

Last Sunday after Pentecost, “Christ the King” November 22, 2020

This morning we come to the last Sunday of what was known in previous generations in the church as “ordinary time.” This is the long season in the church year after Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent and Easter, ending seven weeks later with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Then, for half the year, we live in this “ordinary time,” after Pentecost, learning about the life of Jesus and his teachings, coming to a deeper understanding of God’s mission as we are to carry it out as the church. Next week, with the beginning of Advent, the start of the church year, the cycle begins all over again. Now in years past, I’ve always made a little bit of a one by playing “Happy New Year” on the first Sunday Advent, since we members of the church get a little bit of an advantage starting a new year about a month before the calendar changes on the first of January and the rest of the world celebrates a new year. Of course, this year there is a strong feeling among all that it is way past time to say goodbye to the old year. 2020 has been a killer year, literally. Across the globe, nearly 60 million people have been infected by the coronavirus and nearly 1 and a half million have died. In our nation, almost 12 million have been infected and over 250,000 have died. This pandemic has been particularly deadly for Americans: we have experienced nearly twice the number of deaths of the second country on the list, India, even though India has nearly four times our population. Indeed, just for this reason alone we would want to be done with 2020, but of course, it gets even worse, with the economic disruption and pain associated with the pandemic, the racial strife that we’ve witnessed and the deep political polarization and huge divides threatening to tear our nation apart. Of course we want to leave this old year behind. Unfortunately, the coming year does not all that rosy: as President-elect Biden and Dr. Fauci have both said, this will probably be a long, dark winter, as the pandemic rages on and we have to stay at home. But there are some very promising developments for the future: the vaccines look promising and are being developed with incredible speed and the Nobel prize winning economist Paul Krugman believes that the economy will pick up quite quickly after vaccines are deployed and that we can continue to lift up some of our essential workers. So as we leave this past year behind, we will move forward in faith into the coming year, asking for God’s grace and mercy to lead us in God’s way.

Prayer: Dear God, as the times pass, we know all times are in your hand. today through the power of your Word, help us to live ever more faithfully in the times of our lives, to serve in the Name of Jesus, our savior and friend. Amen.

This past Wednesday we finished our Bible Study on the Exile. I thought that Exile was a good topic for us to study in the scriptures, because this year of

pandemic certainly seems like a sort of exile. We have been out of our sanctuary for almost eight months, for eight months we have not broken bread together and during this time we have had to be apart. Exile from our daily lives and from the community that feeds and nourishes us. Now, the exile of the people of Israel in Babylon went on for decades, seventy years altogether, so our exile, such as it has been, is relatively light compared to what our spiritual ancestors had to face. Nevertheless, we still have the same sense of dislocation, the same sense of disruption and in the worst times, the same sense of abandonment. But God's word came to the people of Israel in their exile: Ezekiel's prophecy is God's word to the people of Israel in their exile, scattered as lost sheep in the day of darkness, God as the shepherd will gather them, feed them on good pasture, on rich pasture on the slopes of the mountains of Israel. God will seek the lost and strayed, bind up the injured, strengthen the weak: they will be nourished with justice, saving the flock and God will bring them a shepherd, one to rule for them as they come out of exile, come into the place God has prepared for them. This is the hope for the exiles, a hope of God's care and mercy, a hope of God seeking to feed and shelter the people, a God who brings hope to the people by providing a loving leader to guide them forward.

Jesus knew of this tradition for the people of Israel coming during their exile. He was also aware of the tradition of Israel's kings, the leaders who were to serve as shepherds of the people in God's stead. For Jesus, though, this takes a new aspect: not only does God show love and mercy for the people of Israel and leads the people into the kingdom of life, out of their exile, but now Jesus explicitly says how this is to come about. Jesus tells a story about a king who tells his people, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Now of course, the people who heard the king say this must have thought he was mad: when would a king ever have been hungry, thirsty, an immigrant, naked, sick, homeless, a prisoner, poor and outcast? Never, never, but the king says, whether it was me or not, if you took care of another, showed a deep sympathy and an active concern and caring action for another, for one of the least of these, you have done it for me. Jesus tells us that this king has a strong and singular identification with others: to show God's love and mercy to the ones who are the least of these is to serve God. This king identifies with the ones who who are the dispossessed, the outcasts, and by taking care of the least of these, we serve the king through our actions.

This morning, Jesus has given us such a different form of kingship to acknowledge. Usually in our world, we are overtaken by the trappings of power, which we also associate with royalty, trappings that include a notion that somehow the king exists on a “higher” level, above the people, and is surrounded by luxury. But Jesus turns this upside down: in taking care of the basic needs of those on the bottom, we serve the highest, we glorify God, we see the entrance to the kingdom of God in a place that might be least expected. Of course, in Matthew’s telling of the Jesus story, this teaching about kingship and the power of God takes on an even deeper form: on the cross, Jesus is identified as the King, and there, in the midst of human brutality and cruelty, we are shown the power of God to reign over evil, to show us, to show you and me, that even in the midst of greatest suffering and agony, God reigns supreme, showing us a love supreme that overcomes the evil of this world. This is a very unexpected and unlooked for kingdom given to us by God’s grace and mercy. Today, this morning we acclaim this kingdom and we praise Jesus as the King of kings and the Lord of lords bringing us the kingdom of God in this most unexpected manner. In his identification with the least of these, in Jesus God reaches out to us, reach out in love, his arms reaching out on the hard wood of the cross to embrace the world and each of us in this divine love supreme.

As we close out this extraordinary year, a year like no other during which we have been forced into exile, forced into physical distancing and witness the devastation of the pandemic on our lives and throughout our nation and the world, today God’s word calls us to recall the hope given to us in Jesus, the hope that as Jesus takes the side of the least in our world God’s love is given to us all. This is indeed, as Paul tells us, the “spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he called you.” In the days to come, as difficult and dark as they may be for a time, this power of God, this loving power manifest in Jesus our savior and friend, is the kingly glory that continues to give us the hope and the faith to meet the days to come. As we follow Jesus, follow in the way of the cross and follow as those who are called in the church, we follow in our prayers and our service of God’s reconciling mission of love, showing our love for our neighbors even in the midst of our exile by singing the Lord’s song in this strange land, in the midst of the pandemic by keeping ourselves healthy to keep our neighbors healthy, being responsible in taking up all the public health directives in order to control the spread of the virus and to end its destructive rampage in our world. We look forward in hope, the hope given to us in King Jesus, the hope of our faith with the eyes of our hearts enlightened by this love supreme, this hope of God’s never failing loving kindness. In the face of illness and death, in the face of widespread economic chaos

and hard times for so many of our sisters and brothers, in the face of racial strife that has marked our nation since its inception, the hope of God's loving kingdom to care for us in the midst of goes before us to lead us on, into the times yet to come. Thanks be to God this day, as we celebrate Jesus' kingship, for the amazing grace that brings us hope and thanks be to Christ for leading us on in the midst of exile toward the kingdom of grace. Amen.