

For Your Consideration: God is Not a Cosmic Monarch Christ the King Sunday

Colossians 1:11-20
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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As a preface to this particular sermon, I'd like to make the disclaimer that whenever you see the phrase "For Your Consideration:" as part of the sermon title, you can be assured that I will be presenting something that challenges traditional Christian orthodoxy or doctrine.

Saying that, every year on the liturgical church calendar, the Sunday immediately before the First Sunday of Advent (which is next week) is always designated as Christ the King Sunday. Since I've never liked the theme and imagery of Christ the King Sunday, and since this is also the Sunday that usually precedes Thanksgiving, I almost always preach on the topic of giving thanks. But not this year.

This year I've decided to share some of my long-standing issues with using the imagery of a king to describe Jesus, and a divine cosmic monarch to describe God. In order to do that, I will be sharing extensively from the book I told all of you about that I read on my study leave last month. The book is entitled, ***What Does a Progressive Christian Believe? A Guide for the Searching, the Open, and the Curious***, written by Delwin Brown, the dean emeritus of Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, CA, and formerly a professor of Christian Theology at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, a Methodist seminary. The eight short chapters in Brown's wonderful book are entitled:

1. What Progressive Christianity is Not
 2. Bible: Negotiating the Heritage
 3. Christ: Overturning the Categories
 4. God: Exploring the Depth
 5. Humanity: Continuing the Creation
 6. Sin: Failing and Hiding
 7. Salvation: Seeking and Finding
 8. Church: Serving and Being Served
- The Epilogue is entitled, "Rightly Mixing Religion with Politics."

Even though this particular liturgical service is centered around the image of Christ as King, I want to back this up a bit and explain why language about God first used this monarchical imagery. Introducing his chapter on God, Brown states:

Americans overwhelmingly believe in God. It is not clear that they overwhelmingly *think* about that belief – what it means, whether it is credible,

and its consequences for everyday life. For Christians, however, an unreflective faith is not possible if we take seriously the injunction to love God with the mind as well as the heart and soul. A faith immune to open and self-critical reflection is not a progressive Christian faith.

Progressive Christianity seeks to unmask and reject the repressive view of God that has infected so much of Christianity.

Many Christians view God as the all-powerful ruler of the universe whose will controls the direction of human life, the development of history, and the destiny of the entire creation. **God is the cosmic monarch. Whatever happens, good or evil, is caused or permitted by this God in “his” infinite wisdom.**

There may be temporary comfort in believing that everything is determined or at least permitted by God, but there is also puzzlement and moral distress. One puzzle is why, if all that happens is in accord with the will of God, we should try as diligently as we do to make things better. Why seek to improve upon the course of events that accord with the will of God? Or, if God has ordained that we should seek improvement on the things that “he” has caused or permitted, why did God cause or permit them in the first place? If that is not an intolerably callous way to run a universe, it is, at the least, poor planning.

This intellectual puzzle, however, leads to great personal anguish when it is coupled with the belief that this all-powerful monarch is good and loving. **Why, indeed, would a loving God bring about, or even allow, the wasteful destruction that besets nature, history, and every human life?** We have human bodies which, although marvelous, could still do with a few design improvements, some of which we have made already. Surely an omnipotent, loving God would do better. We witness human brutality to other humans and to the rest of creation that we, with only limited goodness, know to be outrageous and seek feverishly to end. Surely an omnipotent God could, and if loving would, end or at least diminish the wanton brutality all around us.

The development of belief in a monarchical God is understandable. It emerged in the ancient world when powerful rulers rose up to unify peoples, create laws, impose order, and (ostensibly) protect their subjects from outside threats, natural and human. The power of the monarch came to be viewed as the source of these good things and thus itself the epitome of what is good. **The greater the power, it would have seemed, the greater the good, and, if so, then absolute power would equate to absolute good.** Of course, in time it became apparent that no human ruler is absolutely good, and thus none is entitled to absolute power. Even so, the equation of absolute goodness and absolute power could still be made, if now it were ascribed to a divine ruler. **The equation was made – God is absolute good, and so absolutely powerful. [Hence the solidification of the notion of the omnipotence of God.]**

Many traditional Christians, however, have wrestled in the depths of their souls with the questions that arises from this view of God. “Why, if God is all-powerful

and good, is there so much utterly pointless evil in the world – evil that no outcome could possibly justify, and evil, in fact, that we mortals try desperately to prevent?”

