

“FIRST THINGS FIRST”

a sermon on Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12
January 8, 2017 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
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On the final day of his earthly life, when Pontius Pilate was “presenting” Jesus to the masses just before his crucifixion, he said to them: “behold, your king!”

Pilate was *mocking* Jesus, of course — and all of Judaism with him, really. But there is great irony in that moment: the *governor* of the land “proclaiming” Jesus king . . . only so that he has reason to crucify him; the people (in turn) *rejecting* Jesus, and exclaiming, “we have no king but Caesar!” which of course they did not believe. But at that time, they too wanted Jesus dead. And Jesus, all the while, *silent*, neither confirming nor rejecting the idea that he really *was* their king.

“Behold your king.” The people of Israel so desperately *wanted* a king. It had been so long, and they had lost so much.

Israel’s love affair with the monarchy began over a thousand years before Jesus lived. It was during the time of the judges: after Moses and the years of wandering, after the “conquest” of Canaan. There was a great deal of corruption in the land in those days. And the Israelites were . . . shall we say . . . being regularly “humbled” by the coastal people known as the *Philistines* — who were a much larger, and better “organized” fighting force. The Philistines had even captured the Ark of the Covenant, and hauled it off to the coastal region where they lived – in modern day “Gaza.”

Despite the solid leadership offered at least occasionally by judges like Samuel, the people were insistent: “now appoint for us a *king*,” they cried, “to govern us like all the nations.”

Samuel was visibly distressed when he heard their cry. He knew the *liabilities* of a monarchy, and so he warned them: “he will take the tenth of your

grain and vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants and maidservants, and the best of your cattle and your asses, and put them to his work. He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the LORD will not answer you in that day.”

But they persisted, and as the story goes Samuel eventually anointed Saul as Israel’s first monarch.

As we have discussed on other occasions, Israel’s kings served a “legitimate” function. They enforced justice in the land, they handled *disputes* that arose among the people, and they were also responsible for “international” matters — negotiating covenants and treaties, and leading the people, when necessary, to war.

Kings “ruled” the people. And thereby, they were responsible for the people’s relationships *with each other*. That was their place in Israel’s faith system.

But back to the story. Samuel’s warning proved to be true. Some of Israel’s kings were prone to excess, and taxed the people *heavily* to provide their courts with extravagant luxuries. Others were downright *wicked*, persecuting truth and righteousness.

Occasionally, Israel had good kings – “benevolent dictators,” who were fair and just. But only occasionally.

And then came the years of national decline and downfall. Eventually, the kings who ruled the land were not *of* the land. They were the kings of Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and by Jesus’ day, the Caesars of Rome.

And so the phrase, “Behold your king” took on a different meaning in Israel’s later life — when it wasn’t *their* king who sat on the throne, but the king of the land that ruled them.

And yet, the nation's hope remained strong. That is clear in the writings of the prophets, who declared that a "new day" would finally dawn, in which Israel's fortunes would be restored, peace and justice would again prevail, and a king from *David's* line would sit, once again, on the throne in Jerusalem.

So the love affair continued, in the form of visions and dreams, if not reality. The prophecy of Isaiah describes it in vivid and hopeful words. "Arise, shine; for your light has come," he wrote. "The LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising." A new king. A new time – when *their* king would be the one *other* nations came to *willingly* serve.

Briefly, during the centuries between the Old and New Testaments, the Israelites once again tasted the fruit of independence, when Judas Maccabeus mounted a successful revolt, and deposed the Grecian ruler, Antiochus (which is the event recalled by our Jewish brothers and sisters in their Hanukkah celebration). But along came the great and powerful empire of Rome, and, "Behold your king" once again referred to a foreign ruler, and Isaiah's vision did not become a reality.

Oh in Jesus' day, they sometimes *called* rulers like Herod *king*, but everyone *knew* that Herod wasn't the *real* king. Herod himself knew it. *Caesar* ruled Jerusalem and its people. But in that rule, there was at least a *kind* of peace that Herod and many others wanted to protect. They *feared* Caesar, and they feared an uprising of the people in revolt, and so they ruled with a heavy hand . . . to keep control of the situation.

Nonetheless, Israel never lost hope, at least not *fully*.

