

Looking Backward, Looking Forward: Christ is King – Mariah Justice

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 100; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

As both a Christian and a fan of George Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* books—which are the basis for HBO's popular show *Games of Thrones*—I believe I have created a fun game. This is how you play: I list an atrocity committed by a king—either a male or a female ruler—and you guess whether the story comes from the Old Testament or *Game of Thrones*. Before we launch into this game, I want to give a brief description of Martin's series for those who are not familiar with the story: these are fantasy books that detail the happenings of a civil war on the fictional continent of Westeros, in which multiple factions fight to put their own man on the Iron Throne, thus gaining power over the whole continent. Meanwhile, on the neighboring continent of Essos, a young woman with her own claim to the Iron Throne is amassing an army and nurturing a young trio of dragons, preparing to return in force to her homeland and seize power back from the people who murdered her family before her own birth. Additionally, Westeros's long summer is drawing to a close, and their long summers are always followed by longer and harsh winters that last for years, destroying the weak and weakening the strong. There is magic and murder and lots and lots of sex. Maybe more murder than sex.

Bearing all that in mind, let's play my game. The first question is, I hope, easy: in which book does a ruler command a dragon to destroy his or her enemies? *Game of Thrones*, obviously, yes. Question two: in which book does a ruler attempt to gain or maintain power by having members of his or her own family killed? This one was a trick question—this happens in both the Old Testament and in *A Game of Thrones*! Next question: in which book does a king withhold food from subjects during a time of famine, while ensuring that the royal family and its courtiers have plenty to eat? Definitely this happened in *Game of Thrones*, but quite possibly in the Bible, too. Last question: where can we find an account of a king forcing family members to watch one another being killed in a brutal fashion? Again, this happens in both books.

What is the point of playing this game right now?—to illustrate what we perceive about kings. In history and in fiction, monarchs have been at worst ruthless, violent, vain, cruel, unhelpful to their people. Even kings and rulers that are remembered for their good deeds were not perfect: look at King David, a good king but also a murderer and adulterer. Look at any US president who did something good for our country, and you can likely find something immoral, unlawful, or unhelpful they also did.

Today is Christ the King Sunday, and he is not like any other king. Christ the King Sunday is the last Sunday of Ordinary Time, and the last Sunday of the liturgical year. Judy asked me to give a brief description of this Feast Day's relatively brief history, and I agree that we need some historical context before turning to our Scripture lessons. Pay close attention for the next few minutes, though, because Judy's request was simpler to agree to than it was for me to investigate. What I thought would be a fast Google search devolved into hours of reading, and the feeling that I would have needed to have grown up Catholic and have an advanced degree in Catholic church history and theology to understand all the reasons Pope Pius the Eleventh instituted the Feast of Christ the King in 1925. (Context and Connectedness are both in my top 5 strengths, so it can be difficult for me to draw lines of relevance.) The Feast Day's beginning seems to have

root causes extending back to at least 1861, when began a major political dispute between the Pope and the Italian government; this dispute wasn't resolved until sixty-eight years and four Popes later, when a group of treaties established Vatican City as the Pope's state. During this time period the First Vatican Council also ratified the doctrine of papal infallibility, which some criticized as a politically motivated maneuver to leverage the Pope's claim to secular as well as religious leadership in Rome. Questions of land ownership and the role of the Pope and clergy in matters of state, in addition to wars in Europe, understandably created an atmosphere of hostility and uncertainty in Italy. It was not the only place where the government tried to set itself up as the only entity to have control over civilians' private lives and religions—Mexico was also mentioned by every source I could find about the establishment of The Feast of Christ the King. The clearest connection I found between Mexico and the Italian issues was that there, too, respect for the Catholic church was diminishing, and clergy found themselves persecuted and even killed. Similar problems surfaced in Spain and the Soviet Union. In response to these brutalities, in an attempt to end growing nationalism and secularism in these places, Pope Pius the Eleventh created the feast we celebrate today, Our Lord Jesus Christ the King. Its official name now, thanks to Pope Paul the Sixth, is "Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ the King of the Universe," which is a really cool feast name, and also means that it is one of the highest-ranking feast days on our calendar.

What does this all boil down to? We are far removed from the Italian political tensions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and St. Paul's doesn't feel itself to be under the rule of the Pope, so what lesson can we glean from Pius the Eleventh? In essence, he called followers of Christ to set aside personal beliefs and differences and instead to focus on the supremacy and work of Christ the King. That is what this feast is for, and what all of today's Scriptures point to: today is a time to celebrate the work of Christ as we close one year and look to the next.

