the secret police, watched and waited on the perimeters, ready to take action at provocation, some in the large crowd wanted to carry rocks just in case. But they were told by others to put them away, and

instead to carry candles as they marched together. The massive group of people praying and walking in the streets by candlelight, together on Monday nights, continued over a nine-year period.

I'd like to now switch over to the actual words of Pastor Führer during his interview with NPR a few years before he died in 2014. He says this: "On Monday, the 9th of October [in 1989], when we tried to leave the church after evening peace prayers, the square and the streets were completely flooded with people; people everywhere. And as this mass of 70,000 people with their candles and flowers trying to move peacefully toward the city center, I felt immense gratitude because no one shot at them. I also felt that the GDR [East Germany] that evening was not the same GDR of the previous day. Something huge and completely different had happened. What I saw that evening still gives me the shivers today. And if anything deserves the word 'miracle' at all, then this was a miracle of biblical proportions. We succeeded in bringing about a revolution which achieved Germany's unity. This time without war and military might."

The security chief who desperately wanted to subdue the rebellion by force, was later shown on film as he stared out in the crowd in front of his headquarters. The crowd, whose freedom march had begun in the church, the crowd who had heard the prophetic witness of a pastor emerging from decades of oppression saying, "Let's move forward in peace," the crowd so enormous that it stirred fear in the incredibly powerful chief of security, even with all his tanks and tear gas and firearms. In that potentially explosive moment, the security chief ready to unleash his armed guards was heard to have said this: "We planned for everything, everything we could imagine. We were prepared for everything. Every single thing, except candles and prayers." One month later, the wall was taken down. An entity far superior to military might was in operation.

On this Christ the King Sunday, we remember the one who brought salvation in a completely unexpected way, via a cross. Because we know Good Friday was not the last word. An entity far superior to angry crowds and fearful rulers was in operation, and Easter morning dawned, and something new had begun. We are citizens of the Kingdom of God by virtue of following our king, Jesus. To be a citizen of his kingdom, we honor him as king as we embrace a different way of living, a way that seeks for peace and reconciliation, a way that chooses to be vulnerable and trusting in God's spirit even when it seems foolish to other eyes, a way that counts the cost of serving our king in his way, and recognizing it's a cost worth paying for its supreme value. A way that gives more than seemed sensible, a way that makes love its highest aim because, you see, we serve a different kind of king.

Our hymn of the day serves as a prayer song. Please rise as you are able and sing it with reverence for our different kind of king.

*** Keywords ***

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