

Seeking a Savior in an Age of Empire  
November 25, 2007  
First Presbyterian Church  
The Rev. Barbara E. Davis  
Jeremiah 23:1-6  
Luke 1:57-80

Before his death a few years ago, Johnny Cash released several albums of cover songs; one of the songs “the Man in Black” offered was his rendition of the 80’s hit “Personal Jesus” by one of the quintessential bands of that decade, Depeche Mode. Even in its original synthesizer-rich form, it is a song with an eerie quality that expresses the longing to “reach out and touch faith;” it captured a longing in religious language of having someone, like Jesus, who is always available to listen and be there for you. Since I’ve already dated myself by even mentioning the band Depeche Mode, I suppose it does no harm to further confess that it was one of those songs that I played over and over and over again on my walkman as a teenager; there was just something about it that resonated that perfect combination of angst and hope that embodies adolescence. The funny thing is, listening to it that intensely, even though the title pointed directly to Jesus, it never seemed like a song about faith or Jesus to me. If there was a parallel to faith, even a mocking one, any connection to Jesus was lost on me at that time.

Today is known as “Christ the King Sunday or Reign of Christ Sunday” on the church calendar. Traditionally this is the Sunday that bridges “ordinary time” – the Sundays since Pentecost with the season of Advent, which begins next Sunday. Reign of Christ Sunday is a Sunday when God’s sovereignty and righteousness is proclaimed through the person of Jesus. It is a Sunday to express Jesus’ triumph in the world, both historically and presently.

Problems begin stirring immediately with this imagery: there is the question of whether we should really celebrating Jesus’ as a monarch within a country of strong democratic ideals, and there is the question of how to understand Jesus’ reign without undermining God’s rule. And

these questions are just the tip of the iceberg; Jesus as King of Kings and Lord of Lords is not language that most of us use everyday to understand who Jesus was and is for us.

Part of the challenge is that Jesus has taken on an identity outside himself in the religious landscape of America. In his book, American Jesus: How the Son of God became a National Icon, theologian Stephen Prothero seeks to find the identity of Jesus as Americans have understood him. He addresses head-on the ability of religious insiders to make Jesus, as he calls it, “culturally inescapable.”<sup>i</sup> Americans have created a multitude of images and ideas of who Jesus was and is and is to be.

In searching for the Jesus expressed in America, Dr. Prothero certainly found that Jesus’ ordinary humanness was a big appeal; critics have proclaimed that the divinity of Jesus has been lost in his ascent as a national icon, and he has been reduced to “an admirable kind of guy.”<sup>ii</sup> Jesus may be more personal in present-day America, but modernizing Jesus has been a long and heated debate in this century with critics, liberal and conservative alike, who fear Jesus, as Dr. Prothero puts it, “is more a pawn than a king, pushed around in a complex game of cultural (and countercultural) chess, sacrificed here for this cause and there for another.”<sup>iii</sup>

It is hard not to agree with the critics when we hear about things like the “Jesus balloon,” a 110 foot, 750 pound hot air balloon of Jesus, complete with a purple cape proclaiming him “King of Kings, Lord of Lords” that lifts off each year on Easter over California.<sup>iv</sup> How are we to respond to Jesus being made into such a spectacle? I guess we can respond by giving thanks that it wasn’t part of this year’s Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade, but beyond that, how do those kinds of images of Jesus satisfy our longing? While they might fulfill a longing for some, I daresay Jesus billboards, Jesus nightlights, or a Jesus full of hot-air are not what a large majority of people are seeking in a savior. If we are not seeking Jesus the monarch or Jesus the National

Icon, what then are we looking for? Surely there is some in-between ground on which to stand and understand who Jesus is within our faith. On this Christ the King Sunday, we are faced with a challenge; it is a challenge of how to understand Jesus for today without losing him in the historical expressions, American and otherwise, that have brought us to this point.

