

A Presbyterian and a Baptist Walk into All Saints on “Christ the King” Sunday

Lectionary Reading From the book of Revelation--Revelation 1:4b-8

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen.

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

I have a confession to make. I am a Presbyterian. And I hope you will permit me to share with you a little Presbyterian history of one of its founders, and his intersection with the history of Anglicans and Episcopalians. I will offer you a critique, or hermeneutic, through a retelling of the myth of one of Presbyterian's founding fathers in an attempt to capture three things about this day, 1) the truth that Christ is King, 2) the paradox in Christians use of the description that Christ is *like* a king, and 3) ultimately, the message of hope and reconciliation we proclaim on this day.

As you know, there are three Protestant reformers: Martin Luther, the beer-drinking German; John Calvin, the wine-sipping Frenchman; and John Knox, the whiskey-swilling Scot. In lots of ways, John Knox is the most difficult character.¹ John Knox was indeed a crotchety Scot. His reservoir of vituperations was vast and bottomless. Here's an example of one of his more pointed sermon titles: *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, the monstrous women being, of course, not the entire feminine race but the female French royals, among them Mary Queen of Scots, who tried to turn his manly, macho homeland of Scottish lads in kilts, into a French-speaking, burgundy-

¹ The story of Knox is taken, in part, and adopted from a sermon by William Evertsberg, 1st Presbyterian Church, Greenwich, Connecticut. November 16, 2013.

sipping, escargot-eating, Roman Catholic province of the king at Versailles.

He was a gloomy, difficult, unyielding, sharp-tongued man, and yet he almost singlehandedly converted his homeland into what would eventually become known as Presbyterianism, and it was his disciples who carried this new-fangled ecclesiology across the Atlantic in tiny, leaky boats and dropped it first on the eastern shore of Maryland, where it planted stubborn roots in deep soil, and spread like kudzu south to the Carolinas and Georgia, and north to Pennsylvania, and eventually sowed the seeds of bitter discontent with King George's taxation without representation, which is why **in** London the American Revolution was known as the Presbyterian Rebellion. These are the Myths, ---that we Presbyterians are the cause of the American Revolution, --that Presbyterians tell each other, especially on "Christ the King Sunday."

With any good Myth and tradition, there is some part that is factual. More than one-half of the soldiers in Washington's army were Presbyterians. When Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown, every colonel in the Colonial Army but one was a Presbyterian elder. So, there is some truth in the claim that John Knox is the father of the American Revolution. That's the Presbyterian contribution to politics, philosophy and theology: this towering distrust of centralized authority, this suspicion of kings and queens, this intense egalitarianism that finally leads to the thought "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, ... That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government." Okay, sure, this last clause is Jefferson's and Jefferson was an Episcopalian, but he was thinking like a Presbyterian when he wrote those words.

John Knox was born early in the sixteenth century, sixteen miles from Edinburgh, to a farmer and his wife. She was a Sinclair. He served as a parish priest in England and once was offered a bishopric, but he turned it down because he'd fallen in with all these Bible-thumping, mass opposing Proto-Presbyterians. Early in his life he was such a vitriolic and violent Protestant that he was sentenced to a slave-galley ship where he spent nineteen months pulling eighteen-foot oars through the water and then spent years in exile on the Continent because it was not safe for him to return to his homeland. He spent time in France and in Germany and finally ended up in Calvin's Geneva, where he was just enchanted with Calvin's ecclesiastical and political innovations.

John Knox called Calvin's Geneva "the most perfect school of Christianity the world had ever seen." When it is finally safe for him to return home in 1559, he takes Calvin's innovations with him and plants a second Geneva in Edinburgh, where it gets its Scottish brogue. In Edinburgh, the Gloomy Scot commences a long, loud war of words with loyal Catholic Mary, Queen of Scots. John Knox referred to Mary as "Satan's Sister." How's that for another sharp Knoxism. The Queen of Scotland: Satan's Sister. Diplomacy was not his best thing. Yet, here he joins Presbyterians with the Anglican tradition in its rejection of the pope.

John Knox might have been one of the few males in the British Isles who was not utterly smitten with Mary, Queen of Scots. She was bright. She was witty. She was drop-dead gorgeous. Five times Knox marches over to Mary's Holyrood Palace in Edinburgh to tell her, brazenly, what exactly she's doing wrong. One time Mary looks out her window to see the Gloomy Scot marching up the royal road to Holyrood and she says, "Oh my God, I would rather see a full battalion of enemy soldiers marching upon me than that crotchety Scot."

Several times he reduces her to tears. He apologizes. Sort of. He says "I pray God, Madam, that you may be blessed within the commonwealth of Scotland, but if you overreach your authority, I will become your sworn

arch-enemy. As a prophet of God, it is my solemn vow to point out idolatry when I see it.”