So what do these passages show us about Christ? What does he value? What work is he doing? What place do we have in his work? I hope that in each of our passages, we can see evidence of Christ's overwhelming goodness and love, feel the tension of the "already-but-not-yet"-ness of God's kingdom on earth, and know that our hope and identity as Christians begins and ends with Christ.

In Matthew 25, Jesus is speaking to his disciples about what the end times and God's kingdom will be like. Our sheep-and-goat story follows last week's parable, in which we were charged, as Rick said, to 'Wake up!'—we are to be ready for Christ's return (fitting, that our attention should be called to that, as the season of Advent approaches).

As I said, Matthew 25 describes an end-time scenario—one of judgment. In the preceding parables, an authority figure (bridegroom, master) is out of the picture until the end of the story, and virgins and slaves act certain ways in the absences of the ones to whom they are accountable. Some virgins are ready for the bridegroom when he arrives, but others didn't think ahead to bring enough oil. Two slaves put their master's money to work and earn more for him, but one slave wastes an opportunity to serve his master and chooses instead to bury the money safely in the ground. Today, however, we are not reading a parable, and our King is not away from the action. The virgin and slave stories teach us how to behave as we anticipate the coming of God's kingdom to earth. The sheep-and-goat story focuses, not on us, but on Christ.

In this story, Jesus has several simultaneous identities: he is King, sitting on a throne; he behaves as a shepherd, separating different kinds of livestock; he is Judge, determining who is blessed by his Father and who is cursed; and he is Christ-of-the-Cross, who identifies with the lowly and forgotten. All nations are gathered before him to be judged. When he passes judgment, both the sheep and the goats seem surprised by his praise and condemnation of their actions, respectively. Why do they have such little self-awareness?

To help engage that question, I would like to take a closer look at our Ezekiel lesson, in which God, acting as shepherd, judges “between sheep and sheep”. This passage is a metaphor that works on at least three levels.

Think first about actual shepherds and sheep. A popular image, I think, is that this relationship between man and animal is calm and cuddly, where the sheep feels safe and the shepherd is strong. Not that I have a lot of personal experience in this line of work, but I can say pretty confidently that actual shepherding is nothing like this pretty idea. I think it’s actually dirty and exhausting. Shepherds have to keep track of their stock, defend them from violent predators, and make sure the sheep are healthy and well-fed. Shepherds eat their sheep, and breed them, and sell them (for a more information on this, back up a few verses in Ezekiel)—but thankfully, the metaphor concerning God and the sheep falls apart if one extends it to that point. God puts a lot of hard work into taking care of this flock, and he seems to value it.

We can make sense, too, of this Ezekiel passage as historical/political commentary on the oppression of the Jews during this time period. Human leadership was really failing them at the time, and so God responds by saying that he himself will have to take over the leadership of his flock, and show us how it’s done.

Thirdly, we can read Ezekiel as a prophecy concerning the future of the world, the point being that God will set all right, ultimately. He acts as the agent, the do-er throughout the Ezekiel lesson, speaking with the power of ownership over the flock. The fat sheep take more resources than they need, overlooking the needs of their fellows and leaving some to be lean. God saves the sheep-slash-people from failed leaders and from each other—he saves, yes, but also judges. He decides what each sheep needs—whether healing or food or justice—giving care to all; after all, the “fat and the strong” sheep are his sheep, too. God will come to us, and be with us, and he will stay with us. He is Immanuel.

What, then, is our role in the restoration of creation? The writer of Ephesians speaks of our inheritance. Throughout his letter to the church at Ephesus, the author explores the nature of the global church and emphasizes the importance of the unity of its members. The writer talks about God’s “incomparably great power for us who believe,”—that we, collectively, get to join in Christ’s redeeming work—acting as his body, we get to love the least.

Back to Matthew 25: this passage is not here today to guilt us into donating money to charity or to the church, or to volunteer time somewhere, nor to show us that our salvation is through works. Rather, here we can see God’s heart for the marginalized and the struggling people. We see Christ reigning supreme over all, showing us that when God’s concerns are our concerns, then our concerns are the concerns of our fellow people. When there are no fat sheep and no lean

sheep, but only sheep whose needs are met and who are mutually supportive of each other's interests, then it becomes possible to be surprised at being called "blessed" by our King, because we are living in close relationship with both Immanuel and our fellow person. We can find our identity, like Jesus, both among the least and the blessed.

Today is also the last Sunday before Advent, the time of year when we remember Christ's first coming, and anticipate his return. We stand in a liminal time between past and future, feeling the pull of both. As one year comes to a close and a new one begins, we remember the call to love our God and our neighbors; we remember that our identity begins and ends with Christ; and we remind ourselves that his Kingdom is already and not yet here. Make a joyful noise to the Lord, for he is good, and his love and faithfulness endure forever. Amen.