The most credible reply of these anguished Christians is a commendably honest one: “We don’t have an answer. We do not know.”

But there is another understanding of God. It is different from the view of God as cosmic monarch. This alternative understanding also emerged in the ancient world. It did not fit well, however, with the growth of empires and kingdoms, nor did it serve the needs of rulers for adulation. It persisted nevertheless, usually in the quiet corners of peasant spirituality but sometimes, unrecognized, in the councils of church and political power.

It is the view of God as incarnate. [This understanding of “God with us” is the very meaning of the Christmas narratives themselves, thus bringing Jesus back into our understanding of the nature and character of God.] The origin of this view of divinity lies in the Hebrew background of Jesus, his Jewish context, the life he lived, and what this seemed to his followers to imply about the nature of the world and all life – each life, each form of life – within it.

The fulcrum of this faith is belief in a God who is fully in and with the world [not outside and often opposed to it.] **The world is God’s place, its processes are the means through which God works, its destiny and that of the divine are intertwined.** The chief symbols of this understanding of God are:

- a peasant newborn in a manger,
- a child growing in knowledge,
- a teacher of compassion for all things,
- a prophet opposing injustice,
- a preacher of new ways of being, and
- a lonely man hanging on a cross, forgiving his enemies and doubting his faith, who somehow gives rise to a confidence – expressed in different, even conflicting, ways by his followers – that evil is not ultimately victorious.

A manger, a prophet, a cross – these are not the symbols of a cosmic monarch or king. If they can faithfully symbolize God at all, it will be a God whose place is in the world, with the creation, among the creatures. It will be a God whose reality incorporates the realities of all created life – change and order, animate and inanimate, human and non-human, living and dying, good and bad, joy and sorrow. It will be a God whose way of creating is the persuasive power of what is best or better for each given situation, large and small. It will be a God whose way of saving is a presence throughout the creation, as creative energy, judging goodness, healing love.

It will not be a God who makes worlds on command, determines evolution in advance, stops bullets in their flight, topples tyrants from their thrones, or works other magical interventions. It will be a patiently working God. One who inspires

the new, undergirds the good, and heals the broken by being fully present in and with the whole creation.

It will be the incarnate God made known to us in Jesus Christ.

That's what we will continue to explore during the upcoming season of Advent, in preparation for Christmas Day, the day we celebrate the Incarnation – God with us!

Our Epistle Reading for this day summarizes it best when it declares in Colossians 1:15, “**Jesus is the [visible] image of the invisible God.**” And in verse 19, “**For in Jesus all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.**” **Believing that is why I can call myself a Christian!**

All this is to say, from a progressive Christianity standpoint, that despite the best efforts of metaphorical language from thousands of years ago, God is not an old, gray-headed monarch, sitting on a throne somewhere up in the sky, spouting kingly proclamations from on high. But to best of my limited ability, this is still an image of God that is hard for me to get out of my head.

In addition to that, **a theologically progressive understanding of God will not be a God to whom is ascribed absolute power simply because of the ancient equation connecting God to absolute goodness.**

I am fully aware that there is still a good majority of Christians, perhaps many sitting in this sanctuary this morning, who will continue to cling tightly to the image of God as King, and Christ as King. But for those of us headed down this new path of progressive Christianity, this is one image we might need to consider simply as a carryover from an ancient worldview – a worldview to which we no longer belong or hold on to.

As a closing disclaimer, you may need to filter the lyrics of the upcoming Hymn of Response through your own worldview and understanding of the nature and character of God and Christ. The hymn, from the “Christ the King” section of our Presbyterian Hymnal, is entitled, “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name!” It was written in 1793 and includes the refrain, ‘Crown Him Lord of all!’ The hymn’s tune name is fittingly called “Coronation.”

After all, this is Christ the King Sunday, and all that has preceded this has just been... for your consideration.

Amen.