

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
East Derry, New Hampshire**

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Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

What Sort of King?

Luke 1:68-79
Luke 23:33-43

You may find this hard to believe, but I really don't do it just to be ornery. But yes, I am aware that I have a way of being out of synch. The retail world has been prepping for Christmas for months already, and as soon as they could put Halloween to bed, pulled out all the stops and started the countdown. Next week lights will go up all over town, trees will go up in both houses and churches, and most of the world will officially declare it Christmas – while I stubbornly insist on observing Advent. By the time the season has grown old and tired and you can't wait to clear away the clutter and be done with the fuss, I'll be ready to say Merry Christmas – and start the twelve day festivities that stretch all the way to Epiphany on January 6. And so you come here today, just having had a delicious holiday appetizer at the Sugar Plum Fair, ready to think about Thanksgiving so we can springboard our way into the holiday season, and what do I ask Heidi to read but some words about the birth of John the Baptist, and the story of Jesus' death. Just what is my problem?

Well, like I said, I don't do it just to be ornery. I really did think seriously about preaching a Thanksgiving sermon, but we're having a service Tuesday night, and I don't want you to go home saying, well, we've taken care of that and don't need to go back for another one. But more importantly, the church calendar names this Christ the King Sunday, or Reign of Christ Sunday, and that seems like an important date for us to observe. Maybe precisely because we're about to move into Advent and another year's preparation for the birth of Jesus. As we prepare for and observe and celebrate the birth of the newborn king, maybe this is precisely the right Sunday to reflect again on just what sort of king he was, just what sort of coming we await, just how God works and what God wants.

I'm not sure how many of us use the word king or ruler to describe Christ, but I suspect some of us do at least some of the time. Some of us chafe at words like ruler or obedience or submission, so we've found other images and concepts to bring to Christ. And some of us are so clear that king and ruler relate to strength and force and power and control, that we've decided to look to the horizon where we expect Jesus to return in glory, or we look elsewhere altogether, away from God and faith, to take care of the situations that call for strength and power. Or some of us are eager to appoint Christ king of our hearts, while we look to presidents and armies and corporations to rule the world. When we think king, we're inclined to think King David, or other notable figures from history, seated upon a strong white horse, leading his people into battle, turning back every foe, returning victorious, protecting the weak from harm, maintaining order and establishing peace. When we think Christ the King, we hear the Hallelujah Chorus. But very

honestly, we're more than a little reluctant to look to the cross. There are a lot of things we look to the cross for, but an image of king isn't one of them. But here we are, thanks to the church calendar, lectionary and me – out of synch as ever.

I think they put it up to mock him, but hanging just above Jesus' drooping, bleeding head was a sign that declared him, King of the Jews. Nailed to a cross, executed by the state, strung up in a line between two common criminals, unfit to live, condemned to die. They mocked him, cast lots to see who could take his clothing home - while he prayed for their forgiveness. They pranced around and laughed at the one who saved others, but could not, would not save himself. And yes, there's that blasted sign hanging over his head, echoing hauntingly, King of the Jews. Some king, don't you think? Some hope and promise and deliverer and hero. As one writer has said,

We do not see (here) a rich and mighty ruler, sitting high on a throne. Instead, we see a man with outstretched arms, forgiving those who are killing him, and promising the gift of eternal life to one who believes in him. He is a king without an army, without a country, and the only power he has is the power to love. It is not what we expect to see, but if we look to this person, we see not only an unlikely king, but, in the words of the letter to the Colossians, "the image of the invisible God."

What we have in front of us is something we weren't looking for and we don't understand and for the most part, we're not overly comfortable with. We have a King who rules by love rather than by force, whose power lies in vulnerability rather than might, whose strength is his willingness to give of himself for the sake of others, who recruits through example rather than coercion, whose mission is reconciliation. Or to quote from one popular Christmas song, "his law is love and his gospel is peace." We look for strength, we long to be rescued, we hope for decisive victory. We have before us one who rules with prayer, who wins by love, who forgives rather than condemns, who accompanies rather than overthrows or delivers.

I was struck by a story that National Public Radio correspondent Anne Garrels tells about being in Afghanistan 3 years ago. It was at the height of the bombing, and she was trying to return to Afghanistan from Pakistan when the border was suddenly closed without explanation. What she learned the next day was that a caravan of journalists had left Jalabad the day before and headed for Kabul. Thieves stopped 2 of the cars in the convoy, pulled out four journalists, shot them in the back and left them dead alongside the road. The rest of the journalists fled back to Jalabad, where she found them, shaken and together.

Soon after that, it was Thanksgiving. The American journalists organized a dinner for everyone staying at the hotel, regardless of nationality. Turkeys were located and stuffed, and other ingredients of the traditional feast were scouted out around the city. Everybody was too frightened to move out of Jalabad, and so the meal took on new meaning. A somber group gathered around several tables laid end to end. Pam Constable of *The Washington Post* had been in the deadly convoy, and she raised a glass to her friends who had not survived it. Many of them had known the four journalists who were killed, but they knew what they were doing, why they had been in Afghanistan, and no one could help but think, "There but for the grace of God go I." In "dry" Afghanistan, there was only one bottle of wine for the assembled group of more than 40 people, and as it was passed down the table everyone was chided to take only a sip. A sacramental sip that reminded Garrels of the Holy Communion she hadn't attended in years. A

sip of gratitude and remembrance, a sip of sharing and sacrifice, a sip of togetherness and grace.
(*Naked in Baghdad*, page 41)

We celebrate a king who gives of his life and blood and love, that we might know such mercy and grace in the hardest of moments. We follow a ruler who reaches out and draws us in and walks alongside us through the most frightening of times. We come together in the presence of an awesome God whose power doesn't always spare us any more than God's own son was spared, but who does always love us, hold us, accept us, forgive us and give us peace.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto Christ our King. Amen.