

Looking for a King

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Jeremiah 23:1–6; Psalm 46; Colossians 1:11–20; Luke 23:35–43

Something I think we take for granted in the West and in particular in the United States is just how rare and fragile a thing it is that we get to have a say in how our leaders guide our communal life. In the grand scheme of human history, any form of democratic society is the exception to the rule. This was not lost on those who constructed our Constitution. When asked what sort of government the framers had formed coming out of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, Benjamin Franklin famously replied, “a republic, if you can keep it.”¹

And indeed the inertia of things seems to tend toward authoritarianism. Just five years prior in the uncertainty following the American Revolution, a rogue colonel had the idea of appointing George Washington as King of the United States, an idea Washington squashed in his reply to the fanciful letter.²

The impulse towards authoritarianism even extends beyond our galaxy. In *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones*, the young Jedi Anakin Skywalker describes his ideal form of government to a Galactic Senator. He says: “We need a system where the politicians sit down and discuss the problems, agree what's in the best interests of all the people, and then do it.” An idealistic, if naive sentiment. The Senator replies: “That is exactly what we do. The trouble is that people don't always agree. In fact,

¹ <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/constitutionalconvention-september17.htm>

² <https://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/was-george-washington-really-offered-king-us.htm>

they hardly ever do.” In a chilling twist for those who know the whole story, the teenager who will become Darth Vader then says that someone should make them agree.³ Anakin is looking for a king, not knowing he would become that king's, rather, that Emperor's sword of terror.

Why is our impulse for a king so strong? Why do we want a king? Is it because deep down we think that brute force is the only way to get things done? Is it a matter of efficiency, the pragmatic concession that personal autonomy is an acceptable price to pay for the convenience of a smoothly running society?

I don't think we will get to the bottom of that issue this morning, but we can say with certainty that this impulse is nothing new. Our Scriptures are filled with people who chase after the idea of having a king, even when it is constantly getting them into trouble.

Originally a people without a king, Israel decided to organize themselves to be more like their neighbors. They demanded God's prophet Samuel to appoint for them a king. Despite Samuel's warnings that a king would mean taxation of their material goods and conscription of their sons and daughters into the king's service, the people want to forge ahead anyway. And if you look in 1 Samuel 8:19-20, you see the base motivation that shows the universal appeal towards an earthly king: “[T]here shall be a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us, and go out before us and fight our battles.” Keeping up with other

³ <https://imsdb.com/scripts/Star-Wars-Attack-of-the-Clones.html>

nations, having someone who is in charge, and having someone responsible for their protection. That is what the Israelites want.

It is not an agreement that works out well for them. Saul is chosen as Israel's first king, and in addition to the warnings of Samuel coming true, Israel cascades through a litany of bad rulers and bad decisions that end up in a divided kingdom and ultimately in exile.

This is not to say that there were not any bright moments along the way. But if you look through the books of Kings and Chronicles, along with the brighter episodes in the reigns of David, Solomon, and Josiah, you get the frequent refrain attached to a ruler: "he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord." Idolatry, mistreatment of the people, alliances with wicked nations, Abraham's family broken up into northern and southern kingdoms; this is the legacy of the kings of Israel and Judah.

These leaders are the ones being taken to task in Jeremiah 23, not just the kings, but the whole political and religious establishment. They are negligent shepherds whose crooked ways have led the people into exile, taken away from their homes as captives in Babylon while God's holy city of Jerusalem lies destroyed. But then, a promise: God will raise a righteous branch, who will deal in justice and righteousness. This remains the hope of the people throughout the Exile. Some day, a good king will come.

And the people look for this good king, often in revolutionary leaders who have varying levels of success. If we aren't careful, a desire to see a good king can drive us

to settle for a not so good one. For Israel, things seem to really get going about 150 years before Jesus was born, when the Maccabees actually gain independence from their Greek overlords. And yet, there always seems to be a stronger worldly king, and the short-lived independence is all but washed away when the Roman Emperor Pompey marches into Jerusalem with his legions in the year 63 BC. If the measure of kings is who has the most power, God's people always seem to come up short.

And so a few ears start perking up when a new preacher comes out of Galilee who doesn't seem to be afraid of the Romans or the puppet leaders they have placed over Israel. He is a prophet of God who tells it like it is and leaves a wake of sick people healed and blind people who can now see. But he doesn't seem too interested in violent revolution. Even some of his closest followers are a little confused at the fact that he isn't talking about restoring the Davidic line of kings, a line he himself has a claim to.