When he dies at the age of 55 in 1572 a friend at his grave said, “Here lieth one who in his life never feared the face of man.” That’s an epitaph anyone can be proud of. The Crotchety Scot. Perhaps some Presbyterians are indeed chips off the old Knoxian block. Claiming Christ as king they rail against what they see as idolatry in the society. How quickly and easily do seemingly devout followers of Christ transform that Christ into their own idolatry?

Still, there is something beautiful about the legacy of John Knox: “Here lieth one who in his life never feared the face of man.” You see, when Christ is King in your life, all fear vanishes, subordinate loyalties are dethroned, and all earthly powers are put in their proper place.

John Knox would have loved that passage from Revelation a few moments ago. It is one of the readings for Christ the King Sunday, the crowning Sunday of the Church year.

And, did you notice the multiple and extravagant acclamations the author of Revelation piles up trying to capture a tiny fraction of the glory of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Head of the Church, and Lord of the Universe:

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

John Knox lived by those acclamations, preaching his biting sermons among the towering kings and queens of Europe: Mary in Scotland, Elizabeth in England, Charles in France, Philip in Spain, William of Orange in Holland. John Knox would have remembered that Paul acclaimed this rustic carpenter from Nazareth with such grandiosities within earshot of Emperor Nero, the most powerful man in the world. When Christ is King in your life, you can no longer kneel before puny

princes, pygmy principalities, or paltry powers. When Christ is King in your life, all thrones, all dominions, all principalities, all powers are unseated.

When Christ is King in your life, you no longer need fear the face of man. That's a good way to live.

Now...

You may know that Presbyterians and Anglicans love paradoxes! Remember the second reading in the Lectionary for today, from the gospel of John. It describes the paradox is using the image of Christ as king for inspiration.

Lectionary Reading From the book of John-- John 18:33-37

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?"

Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?"

Jesus answered, "*My kingdom is not from this world.* If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

The paradox of Christ the King Sunday is that we live like Christ is King, but of a Kingdom not of this world. Through our myths and our Traditions, with a capital T we see the truth of what it means that Christ is King. Yet we also see the great danger in it. Violence, sexism,

racism, and xenophobia, Some even use it to turn on the stranger or refugee who comes to live among us. First we worry some might be terrorists. Then demonize all who are Syrian, then we say that we are really looking to exclude all Moslems from the Middle East. Yah, yah, that's the ticket, it is that we want *to protect* ourselves by using the name of Christ to deny refuge to people, who, themselves, are on the run from terror. We use polls to justify our position. We take this Supersaturated phenomenon² of Christ's sacrifice of Love, and make it into an idol to serve our own positions of power and prestige.

But Christ says, "My kingdom is not of this world." And **we** confess that in our history we to have perverted through Myths and Traditions the "truth" that Christ teaches.

It is in the hermeneutics of interpretations of our stories that we see the complexity, the perversions, of our current interpretations, and yet how Christ opens us up to new possibilities and a new understanding of his kingdom of love. He opens us up to new way of living, in forgiveness and liberation.

Let's remember one additional example, ... of a man whose life was lived inspired by the same Knoxian claim that Christ is King and God is Creator, and then a brief coda, and I will finish.

We sometimes forget that when Martin Luther King, Jr., a Baptist, took charge of the Montgomery Bus boycott in 1955, he was only 26 years old. Fresh from seminary, serving his very first church, 26 years old; he had just 12 more years to live. Late one night during the Boycott, Dr. King answered the phone at his house. The voice on the other end said, "Listen, nigger, we've taken all we want from you. Before next week you'll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery."

² Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, Forward by David Tracy, *xiii*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2012.

Dr. King was completely unnerved. He couldn't sleep the rest of the night, and finally put his head in his hands at the kitchen table and prayed, "Listen, God, I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone."

And then Dr. King says, "At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never before experienced it. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying, "Stand up for righteousness, Martin, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever." Almost at once my fears began to pass from me. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything. The outer situation remained the same, but God had given me inner calm."³

"Put your confidence in something that works," says Peter Gomes, "It is God who will keep you when all else has failed you: and it is to God to whom you will turn when you have exhausted all of the alternatives. It is God on whom you will call when you get that fateful diagnosis: it is God on whom you will call when the bottom drops out; and it is God on whom you will call when you pass through those seasons of doubt and despair, when life itself seems not worth the living and you cannot remember the last victory; and it is God on whom you will call with your very last breath."⁴

So in the end our song on this day is a three part refrain: We worship Christ as **King**, We remember at Table that **Christ** is King, and our constant continuing prayer is that Christ **be both our King** and Shepherd. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

³ Martin Luther King, Jr., in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. M. James Washington (Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1986, pg. 508 & 509

⁴ Peter J. Gomes, *More Sundays at Harvard, Sermons for an Academic Year*, (Cambridge, MA: The Memorial Church, Harvard University, 1995- 1996), p. 167.