



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

First Place in Everything

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

November 21, 2010

Christ the King Sunday (Year C)

Colossians 1:11-20

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May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

There's a certain truth about congregations that every pastor knows: It's better to have one retired person with a pick-up truck than two millionaires who tithe. That joke plays on the idea that, while we think we don't have enough money, the real problem in our culture today is not having enough time. While there's no denying that we are gripped by a lingering financial crisis, we are also plagued by a time crisis.

Where did all the time go? That's a question being asked by countless folks across the generations. How many times have you heard a retired person so, "I'm so busy now I don't know how I ever found the time to work." And our children are so swamped with hours of homework, sports practice, music rehearsal, and so many other things pulling for their time that they can barely breathe. And their parents are being pulled in million directions trying to keep up with it their children and work and dealing with illness. So little time, and so many voices calling for it.

It's become common when I'm trying to schedule an appointment with someone, to see them pull out as many as three calendars to check for an available time. It's a fascinating visual display of an often unnoticed truth about us: whether we are always conscious of it or not, our lives are controlled by any number of competing calendars. Not only do we check the yearly calendar with months ranging from January to December.

No, we also consult our kids' school calendars, our work calendars, our sports league calendars, our PTA calendars, and a host of other calendars that we have developed to order the time we've been given. It's enough to make your head spin when you consider the number of ways we order time.

It's not surprising, then, that the church has a calendar of its own. And I'm not talking about the unofficial "church year" calendar that runs from September through August. Nor am I talking about the operating budget calendar that runs along the lines of the calendar year from January to December.

No, I'm talking about the church's odd way of ordering time through the liturgical year. As many of you know, the church year begins in the longing of Advent when we wait for and prepare for the coming of Christ among us. At Christmas, we celebrate Jesus' birth. On Epiphany, we proclaim that this child that at first is known only by a few is being made known to a larger and larger circle, including the wise men from the East who come bearing gifts for this newborn child.

Following Epiphany, we move into the season of Lent, a time for repentance and turning back to God as we remember Christ's demanding claims upon us. Then into Holy Week and Easter, when we remember the suffering and death of Jesus on Good Friday, the long, plaintive silence of that Easter Saturday, and the glorious resurrection of Jesus on Easter morning.

Following Easter, the church celebrates Jesus' ascension into heaven and the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church on Pentecost. It's a way of saying that the risen Lord will be powerfully present among the gathered church but in a different way.

And then, we enter the long season of Ordinary Time, which really is not ordinary at all, because it's time filled with the presence of God, and we as the church do our best to follow God into all the places that God calls us.

Finally we make our way to the end of the church year, and we find ourselves saying on this day, "Christ is King." But if you look closely, you'll see that the church year itself has been saying the same thing all year. The very way the calendar is ordered around the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we are saying that Jesus is the center of time—which is another way of saying that he is at the very center of our lives. In him, all things hold together, including the church year.

Next week Advent begins, and we'll soon find ourselves out in the desert listening to Isaiah and watching for the hills to be made low and the valleys to be lifted up so that all flesh can see the glory of God. But today, at the close of the year, we celebrate what we have come to believe about the child whose birth we will soon celebrate—that he is Lord of All. That Christ is King. He is the firstborn of all creation, and he has come to have first place in everything.

That is at the heart of our reading from Colossians this morning. The writer reminded me of how my daughter Sarah is when she starts telling me some exciting story. She'll start speaking a mile-a-minute, and she'll get so excited about what she's saying

that her words take a while to catch up. When she starts telling me about something that's happened to her that day, she begins to speak faster and faster, the words piling up on themselves as she does her best to convey the essence of whatever it is she's describing.

The same thing happens in this letter to the Colossians. The author keeps trying to find enough words to describe the height of Christ's glory, and his words pile up faster and faster in an explosion of praise: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers--all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross."

You get the sense he could have continued in this explosion of descriptive praise forever. There is, however, one piece in that burst of praise that slows everything down for me. It's this line—"...so that he might come to have first place in everything."

Now I don't know about you, but sometimes I can get by with a vague statement that Christ is my Lord, that Christ is my King and it doesn't get much deeper than that. But when I'm struck by that line about Jesus having first place in everything, I begin to come dangerously close to the countless ways that I seek to put myself first. Or my family. Or my job. Or my nation. Is Christ King in my life, you ask me. Sure he is. That's easy to answer. Has he come to have first place in everything, you ask me. Now that's another question, and frankly I don't want to go there.

But like it or not, that's the question that has been consuming me these last few weeks. When I filled out our estimate of giving in support of the mission of this church last week, that was in my mind—is Jesus first in this.

When I schedule activities that fill my days, that question is beginning to press its way in—how does this choice of my time show that I am putting Jesus first?

When I plan how I will celebrate Christmas this year, will I put Jesus first?

By no means have I reached perfection in these choices, but at least the question is slowing me down enough to consider what role my faith plays in the ordering of my life and time.

Which brings us back to today—this last Sunday in the church year. You know why I think we wait until the end to acknowledge Christ as King? I think there are two reasons. For one thing, it's taken us a whole year of watching and listening to Jesus to recognize that this strange life of dedicated discipleship, this haunting figure who seems to live life upside down, is really the king. It's taken us this long to discover the truth that this one who is the servant of all is in fact the king.

Christopher Idle wrote a hymn about this striking contrast. Here's how he describes it:

My Lord, you wore no royal crown; you did not wield the powers of state, nor did you need a scholar's gown or priestly robe, to make you great.

You never used a killer's sword to end an unjust tyranny; your only weapon was your word, for truth alone could set us free.

You did not live a world away in hermit's cell or desert cave, but felt our pain and shared each day with those you came to seek and save.

You made no mean or cunning move, chose no unworthy compromise, but carved a track of burning love through tangles of deceit and lies.

You came unequaled, undeserved, to be what we were meant to be; to serve, instead of being served, a light for all the world to see.

I especially love this final stanza: *"So when I stumble, set me right; command my life as you require; let all your gifts be my delight and you, my Lord, my one desire."*

So what's the other reason Christ the King is at the end of the year? Because next week is a chance to begin anew. We have a chance to order our time and our lives around the person and work of Jesus Christ, so that he does come to have first place in everything.

As I thought about this as a new year for us—a new beginning—I came across a hymn called "The God of All Eternity," which is meant to be sung at the turning of the year. For us in the church, that time turns now.

It's final stanza is my prayer for us in this coming year of worship and witness and service as the people of Massanutten Presbyterian Church:

*God grant that we, in this new year,
May show the world the Kingdom's face,
And let our work and worship thrive
As signs of hope and means of grace.*