And then the inevitable happens. Even though he has not raised a finger against Rome, Rome, along with the leaders of Israel, see that he is put to death. And on his cross is written the charge: "King of the Jews." Frederick Buechner reminds us that we ought to read the sign as an implement of cruel mockery, suggesting the sign in this day and age would say something like "Head Jew."⁴ As another scholar has put it, the message of the sign in our Gospel reading is something along the lines of, "this is what happens to those calling themselves King of the Jews."⁵ If Jesus is a king, he wears a crown of thorns.

⁴ <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2017/6/14/the-bible-without-tears>

⁵ Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Luke*, p. 378.

And if the story ended there, his kingdom would have ended there. It would have been a fair assumption to make. As the already quoted Benjamin Franklin has said, the only thing as certain as taxation is death. But as it turns out, the thorny crown is not the only one that our Lord wears. As we know well, the cross is not the end of the story. It turns out that Jesus' authority means that he wears the crown of New Creation Life, and that the grave could not successfully hold him down.

Consider this: All the other leaders who would have taken upon themselves that title of God's righteous branch come to save his people, they were proven ineffective because they died. This was the failure of the revolutionaries - the overlords with the bigger armies and more sophisticated technology could snuff them out, ending their revolution. The threat of death is the ultimate trump card of earthly power. But for God's true Righteous Branch death is not an insurmountable obstacle. His reign and rule extend beyond the power of the grave.

And then our crucified and resurrected King did something else incredible, he ascended into heaven to be seated at the right hand of the Father. The power of resurrection turns out to be the power over the entirety of Creation. Our King today wears the crown of thorns, the crown of life and the crown of the cosmos. Hear again the epic nature of Jesus' reign as described in our reading from Colossians:

"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of

the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”⁶

Eat your heart out, Caesar. The power that the worldly kingdoms of the world chase after, the power that they kill, enslave, and steal for, is fleeting. True power, true authority, wrought of divine love and sacrifice sits in the hands of the one who made everything.

Are you looking for a king? The thief on the cross was. Put yourselves in the place of this thief for just a moment. He is often called a thief, but Luke calls him simply a criminal. He had grown up in a world where his people were dominated by an outside force. He would have grown up with the stories of the freedom that had gone away less than a century before when Rome had come to town. The Great Depression is about as far away from us as the end of the most recent era of independent rule in Israel was at the time of the crucifixion. This man now on the cross beside Jesus would have heard the stories. Perhaps he would have been one of those longing for a king. Given his position on the cross, it is likely he had joined in some sort of revolutionary activity, maybe he had roughed up a tax collector, joined up with a band of raiders, or maybe he just spoke his mind too often and too loudly, but whatever his crime, he seems to admit his guilt. This thief’s efforts at building a kingdom for himself or his people had led to his ruin.

⁶ Col 1:15-20

And then, he sees the man next to him on the cross. Perhaps he had heard of the preacher from Galilee, perhaps he had even heard him speak. He probably didn't approve of his methods; Jesus' revolution was far too quiet for his liking, no if you want something to happen, you need to take control and make some noise. All that noise had landed him on a cross.

And so he looks over at the man who shares his fate. He sees the sign above his head; "King of the Jews," meant to mock, belittle, and terrorize. But he sees through it. He finally believes. Suddenly, he is looking for another type of Kingdom, another type of King. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Are you looking for a king? There are a lot of places for you to look. And so often, we get it wrong. There are the usual suspects, the political strongmen, the ideologues, the intellectual elite. "Come and follow me. I'll give you Paradise."

But there are more slippery rulers vying for our allegiance and efforts. Often they begin with good desires - the desire to succeed, the desire for connection with others, the desire for stability. But when we put these desires on the throne of our hearts, that's when the trouble starts.

"If only" thinking can be a good indicator of a false hope in a false kingdom. "If only I had a better paying job.. If only people respected me more...If only I was in a relationship...If only I had this much to live on..." The problem with "If only..." is that it never is satisfied.

The thief on the cross may have had a good desire to see his people free. "If only God would grant us a leader to overthrow Rome," but his limited vision of freedom tied him to a false king. Thankfully, Jesus showed up before it was too late.

We have this morning an opportunity to rehearse and rededicate ourselves to King Jesus as Silas and Micah Smith receive the sacrament of baptism. They will say this morning for the first time the vows they will live under for the rest of their lives, to turn their backs on the world, the flesh and the Devil, the false kings of this world, and turn to Jesus. To be baptized into Christ is to declare that he is indeed King of the universe and of each and everyone who comes to these waters. And so as we hear these vows taken in faith, let us each reaffirm our commitment to the One and True King.

So if you are looking for a King today, he's here. If you are looking for a King today, he loves you. If you are looking for a king today, his kingdom will have no end. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."