And so the Gospel writer Matthew, in telling the story of Jesus of Nazareth begins the story by putting first things first, so to speak. Yes, Jesus came to fulfill the *whole* law, and assume all *three* of the Old Testament offices – prophet, priest, and king.

But Israel, in Jesus' day, *had* prophets and priests (albeit, not always good or faithful ones). What they *lacked* – what they *longed for*, not to mention what the

mere *thought* of scared Herod out of his *mind* – was the arrival of a legitimate new King of Israel.

And so in chapter one, Matthew lays out Jesus' genealogy, with the *very first sentence* of the book proclaiming that Jesus is “the son of David.” And then telling the story of Jesus' birth, focusing not on shepherds and angels, as in Luke's account, but rather, on a group of “wise men from the East” who arrived, in full oriental splendor, to pay homage to a royal birth — to Herod's considerable displeasure.

Jesus, our theology insists, *was* and *is* our king. He was *born* a king – the rightful “heir” to the Davidic Empire. And yet, he plainly *never* ruled the land as any other king had ever ruled it. In fact, the very best image we have of Jesus' kingship is the one I've already mentioned: Jesus, the “crucified king.”

Jesus, of course, never *meant* to be the kind of king Israel had in the past, or under which she labored in his days. *That* kind of kingship is only *external*, and temporary. Kings of nations can rule the *land*. They can “restrain evil.” They can “negotiate.” But they cannot *change* people. They cannot rule *within*. And they are limited by “borders.” But the primary function of kings all along was to oversee *relationships*: relationships of the nations they ruled with *other* nations as well as the relationships of the individuals in the land with each other.

Jesus came into the world to declare that *in him* our relationship with the *Father* is restored, and therefore, our relationships with others can be restored as well – *all* others!

The wise men, of course, had no idea that the one they honored was going to become an entirely different kind of king. Nor did Herod. They had no way to know. God was doing an entirely new thing in the birth of Jesus, *building* on a centuries-old tradition, but raising it to an entirely new and “ultimate” level.

“But *we* don't need a king,” you might say. “We Christians have ‘freedom.’ So the ‘kingship of Christ’ is just an outdated idea, made up by people who didn't *know* any other way to live, and we have now ‘progressed’ beyond it.”

Well, perhaps we don't need a "Caesar." But we *desperately* need a king; that is, we need restored and enlivened relationships. We need justice and fairness in all the realms of life.

We are just at the beginning of Matthew's account. We have much to encounter. But first things first. Jesus came to be King – and thereby, in fulfillment of the prophecies, to "rule our hearts." Because of his lineage, he was a *legitimate* heir to the throne of David. That may not mean much to us, but it meant everything to Israel, because it was a requirement of their *law* – a law that Matthew will go on to demonstrate was both fulfilled and replaced with something new. Jesus is here living and *ruling* in our hearts — which means that we *can* live in love, and have fellowship and communion not only with God, but with each other. Today. In Christ, we can live in the light, and draw strength and encouragement from one another. That is what it means to be "in communion" together.

And add to that good news the *challenging* message that now as in the days of the old Law, the king's "rule" extends both to our relationships with each other, by which we now mean the membership of the *Christian Church*, as well as our relationships with *everyone else*. In the stories we will encounter in coming weeks, Matthew has plenty to say about *both* parts of Jesus' "Lordship."

On this day when we are installing new church leadership, I would be remiss to not make a connection between Jesus' Lordship – which is internal, and *ultimate*, and only *partially* evident in the world in which we know it – and the continued need for "government" in the world – out there in secular society, and even here inside the church doors. Our denomination has a constitution, which includes *rules*, the proper following of which helps keep us in right relationship with each other – both in our local faith communities, and in the larger Church.

And in our church's particular system of governance, everyone has a role. The role of the entire congregation is to prayerfully *select* its leaders, which you have done. And then those leaders' task is to both implement and *follow* the constitution, even as it participates in the ongoing process of keeping that constitution vital by engaging in the process of changing it – all under the *ultimate* Lordship and rule of Jesus, born so long ago, and proclaimed King *first* by a group of outside "visitors" – Gentiles (non-Jews) – who were guided by a star to the place of his birth, a sure sign that in bringing Jesus into the world, God was doing a

new a glorious thing to finally bring restoration and rebirth to everyone,
everywhere.

To God be the glory.