

## **An Ironic King, Yeah, I Really Do Think**

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**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**

**Psalm 46**

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So, I get it. *King* and *kingdom* are not the most popular metaphors in 2019. Those words conjure up hard images. The kingdoms we know are too often associated with domination, and inflexibility, and anti-intellectualism, and violence, and greed, and power, and political machinations. And kingdoms certainly don't reflect a post-post modern world where universal truths aren't so black and white. And too often kingdoms, even the best ones, remind us, in not-so-subtle ways, who's NOT included. And the kings and queens of such kingdoms are usually not the best that humanity has to offer.

Dawn Hutchings, who provides our worship guide quote this morning, goes as far as to question the appropriateness of using kingship and kingdom imagery to describe the Christ. Hutchings criticizes the Church for not seeing the irony in proclaiming a kingship of Christ, and indeed a rule over other religions, when Christ himself spent a lifetime rejecting such structures.

Hutchings point is fair. I would certainly subscribe to the notion that we can always enhance the imagery we use to describe a God who is robust, and loving, and creative, and affirming, and beyond the simple, rigid visions of millennia-old patriarchal structures. Additionally, I agree that any image used in a way that promotes the Christian faith as an exclusive avenue to divinity is harmful and shortsighted. The words kinship and kin-dom are often used as a modern replacement for kingdom imagery. We have, in fact, used such imagery with regularity in our worship and liturgy at Sardis.

But this morning, I would also push back on Hutchings in debating the merits of Pope Pius' use of kingly diction nearly 100 years ago. When we talk about authority or dominance, there is no more universal metaphor than kingdom and kingship. To be king is to rule in your space with absolute power and absolute certainty. And if one were living in first-century Palestine, or under the Fascist dictatorships of the early twentieth century, such power, such dominance, such authority could be visualized instantaneously. Caesar was God. Caesar had his

own coins that told you it was so. And Caesar had centurions at every post to remind you just in case you forgot.

Caesar also kept what was known as the Pax Romana or the Peace of Rome. This wasn't a prayer circle, and there's wasn't much pleasant about it. It wasn't peace from war, but rather it was a stability gained through domination – it was the peace of one giant thumb clamping down on the region.

Now imagine, that a bunch of folks from the Galilee start following an itinerant prophet from Nazareth who invokes God's kingdom, not Caesar's. This prophet dismisses any overtures for power or influence. And after this prophet's death, even to this day, some two millennia to be precise, people still share God's peace in his name.

To proclaim God's kingdom, to call Jesus the Christ or the Lord or the king of such a realm, and to articulate the tangible nature of the peace that comes with such a presence is powerful. Is subversive. Is defiant. Is extraordinary. Is dangerous. Is revolutionary. And most of all is necessary.

Yes, a kingdom where truth is power is ironic. Yes, a kingdom where rulers relinquish rather than usurp power is ironic. Yes, a kingdom whose leaders love rather than dominate is ironic. But gimme some of that irony!!! Because when God reclaims the kingdoms and systems of this world, in any age, we begin to implement practices, beliefs, actions, and attitudes that transform our kingdom structures.

We realize a reliance, not on kingdoms, but in the God who undergirds them and their people.

And to Hutchings point, if, we as the Church, insist on kingship Imagery, we had better be keenly aware of those times when we stop articulating the ironic kingship of Christ in favor of the predictable kingship of humanity.

So...that was about 600 words, and I read you a Psalm before this, yet all my talk has been of the Christ. I think the life of Jesus, both historically, and the resurrected life we experience now, is a tangible manifestation of the kingly God described in Psalm 46.

For here is a refuge. Our very present help in times of trouble. And I am struck, stopped in my tracks by that word *present* – meaning fully-focused, involved, paying attention to what’s happening right now.

For the earth is changing – its mountains may tremble, its seas may roar and foam, but God is present. Not by Tweet. Not by emissary. Not flanked by a thousand soldiers or diplomats. Not informed by the latest poll, nor captive to the most favorable media outlet. But present. Listening, loving, longing for me, and longing for you.

And a river of gladness, a liquid form of God’s presence, is flowing in and toward and through our city. And such gladness is not made manifest by instruments of war, nor by tedious legislation, nor by red buttons that threaten destruction. Rather, that gladness, that refuge, that hope, that sturdiness is evident in stillness. Yes, that’s right, God is still. And we are still.

But don’t confuse stillness with inaction. God sits still, listening, looking, being present with us. And I think, creating an environment where humanity can become aware of how to bring about the world we want: God’s world. Right now.

It’s a stillness that breathes life into a new season, one that starts next Sunday: Advent. In such a season, God’s stillness breathes life into a forgotten people. Forgotten women, in a forgotten place, bear sons and daughters who speak forgotten truths, and engage forgotten communities, and unearth forgotten joys. And people, beaten down by the systems of this world, rediscover their forgotten value.

Jesus, is the kind of king who is still enough to notice what the kingdom needs.

At a table. At a well. In the streets. In conversation. In the hearing of ancient texts. In the embrace of friends, both in times of joy and of grief. In the waters of baptism. In the healing of friends and strangers. On boats. And at work. And at rest. And along the shoreline. And in a garden. And in every possible form of community, both formal and informal. Jesus takes every opportunity to offer strength, refuge, and presence to his neighbors.

I suppose what I mean to say is this: Jesus as king is an audacious metaphor. Audacious, because we've never known a king who doesn't act like a king: one who washes feet; one who cries with us; one who recognizes his own humanity; one who proclaims his utter dependence on God. But it's that very audacity, that very irony, that very newness that is needed to transform our world.

To call Christ the King, to proclaim God's kingdom is not to wish for a kingdom where Christians offer retributive justice and cement their primary status as God's elite and chosen. To call Christ the king, to proclaim God's kingdom is to demand a new way of living, a new world, a better world, where love replaces power, inclusion replaces exclusion, and refuge replaces domination.

Sardis Baptist Church, today is Christ the King Sunday. Today, and in the coming season, may we open ourselves to the audacity of God's kingdom, mimic the humility of Christ's service, and slow down to enjoy the stillness of God's presence. For a child is coming. And he may just change the world as we know it. Next Sunday, we can hope together.

Amen.