

The End and the Beginning

Revelation 1:4-8 Crossroads Christian Church

John 18:33-38

Christ the King

November 29, 2015

The last two Sundays, I've been talking about some strong and courageous women in the Bible. Today, I want to tell about a strong and courageous woman of our own time, one whom Sandy and I knew personally. Myrle Ward was an adventurous woman, a tiny lady with her white hair drawn back in a bun, and a dear friend of our family's. When we first got to know her well, she was a member of a church we served, First Christian Church in Red Oak, Iowa, and a neighbor. But before that, Myrle had been a lifelong Disciples of Christ missionary—a teacher, first in the Congo, then in Jamaica. Back before World War II, Myrle would take river steamboats into the jungle and then jungle paths to remote villages, living out Christ's command to carry the gospel with her. One time, when Myrle and a colleague were scheduled to return home on furlough, they started to make their travel plans. They discovered that it would be really expensive to come home by tramp steamer from Leopoldville, the capital of the Congo, but much cheaper to take a similar ship from Cairo, Egypt. So the two women crossed the continent of Africa—on river steamer, truck, train, foot, horseback, and got to Cairo so they could catch their boat. Afterwards, they discovered that they were the first white women to cross that continent in that particular route. An adventurous woman, she was—resourceful, brave, resilient, and always ready to try something new, even many years after her retirement from the mission field. After we moved to St. Louis, Myrle, in her late 80s, developed leukemia. When the end was near, her friends gathered around. Her last words, spoken with a smile, were "I'm leaving on my greatest adventure." She saw in her ending a new beginning. Christ was her King, and she followed him enthusiastically in this life and into the next.

We end the church year today by looking back and remembering, before we look ahead to Advent, and its emphasis on preparation. So we have an ending before a new beginning. We end Year B of the lectionary that focused on the Gospel of Mark to move to Year C, which focuses on Luke. Today is also the Sunday before Thanksgiving, and Christ the King Sunday—or Reign of Christ Sunday as it's sometimes called.

Why is it called Christ the King Sunday? The story goes back to 1925. Mussolini and the Fascists had spread an iron grip over Italy. They demanded full allegiance. If you follow us, we will bring glory. If you follow us, all your enemies will be conquered. We will rebuild the Roman Empire. Mussolini's gang were a model for what Hitler was beginning to do in Germany. Pope Pius XI issued an encyclical that proclaimed Christ the King Sunday as a day to celebrate Jesus Christ as the true Lord over people's lives, the King who comes in peace—a stark contrast with the dictators of this world. It was a brave thing to do, since the Vatican was surrounded by Italy. Other churches have picked up the idea for that holiday since then, because it's helpful for us all to realize that Christ is truly our Lord and King.

In our gospel reading, we heard a discussion between Pilate, the Roman ruler of Judea, and Jesus of Nazareth—who was charged with wanting to be a king, king of the Jews—in other words, with treason against the Roman Empire. Pilate felt that it was a trumped-up charge by a kangaroo court, and asked Jesus directly, “Are you king of the Jews?” so Jesus would have a chance to deny the charge. Jesus asked his own question. “Are you asking that yourself, or based on what others have said?” Pilate didn't want to get involved. “I'm not a Jew, am I?” and Jesus replied that his kingship wasn't of this world. He had come to testify of God's truth. And Pilate asked, “What is truth?” He probably didn't really want to know Jesus' answer. For Pilate the truth was political reality. He had to keep the peace, the Roman Peace, at all costs, even if it meant killing a harmless religious fanatic like this naive Galilean. But John's Gospel is full of irony—Pilate asked “what is truth?” thinking there was no answer, and the answer was staring him right in the face. God's truth—the absolute truth of God's love being so strong, so passionate, so compelling, that God was willing to take on human form and experience the worst kind of death in order to show the way to life—was staring him right in the face.

Another glimpse into the kingship of Christ is seen in our text from Revelation. If we read Revelation like we read the newspaper, we'll get confused. If we read it like a secret code giving us the inside scoop to the end of the world, we'll get worse than confused. But if we read it as a song of praise for Jesus Christ, sung by a persecuted and oppressed people, we'll be invited to join that song. Think about it. The Roman Empire held all the cards—political power; social power; economic power—and all packed by the greatest military

machine in the history of the world. They treated the emperor as a god, and those who didn't worship the emperor were seen as subversive, unpatriotic, and suspect. Along come the Christians—a group that worshiped a criminal executed by the empire for claiming to be king of a land that the Romans ruled. Suddenly, the Christians were attracting attention, and it was no longer business as usual. So the Christian believers became enemies of the state, and it became illegal to be a Christian. In this setting, John of Patmos sang his song of praise to Christ, the one who was; who is; and is to come; the faithful witness; the firstborn of the dead; and the ruler of the kings of the earth! It was this Jesus who set us free from sin, who made us a kingdom of priests, praising God forever. It is this Jesus who will come, for he is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and Omega, the Almighty. Alpha and Omega, remember, are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, the beginning and the ending—so John's saying that Christ is A and Z, and all the letters in between. And this visionary John, huddled in exile on a little rock in the Mediterranean Sea, invites us to join the song.

The song isn't about us, he reminds us, it's about Jesus Christ. As St. Paul wrote to the Philippians, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." So the Jesus Christ who is the beginning, the middle, and the end, is the Lord of new beginnings. That's the message of Easter, it's the message of the last day of our lives, but it's also the message of every day of our lives. Christ is the beginning and the end, Christ is also the end and the beginning. Isn't that something to sing about?

If Christ is our King, our Ruler, our Sovereign, our Lord, then all those little endings that make up our lives will lead to new beginnings. All the little deaths that we experience—the loss of a job, alienation within the family, illness, divorce, the empty nest—will be followed by the possibility of new life, of new beginning. And death the final enemy? That's just the start of the next great adventure.

The whole rhythm of the church year helps us remember the flow of the life of Jesus Christ and the beginning of the church. We are now at the end of one church year and ready to begin another.

What kind of king is Christ our King? John of Patmos pictures him in glory, power, and majesty, overshadowing the Caesars of the world. But next Sunday begins Advent. Then we wait for the coming of a king who will be a baby, born in a destitute little place, fragile, powerless, but one in whom God's love will be made real.

Jesus Christ is the alternate king—who wants to rule our lives not by power and might, but by the power of love. Jesus Christ wants to transform us into loving, justice-bringing, peacemaking, joyous, passionate members of God’s family. What will it mean to you to let Christ rule in your lives? How will you find Christ present in your endings and in your beginnings? Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon