

**The Complete Christ
First Presbyterian Church
Pittsford, NY 14534**

**November 20, 2016
Christ the King Sunday**



1. Hark the Herald Angels Sing glory to the newborn King.
 - a. Newborn king?
 - i. Wait a minute
 - ii. Don't worry, Christmas is still five Sundays away.
 - iii. We are not yet celebrating the babe's birth.
 - iv. We are celebrating Christ being a King.
 - b. As with much of life, we end where we begin.
 - i. This is the time in our Lectionary calendar immediately preceding the four weeks of Advent.
 1. This is also the last Sunday of the year in which our Gospel lessons will come primarily from Luke.
 2. Next Sunday, the first Sunday in Advent, our gospel texts will once again come primarily from Matthew.
 - c. On Christ the King Sunday, we celebrate one of the characterizations or offices of Christ – King.
 - i. The other offices are prophet and priest.
 - ii. But we don't have Christ the Prophet Sunday or Christ the Priest Sunday.
 1. Why not?
2. Humanity has historically and inexplicably been obsessed with royalty.
 - a. We know that Israel pestered the prophet Samuel to give them a king and he anointed Saul in reluctant response.

- b. Elvis became the King of Rock and Roll.
- c. In 2015, people spent \$1.8 billion on goods and services related to the British monarchy.¹
 - i. Tourism is the nation's third largest industry accounting for one in twelve jobs.
 - ii. According to Buckingham Palace, sustaining the royal family costs Britons about 81 cents, per person, per year. The total came to about \$51.1 million for 2012-2013.²
 - iii. Some experts dispute the crown's low estimate pegging it at ten times higher or expenses of approximately \$500 million.
 - iv. Even with that estimate, the net income generated by all things royal is a whopping \$1.3 billion.
- d. Our obsession with royalty does not stop with reality.
 - i. Just think of all the Disney princesses and other fabled folk undergirding our collective mythology.
- e. This obsession with royalty is perpetuated even in new literary expressions.
 - i. Consider that the Greek word for King is basileum
 1. The diminutive form of basileum is basiliskos (little King)
 2. Yes, Harry Potter fans: JK Rowling named Voldemort's snake the Basilisk, the little King
 3. In case you were wondering, yes, the Greek word for King is a cognate of the word basilica, a medieval church style found especially in Italy
- f. Somehow or another, humanity likes to sort itself into hierarchies.
 - i. Do you remember playing King of the Hill?
 1. The winner or King of the game has to climb over everyone else to hold a precarious perch.

¹ <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-queen-and-the-uk-royal-family-contribution-to-the-uk-economy-2015-9?r=UK&IR=T>

² www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/.../is...royal-family.../278052/

2. And that King is easily dethroned by the next person climbing upon him.
 - ii. It's a system based on putting down others to lift one King up.
3. Is that the kind of King Jesus is?
 - a. Not according to our readings for today.
 - i. Luke says Christ the King is scoffed at by the religious leaders, mocked by the guards and blasphemed by the prisoners with whom he is crucified.
 - ii. Jeremiah says this King from David's righteous branch will be unlike other shepherds who have scattered the sheep of God's pasture.
 1. What do shepherds have to do with Kings?
 2. In the Ancient Near East, shepherd was another name for a high ranking leader such as a king.
 3. Jeremiah's prophecy was an indictment against the currently enthroned King Zedekiah, not to be confused with the Good King Hezekiah.
 4. Jeremiah says this righteous King will deal wisely, execute justice, and live righteously.
 - a. His behavior is epitomized by the prophet Micah's answer as to what the Lord requires of us: do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your God.
4. The King Christ is breaks all our stereotypes.
 - a. Our daughter Rachel entered middle school this year.
 - i. Bill and I can hardly believe it.
 1. When did that happen?
 - ii. The Middle School counselors recently made a presentation to parents.
 1. Between them, these ladies have 45 years of professional experience.
 2. Can you guess what they identified as the number one challenge for middle school students (and their families)?

3. Stereotypes.
 - a. Jocks, nerds, artsy, stuck up, sloppy, creative, ditsy, disorganized, geeks, rich, poor, popular, stoner, loner, crazy.
 - b. Cliques form: relational, electronic and physical bullying ensues.
 - c. We have all used these stereotypes or had them used against us.
 - i. I have used them.
- b. When I first graduated from Princeton, I was selected to be a part of a Transition into Ministry program funded by a generous grant from the Lilly Foundation.
 - i. Bill and I along with six other newly-ordained pastors and their spouses covenanted with one another to meet regularly for continuing studies and theological reflection upon our callings as pastors.
 1. We were mentored by two large congregation senior pastors in the PCUSA.
 2. When we gathered for the first of several retreats and shared with one another our life stories I made judgmental stereotypes *which I regret*.
 - a. Thank heaven, God is merciful and was patient with me even in my being judgmental.
 3. Over the course of our retreats, this group of pastors and partners shared the miscarriages and births of children, the deaths of parents and siblings, the joys and challenges of pastoral callings and fallings.
 - a. Through it all, we found some wisdom.
 - b. We found God loves each one of us uniquely.
 - c. We found we love Christ the Prophet, Priest and King.

- d. We found the Holy Spirit continuing to work in marvelous and mysterious ways.
 - i. I am so grateful for their breaking my stereotypes.
- 5. The King Christ is breaks all our stereotypes.
 - a. A Christ-like King leads not by brute force but by caring for those who are poor, oppressed and captive.
 - i. Christ revealed this to the leaders of the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth when he was handed the scroll of Isaiah and Jesus read:
 - 1. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.
 - 2. As he handed the scroll back to the attendant, Jesus said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:16-21)
 - b. The majesty of Christ the King is not revealed when we look up but when we look down.
 - i. One of the most powerful things Christ the King does is forgive sins or debts.
 - ii. There are examples of Kings doing such wise things in humanity's history.
- 6. In ancient city-states such as Babylon, Sumeria and Judaea, rulers found it necessary to cancel all consumer debt from time to time.
 - a. Their reason for doing so was not just wise and merciful: it was practical.
 - i. When peasants became too debt-ridden, the fabric of society was torn apart.
 - b. Dr. David Graeber of the London School of Economics wrote a fascinating history of debt in 2011.
 - c. He writes, "we don't know precisely when and how interest-bearing loans originated, since they appear to predate writing.

- i. Most likely, Temple administrators invented the idea as a way of financing the caravan trade.”
- d. By 2400 BC it already appears to have been common practice for wealthy merchants to make loans to peasants who were in financial trouble on collateral.
 - i. When the debtors were unable to pay, the merchants began to take their property.
 - ii. The appropriation usually started with grain, sheep, goats, and furniture, then moved on to fields and houses, or, ultimately, family members.
- e. The effects were catastrophic.
 - i. If for any reason there was a bad harvest, large proportions of the peasantry would fall into debt.
 - 1. Families would be broken up.
 - ii. Before long, lands lay abandoned as indebted farmers fled their homes for fear of repossession.
 - 1. These refugees joined semi-nomadic bands on the desert fringes of urban civilization.
 - iii. Faced with the potential for complete social breakdown, Sumerian and later Babylonian kings periodically announced declarations of freedom for consumer but not commercial debt.
 - iv. The Sumerian word *amargi*, the first recorded word for 'freedom' in any known human language, literally means 'return to mother' -- since this is what freed debtors were finally allowed to do. ³
- f. The Old Testament book of Nehemiah tells of one of these declarations of freedom.
 - i. Nehemiah was a Jew born in Babylon, a former cup-bearer to the Persian emperor.
 - ii. In 444 BC, he managed to talk the King into appointing him governor of his native Judaea.

³ David Graeber. *Debt: Updated and Expanded: The First 5,000 Years* (New York: Melville House, 2011) Pages 64-65, 81-82.

- iii. He also received permission to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem that had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar more than two centuries earlier.
 - g. The problem was that Nehemiah quickly found himself confronted with a social crisis.
 - i. All around him, impoverished peasants were unable to pay their taxes.
 - 1. Creditors were carrying off the children of the poor.
 - ii. Nehemiah's response was to issue a classic Babylonian-style declaration of freedom.
 - 1. All non-commercial debts were to be forgiven.
 - h. At the same time Nehemiah managed to locate and reinstate much of the Torah.
 - i. Lo and behold, the Torah mandates a declaration of freedom.
 - ii. The Law of Jubilee stipulates that all debts would be automatically cancelled 'in the Sabbath year' (that is, after seven years had passed), and that all who languished in bondage owing to such debts would be released.
 - 1. Nehemiah used the power of the Persian King for good.
7. Christ is a King who regularly forgives debts, seeking relationship, not subservience, with those he rules.
- a. The King Christ is breaks all our stereotypes.
 - i. How does Christ do that?
 - 1. Remember, Christ is not one-dimensional.
 - 2. Christ is not only part of the Trinity.
 - 3. Christ can be described by more than just the office of King.
8. We need a more robust understanding of Jesus the Complete Christ.
- a. Picture Jesus pumped up like a young Arnold Schwarzenegger.

- i. On second thought, don't.
 - b. Jesus is not just the meek and mild babe to whom we will sing Happy Birthday.
 - c. Jesus is not just the cheeky teen who slipped his parents' yoke and taught rabbis 3, 4 and 5 times his age.
 - d. Jesus is not just the one who calls AND equips Peter, James, Andrew, John, Martha, Mary, Lydia, Carrie, insert-your-name-here to follow him.
 - e. Jesus is not just the one who rebukes demons and saves the oppressed.
 - f. Jesus is not just the one who tells the woman at the well everything she has ever done and still has a redeeming purpose for hers (and for our) lives.
 - g. Jesus is not just the one who heals.
 - h. Jesus is not just the one who feeds the five thousand.
 - i. Jesus is not just the one who asks God to forgive the people who kill him.
 - j. Jesus is not just a prophet.
 - k. Jesus is not just a priest.
 - l. Jesus is not just a king.
 - i. As with much of life, we end where we begin.
9. As we enter the season of Thanksgiving, let us celebrate the fullness of Christ: his kingly, prophetic and priestly offices.
- a. Let us also give thanks to God for uniquely making us and putting us in relationship with God and with one another.
 - b. Parker Palmer, author, educator and activist, has noted that our ability to sustain community is bound up in our "capacity for connectedness".
 - i. Connectedness is willingness to engage with others, even those with whom we disagree, out of an understanding of our deep interdependence.
 - ii. We need each other, not only for comfort, encouragement and support, but also for criticism, challenge and collaboration.

- c. In particular this Thanksgiving, let's remind ourselves and our families who may have wildly different opinions about our nation today, that we have more in common when we celebrate the fullness of Christ.
- d. We have more in common when we give thanks for blessings
- e. We have more in common when we worship something bigger than ourselves
- f. We have more in common when we minister to others.
- g. We have more in common when we offer hospitality to strangers and thus entertain angels.
- h. We have more in common when we bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, restore sight to the blind, free the oppressed, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.