

To See the King

With this morning's text, we are deep in the heart of Holy Week. The enthusiasm of Palm Sunday still hums in the air, along with the palpable tension that swells on the heels of Jesus' outrage in the Temple. The chapter that follows this one will tell us about Jesus' anointing by a woman with a jar of costly perfume and Jesus' declaration to the disciples that the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified in a matter of days. I struggle to imagine what it must feel like to be one of those original disciples. What could they possibly be feeling? How can they take in all that is coming their way? How can they even begin to see straight? [read Matthew 25:31-46]

Jesus is with his closest disciples, the ones who should know him best. They were with him in the Temple as he argued with and confronted the religious leaders. They watched him bring healing to those who had no hope. They walked alongside him as he rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey. They listened as he proclaimed the kingdom of heaven with urgency and fervor. They heard this kingdom coming on earth described as a vineyard filled with grapes and grace, a lavish banquet meant to transform the guests as much as it is intended to fill their bellies, and a waiting wedding party called to keep watch by tending to kingdom things. Jesus has been trying to help them see what he sees, to shape their vision, to train their eyes to see him as a king unlike any other, but they simply don't see him as they should just yet.

In their defense it is not easy. Even though they have been swept up in following this rabbi who describes a kingdom unlike any other, they have been taught from an early age what a king and his kingdom are supposed to look like. It can be hard to shake that. They have lived their entire lives in an occupied land under the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire. As you may recall, a few months ago on the heels of celebrating Jesus' birth, we heard about the magi who are warned in a dream to go home by another way because of the puppet King Herod's menacing ways. Herod claimed that he wanted to know where to find the newborn king because he, too, wanted to worship him. In reality Herod had no such intention. In fact, Matthew tells us that Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt as refugees because Herod, the supposed King of the Jews sought to destroy any

and all chances that another would take his place. The disciples have witnessed firsthand the aftermath of John's telling the king what he did not want to hear, and then finding himself imprisoned and eventually killed. The Empire has trained them to see kingship and kingdoms in a very specific way. Jesus has spent much of his breath turning that notion on its head and trying to turn their vision right side up.

And then comes Palm Sunday. Without giving away too much of next week's text, it helps to remember that the disciples are breathlessly trying to keep up with this one who is no longer on the way to Jerusalem but in the thick of it. Crowds have waved him in with palm branches. Children have shouted "Hosanna! Save us!" alongside the road. He has marched with authority into the Temple and directly confronted the powers that be. For all of his teaching and healing, Jesus looks like a man on a mission, like one determined to turn the world upside down. Couldn't he also be setting out to claim the throne of David and become the king the people have been waiting for? Or the one they think they have been waiting for? After all, he begins this final parable with images fit for a king:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him...¹

We've seen the pictures, the paintings, and the carvings throughout history. This is one of the church's favorite scenes. Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris has the scene intricately carved above the western façade. There are grand triptychs and entire basilica domes dedicated to this one scene. In these depictions Christ sits enthroned over all, wearing a crown and holding a scepter, regally directing the sheep and the goats to his right and his left. The grandeur matches the words in the passage; there is no great creative leap. He is in fact a king, THE king, our king. But in case we grow too enamored with the pomp and circumstance, while we are craning our eyes up above, Jesus swiftly moves on to re-training our vision once again by bringing us down to earth. He welcomes the sheep into the kingdom, opens his arms, invites them into their eternal inheritance and celebrates the ways they tended to him, not when he was enthroned high above it all but when he was hungry, thirsty, naked, a stranger, sick, and in prison. The goats he condemns for neglecting to tend him. And every one of them is stunned and surprised: "When was it that we saw you?" Because they did not see him; not one of them did.

¹ Matthew 25:31-32, NRSV

Neither the sheep nor the goats saw Christ in the least of these. That just isn't where one looks for a king, let alone where one expects to find one. Yes, he was born to nobodies in the middle of nowhere, but he doesn't stay there. From the outset he was meant for bigger, grander things. A star shone over his childhood home for goodness's sake! He makes the High Priests nervous; he will make the Roman authorities anxious, too. He is on his way up, right? Rags to riches. An underdog who makes it big. But no, Jesus is determined to teach the disciples, to teach us how to see him and his kingdom not in the clouds above it all, but on earth with the lowest of the low.

Because it matters that they know where to find him, how to look for him, how to see him, not only at the end of all things but in the days and hours that lie ahead. It will not be long before, "Christ is himself judged, imprisoned, beaten up, stripped naked, and, bawling for a drink, [and] killed off."² Jesus comes from the least of these and that is where he stays. This king will not wear a crown of gold or sit on any throne that we can see. Instead he will wear a makeshift crown of thorns after sitting on death row awaiting trial for a crime he did not commit. And even his most faithful followers will struggle to see him as king. Because a king does not wind up imprisoned, naked, hungry, abandoned, forgotten, shamed, and dying of thirst, especially if the king of the universe, the only Son of the one true God. He *should* be seated on a throne, above it all. That is where he belongs—shiny, perfect, gilded, and whole, right? And yet, it is here where we find him and his kingdom, on earth, Immanuel, God with us. He does not stand apart or above it all, far removed in a safe or sanitized palace. Instead he comes and becomes one of us. He is found in the convict on death row, the addict sleeping in her car, the runaway turning tricks, the migrant crossing the desert, the welfare mom with a couple of kids and another on the way just trying to make it to the end of the month. And that is where he wants to find his church, not insulated and isolated, debating the world out there from a safe distance, but actually out there, seeking him and serving him in the places where no other king would be caught dead.

Even when we know where we are supposed to look, we can have a hard time seeing him. I take comfort in knowing those first disciples did, too. In another gospel account, Luke tells us that on that first Easter evening, the disciples could not see straight due to grief and fear and disappointment. As two of them walked to

² David Buttrick as cited by Jarrett McLaughlin in his paper for the Well, 2014.

Emmaus, a stranger fell in alongside them, asking about all that had happened and discussing and debating the scriptures. And then they gathered with others around a table. The stranger took bread and blessed and broke it and in that moment, their eyes were opened and they recognized him. There was their risen Savior with the very ones who could not bring themselves to believe his promise that he would rise from the dead. There he was, not with the proud and the perfect but with the grieving and frightened. There he was breaking bread not with the high and mighty but with the losers and the lowly ones, the ones who doubted and deserted him, the least of these in their lowest moment.

And still, by the grace of God and through the work of the Spirit, he meets us here. Not once does he write us off. He comes and keeps coming to us. Us. All of us: the doubters and the disappointed. The grieving and the dying. The smug and the frightened. The broken and the bombastic. He comes and keeps coming, to keep training our eyes, to teach us where and how to look to see him, our king. I think he is perhaps even more concerned that we see his kingdom, the kingdom of heaven in the faces of those the larger world insists on ignoring, dismissing, and writing off, in the faces of neighbors and strangers, in the faces of those we fear and those we struggle to welcome and love. And I think he wants us to see him here, in a simple meal of broken bread and overflowing cup, a meal that retrains our vision and helps us see our king not on a throne above it all, but on a criminal's cross, flanked by other prisoners, hungry, mocked, thirsty, and stripped bare, giving himself up for the life of the world, his kingdom come, on earth.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.