

11.26.23 – Pentecost 26 & Reign of Christ Sunday

“Seeking Royal Direction”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Psalm 95:1-7a (NIV)

- ¹ Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord;
let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.
- ² Let us come before him with thanksgiving
and extol him with music and song.
- ³ For the Lord is the great God,
the great King above all gods.
- ⁴ In his hand are the depths of the earth,
and the mountain peaks belong to him.
- ⁵ The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands formed the dry land.
- ⁶ Come, let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the Lord our Maker;
- ⁷ for he is our God
and we are the people of his pasture,
the flock under his care.

Leader: These Words of Praise Are of and for God! All: Thanks be to God!

Matthew 25:31-46 (GNT)

The Final Judgment

- ³¹ “When the Son of Man comes as King and all the angels with him, he will sit on his royal throne, ³² and the people of all the nations will be gathered before him. Then he will divide them into two groups, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the righteous people at his right and the others at his left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to the people on his right, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father! Come and possess the kingdom which has been prepared for you ever since the creation of the world. ³⁵ I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, ³⁶ naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷ The righteous will then answer him, ‘When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? ³⁸ When did we ever see you a stranger and welcome you in our homes, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we ever see you sick or in prison, and visit you?’ ⁴⁰ The King will reply, ‘I tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least important of these followers of mine, you did it for me!’
- ⁴¹ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Away from me, you that are under God's curse! Away to the eternal fire which has been prepared for the Devil and his angels! ⁴² I was hungry but you would not feed me, thirsty but you would not give me a drink; ⁴³ I was a stranger but you would not welcome me in your homes, naked but you would not clothe me; I was sick and in prison but you would not take care of me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they will answer him, ‘When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and we would not help

you?’⁴⁵ The King will reply, ‘I tell you, whenever you refused to help one of these least important ones, you refused to help me.’⁴⁶ These, then, will be sent off to eternal punishment, but the righteous will go to eternal life.”

Leader: These Instructive Words Are of Jesus. All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Reigning Christ, we worship you with Scripture and song, trying to understand. Help us to yield to Christ’s leadership and rule in our lives. Let us recall our legacy of faith, your love, and teachings, despite any sadness or the burdens of this season. Help us to share our resources with others year-round, not just at the holidays, especially the good news of your salvation. Today, we seek your royal direction, so that we may experience eternal life in you both on the earth and in heaven. Speak to us as we hear your Words and your voice through this servant. Amen.

Happy Belated Thanksgiving, church! I hope you had a safe, delicious, and lovely holiday with friends and family this week. Some of you are still recovering from the work it takes to drive, host, or contribute to a feast. We are all grateful for God’s provision, a little time off, and the chance to remember the loved ones no longer with us. You were all in my prayers. We had a lovely breakfast yesterday; please plan to participate in other activities here in the next several weeks. Sign-up sheets are on the Special Events bulletin board near the Fellowship Hall, and it is very helpful to know your commitment level to what’s been planned. Tuesday, as Debbie mentioned, is “*Mailbox Angels*”, and we need you here for only 2 hours, from 11 am-1 pm. I have stickers, cards, stamps, pens, directories, and supplies! This is an easy but fun outreach mission activity for all! No skills are required.

As we often do in worship, we begin our services with praise and thanksgiving, so we opened with a thanksgiving anthem and typical psalm of praise for Scripture. God is declared the rock of their salvation, which assumes the people had already experienced God’s deliverance in

some situation. His majesty was the reason for singing these songs of joy. God is superior to all other gods (small “g”) including those of pagan worship. In Israel, I saw the niches at one pagan temple site where they had placed statues of their idols in the niches for people to come, sacrifice to, and worship them. The historic validation makes it more real to me now as I read my Bible. In this psalm though, we learn that the Lord was their maker and shepherd. These people relied upon God (big “G”) for everything.

There are two sections in this liturgical psalm; God is celebrated as king and worshipped by the gathered congregation. Verses 1-5 are a processional hymn toward the temple, and even Gentiles are welcomed into the throng. The second section, verses 6-7c was also sung as a processional into the sacred part of the temple where Yahweh’s presence was most felt. Gentiles were not allowed in there. Another interpretation says the first part was sung only by a priest with the second part sung by the congregation as a response.

This psalm suggests that one of the first things we do in any worship setting is to give thanks. We do that weekly in our praise hymn at the beginning of worship. Verses 3-5 mean that God is in charge of all things on earth. He is supreme over the gods of humankind, and the details of living are under his control as well. Verses 6-7 usher in the mysterious nature of worship through surrender by kneeling before his figurative throne; Jesus is our God incarnate and shepherd.

In our second passage, the disciples questioned what was next for their mission; what would be the sign of his coming and how would they know the end of the age (Matt 24:4-31)? Jesus encouraged them in

preparation for what was to come: his punishment, death, and resurrection. When the Lord returns, he will establish his kingdom, judging the Jews (Matt 25:1-30) and the Gentiles (Matt 25:31-46). The word picture for judgment Jesus uses is sheep and goats, and is just that, a gentle illustration for his disciples to understand. As he describes the end of the age, before this king will stand white Syrian sheep representing the good gathered to his right for approval and acceptance, while the Syrian black goats are to the left representing condemnation and dismissal. Do not read anything into the color choices; white and black were commonly used as symbolism in Biblical times. A shepherd could easily separate them by color, so it made a good parable. The words in verse 34 as translated in the King James Version “will inherit the kingdom” mean the good sheep on the right will be recognized as the children of God.

The section we are most familiar with has to do with charity or benevolence, a non-judgmental generosity to those with less; this is an important lesson for the disciples and for us, so please go back this week to study the entire passage carefully. It could be word salad if you don't re-read it. Jesus lets his disciples know that he identifies with those in need, even though he is the great king and provider. Think about it as we go into Advent next Sunday. He was born in humble circumstances to Mary and Joseph; he was raised in what we call “blue collar” or working-class surroundings with an admirable work ethic and established faith practices. As he travelled around Israel and Galilee teaching, he relied often on the generosity of hosts, friends, and strangers all his life; and in his death he was cared for and buried by others. “When did this happen?”, they asked. They couldn't recall or imagine their friend and spiritual

“brother” who had become the Messiah King in any of these needy circumstances he illustrated: thirst, hunger, or imprisonment; and yet, we know Jesus the Christ experienced all in the last few weeks of his life. They couldn’t remember not serving his needs either. Jesus’ point was to help them see both his power as God’s royalty (through divine healings and miracles) and their own sinfulness and neglect that might keep them from eternal life. When the disciples asked for guidance and signs about the end of the age, they had no idea what was to come, and isn’t that true of our prayer requests? Sometimes we can see only our selfish need for relationships or materials, yet God’s will is more complex than that. Our human spirits must be reminded, like the disciples, that it is God’s royal direction, advice, or blessing through the power of the Holy Spirit, that we desire ultimately, and not our earthly selfish lifestyle wants.

Jesus is the King but is also the Son of God in all his glory, so let us remember something about kingship on this “Reign of Christ” or “Christ the King” Sunday. We Baptists with our deep religious liberty, soul freedom, and church autonomy roots, typically don’t celebrate this day; Catholics and Anglicans with established church hierarchies do every year. This year, because of the church calendar we had an extra week before Advent; I chose to visit the subject and interpret it for us. Christ’s Kingship is a once-and-future reality as it came to be in the manger/cave/stall at his birth and as it will come again in the fullness of eternity. Will we be on the sheep side or the goat side? For us, the royal direction is repentance, forgiveness, mercy, and grace, all part of the Good News of the Gospel. In the Old Testament, Kingship was an administrative and territorial protection representing the management

institution of an empire. Jesus Christ represents a new and different kind of reign; no wonder the disciples were confused (we see more of that confusion on Palm Sunday when the people welcome the “King”). Was he part of the royal priesthood, a teacher, leader, protector, provider, or judge? Yes, and more—he was and still is all of the above. His royal direction to the disciples and to us was and is to look in the mirror; repent from sin and follow him, even unto death if necessary! Are you prepared to meet him now or at his return? We must be . . . let’s talk if you’re not sure. Amen! ||

Please pray with me. Almighty God and Christ the King, we thank you for all you provide in material comforts, relationships, teaching, and inspiring words of Scripture. Help us to follow you more committedly, feel comfortable asking questions like the disciples did, and find like minds and advisors to help us wrestle with your guidance. Help us to **share** your good news and loving grace with those who need you as we encourage their faith journeys. It is in your Son, Jesus’ name we pray, **Amen.**