If we bring Jesus back to his historical context and the context of the Jewish faith and its history and tradition during first century Palestine, we can situate Jesus within the tradition of longing and seeking. Longing is one of the most important aspects of our faith, and it has been throughout the history of our faith story. The biblical passages for today are great examples of the faithful importance of expressing longing; and they both describe a particular kind of longing that seems indicative of our faith, the longing for a savior, the longing for a better world. For Jeremiah it is the promise that “the days are surely coming” when a leader will emerge, one who can execute justice and righteousness, one who will shepherd and guide the people. In these early accounts of messianic expectation, the longing is for one who will reign, one who will be king, one who will be King of kings.

In Jeremiah’s time there was still a blazon memory of King David, whose family line was most often conjured as potentially giving rise to this new leader. The Babylonians had marched from the east and laid their claim to the lands of Israel, who had just regained a fragile hold on their identity after the Assyrians had swept through a century before. The political landscape was a long way from King David’s glory days, and the mere thought of a leader who could regain even a portion of that leadership was a welcome thought. This longing would not be fulfilled in Jeremiah’s time; instead, the people would face new longings in a new land as a majority of those living in Jerusalem were moved to Babylon where they dealt with loss and dislocation and the challenges that arise when life goes on away from one’s homeland.

Luke's longing, similar in messianic expectation, is expressed through the constraints of yet another empire, the Roman Empire. While the political panorama of empire may hold many parallels between the Babylonians and the Romans, the passage we heard today from Luke's gospel is giving the expectation of the Messiah a new twist, for it is the beginning articulation of a desire fulfilled. The leader who has been longed for is near. Zechariah's words are a foreshadowing of that fulfillment; they are a celebration of a child born who will be the prophet of the Most High, one who will proclaim the arrival of the one who has been expected. On Zechariah's lips, the emergence of this leader is no longer just a desire; the Messiah who has been anticipated is at hand.

Zechariah's story is one of the most interesting in the gospels. Luke's gospel uses it to frame Mary's conception and the Magnificat, before launching into the birth narrative of Jesus. We did not read all of Zechariah's story this morning, but the beginning will sound familiar: He is an older man, a priest, part of order that helps serve in the Temple. It comes time for his section to be on duty, which involves members to be chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer the incense. Zechariah is chosen to enter the sanctuary and he does so, whereupon he finds the angel Gabriel. Gabriel comforts him by assuring him to "not be afraid"; a greeting he will also share with Mary in a matter of verses.

Gabriel continues with the good news that Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth will soon bear a child, even though they are older and have not yet had children. It is news that echoes countless patriarchs and matriarchs of the Old Testament, and it is equally unbelievable news to Zechariah as it was to his Old Testament counterparts. Like Sarah before him, who laughed out loud at such a thought, Zechariah questions Gabriel as to how this can be so and thus suffers the wrath of the messenger of God. By all accounts Zechariah and Elizabeth are pious, faithful Jews,

well-liked and respected, but little does this matter to an impassioned Gabriel who immediately strikes Zechariah mute for questioning God's will and his good news.

Zechariah spends Elizabeth's pregnancy mute and it is not until after John is born and about to be circumcised and named that his voice returns to him. Zechariah's words celebrate the long-awaited messiah, the savior who would rescue the people from their enemies and guide them on the way of peace. The possibility of fulfilling that corporate longing for leadership who could bring peace and justice and righteousness must have been overwhelming. Zechariah expresses it well, and it is no small thing that the arrival of a messiah would also demand that the people re-affirm their relationship with God. This savior is an opportunity to feel remembered, to feel the mercy of God, to believe that God has upheld the divine part of the bargain.

