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Emanuel's Ev. Lutheran Church, Bellevue (Pittsburgh), PA  
November 21, 2010 • Christ the King Sunday (C)

*Jeremiah 23:1-6*  
*Psalm 46*  
*Colossians 1:11-20*  
*Luke 23:33-43*

We are bombarded by images in our lives – in print media, on our televisions, on our phones, and on our computers. They depict our society's image of perfection and draw upon our hopes for our lives. They are powerful, too, aren't they? It seems normal to see an image shared by television or internet and have it stay with you for the whole day and into the night. It's as if the pictures burn in our brains and make lasting impressions. Images around us make strong impressions and help shape how we interpret the world.

On this Christ the King Sunday, we are reminded that Jesus Christ is the ultimate image of them all. As the author of Colossians says, "He is the image of the invisible God..." (1:15) He was and is the picture of God, intended for the eyes of humanity. Jesus sets an alternative goal for our lives which is a significant contrast with all the other images of our lives.

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Our culture glorifies images of richness and celebrity. The majority of us see them and it's hard to keep from wanting what we don't have. We covet the apparent lives and belongings of others. We buy and buy, trying to satisfy our longings. Yet Jesus' picture of God is one of absolute poverty. He was born away from home, in a stable meant only for animals. Even as a newborn, his little life was threatened by people in power. Doesn't look like much of a king to me.

The images of our lives celebrate strength and health, youth and invulnerability. Pictures of people who would be considered weak or vulnerable don't appear nearly as often, and if they do they aren't honored or celebrated. Even as nations, we represent ourselves as strong. For ours, in particular, the ways of war is foundational to how we function in our international relationships.

Yet Jesus is an image of vulnerability and weakness – as a defenseless babe, when our king first arrived, and during the week of his passion, when our king was crucified. He is an image of nonviolent response, even when facing threats against life. His life and death depict real and personal suffering, in a way that we don't want to hold up as a norm or an ideal. Doesn't look like much of a king to me.

So much in our culture glorifies the things that we do, not what we are – like science, technology, and business. There have been a whole bunch of commercials, whether it's for phones or television technology, that depict technology embodied and unleashed on the world. We see terminator-like droids wreaking havoc on people's homes.

In contrast, Jesus the King was as human as it gets. He was made of flesh and blood. Born from a woman, he bled just as we do. He was not invulnerable at all -- at times he wept and was angry. Doesn't look like much of a king to me.



Jesus, our King, was the image of God's fullness among us. He was a witness to perfect faith in God. He demonstrated the power of forgiveness of sins and healing, which we can share for one another. Christ's person and life revealed to us what our lives can and should be. He lived God's love – in ways that explode any ideas we have about feeling God's presence or love just in our hearts or our minds.

Jesus lived God's love by releasing people from the chains that bound them – whether they were chains of sin, illness, or social exclusion.

Scripture's images of Christ provide for us an alternate set of hopes and visions for what our lives can be. We see Christ, born to an unmarried woman, living in poverty. We see Christ, broken and suffering, and dying the excruciating and humiliating death of a criminal. We see Christ, who was forsaken by the crowds that proclaimed his glory and by his closest friends. We see Christ, who went to places of hurt and shame to care for others in love. We see Christ, who challenged the powers that be so that normal people, children of God, could blossom in faith, hope, and love. We see Christ, who bore unimaginable power amid a humble life. We see Christ, who conquered death and sin once and for all.

These images of Jesus call us Christians to an oddly shaped life of faith. We see Christ our King in the eyes of our brothers and sisters who are poor, hungry, suffering, imprisoned, dying, or forsaken. These are people who are not acclaimed by our dominant society. They are not celebrated. Often these are the people whom everyone but family members ignore. Our society shoves them off to the side to be tended by poorly paid staff. When we behold our king in these faces, we offer care and concern, honor and respect. We bring an awareness of the sacred in every day life and relationships.

Jesus' way of being in real, human relationship with others in need is an integral part of the "kingdom of God" that Jesus mentioned so often. He told the disciples to say that the "kingdom of God" has come near, which is to say that the gracious kingdom of God is happening, now, amid our relationships. We contribute to it, and participate in it. We are ruled by a way of being together that is not determined by the values of our culture or government or economy.



Colossians reminds us that we Christians look to Jesus as the “head of the body, the church.” (1:18) The small act of looking to Christ reminds us of what it means for the church to be his body in the world today. We are to share this “new” realm of the kingdom of God with the world around us, in Jesus’ name. As the body of Christ, we look to him as our guide for expressing God’s care, healing, and forgiveness, especially for those who are most in need, and for one another.

Our congregation of Emanuel’s continues to prepare to make difficult choices together. We have many financial constraints in our lives, which means it takes prayerful consideration to decide how we may faithfully live our identity as the church. It all boils down to how we as a group (with the reality of our resources) can best live in and share the kingdom of God. Our synod leaders are opening our eyes to possibilities. Your council is doing its best to explore our choices. Ultimately it will be our whole body that gathers to choose. Soon you will be receiving a letter that shares some of our next steps together, as we prepare for our congregational meeting on December 12.

We could end up deciding many things as we answer God’s call. God is calling our ministries to be transformed – how we deal with our staffing, our building, our congregational identity, our money, our relationships with the community around us. All of these things are on the table. God may transform any of them into something even more beautiful, in order to share the grace and peace of Christ more clearly with the world.

In all of these questions and explorations, Christ our King is the constant. He has brought us into the kingdom, forgiven us and redeemed us. (1:14) He continues to lead us in our life in the kingdom and rule our lives in his generous love. Amen.