The messianic expectation is so engrained in our Christian thinking that is hard to remember what New Testament scholar Paula Fredrikson reminds us, that "messianic expectation was not universal" even in Jesus' time.<sup>v</sup> While the longing for a messiah may not have been universal, the longing to be out from under the rule of the Roman Empire was a passion felt by many. The characteristics of the leader who would bring the people out from under this reign could not help but have messianic undertones, and Zechariah's expression of who this leader would be parallels Jeremiah's version. His words indicate a continuation of the longing for a leader that Jeremiah expressed all those years before. It was a longing for a leader who would embody the role outlined through the ages. The Messiah would be one who, according to Fredriksen, led by "executing judgment, defeating enemies of God, reigning over a restored Israel, establishing unending peace, this eschatological prince epitomized the military prowess, valor, and virtues of his royal ancestor, the warrior King David."<sup>vi</sup>

The problem is, of course, that in envisioning this warrior King as the triumphant victor in a battle against the Roman Empire, the longing for a king begs the question is an empire any better if it is our empire? Jesus inverted the Roman Imperial Theology; the radical nature of his message was that he did not seek to replace the Roman Empire with his Empire; he sought to bring about the Kingdom of God in a fashion that was NOT imperial.

If the Roman Imperial Theology was “piety, war, victory, peace” the path to peace went only one way, through victory in war.<sup>vii</sup> Jesus dared to imagine and express that there was another path to peace, a path through justice and the strength of inclusion. The familiar language of empire inverted and re-imagined was a way for people to begin to enter into a new and exciting metaphor for living. Jesus drew his vision from the Jewish faith, but it was not the vision of a new empire led by a messiah. It was a vision based on community that involved the need to love the poor, the downtrodden, the outcasts, the strangers. Jesus was not, nor would he be, a warrior king, despite efforts to make him so.

Christianity grew out of his radical inversion of the imperial theology of his day and this inversion is also an important anchor for understanding him today. For what we are seeking in Jesus is an expression of that longing to bring about the healing of the world; we are seeking one who fulfills our longing for a vision of how to bring peace, for how to heal the sick, for how to welcome the stranger. Our longing is about giving voice to those who have been mute; our longing is about forcing the bulbs of hope to sprout and flourish now.

Making Jesus an ordinary guy may make him more personal and more like us, but we do have to be careful about denying his divinity. The fact that was God incarnate and lived among us is significant because it ties the human heartbreak of the world back to God in a way that is otherwise indescribable. We may be more comfortable with a more human Jesus, but we must

remember that a more human Jesus also gives us a more divine God. Those categories may clarify the roles of God and Jesus, but we must not insist on clarity when complexity is necessary. Understanding Jesus as divine and human allows for a deeper understanding of longing and hope, for it allows us a deeper belief that God understands something more than what we can articulate of our human suffering.

Walter Bruggemann, the Old Testament theologian, helps us think about the connection this way: “Suffering brought to speech concerns hope, because such protest in prayer and public life is a refusal to let things be this way then they are in fact unbearable. Those who enter their grief, suffering, and oppression, who publicly profess it and move through it and beyond are the ones who are surprised to find again and again, that hope and new social possibility come in the midst of such grief.”<sup>viii</sup>

God enters our grief with us, more completely because of who Jesus was; God raises a voice of hope among us for the otherwise unbearable brokenness around us. We are a week away from the patient season of Advent, when we are challenged to hold our expectation in active tension as we await the joy of celebrating the birth of Jesus. Today we are called to be impatient with the suffering of the world; the imaginative vision of the one who dismantled imperial theology for hope calls us to action. The longing of the world is before us; may the tender mercy of our God guide our feet in the way of peace and hope.

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<sup>i</sup> Prothero, Stephen, American Jesus: how the Son of God Became a National Icon, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, NY, 2003) p. 16.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid, p. 296.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid, p. 297.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid, p. 11-12.

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<sup>v</sup> Fredriksen, Paula, Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity, (Vintage Books: New York, NY, 2000) p. 124.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Crossan, John Dominic, Saving Jesus (DVD Series: Living the Questions, 2006).

<sup>viii</sup> Brueggemann, Walter, Hope within History, (John Knox Press: Atlanta, Georgia, 1987).