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“Telling Time at Church”Rev. Jennie SankeyPsalm 46, Colossians 1:11-20November 24, 2019Christ the King Sunday |
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*Happy New Year!*

You’re probably wondering if pregnancy brain has fully claimed me, or if I haven’t been sleeping well, which is up for debate. Happy New Year! Today is Christ the King Sunday, a Sunday I’m *sure* you’ve all been looking forward to with anticipation. It’s the last Sunday of the Christian year, before we begin a whole new year with the start of Advent next Sunday. So today is like New Year’s Eve for Christians. Pretty exciting, right?

Our scripture today from the letter to the Colossians emphasized the power of Christ above ALL things. Christ claims our highest loyalty above all other worldly powers, past present, and future. We don’t have a lot of examples of true monarchies left in the world, so it might be hard to imagine what giving your highest loyalty to a king might look like. It means that we have a ruler whom we count on for provision and whom we rely on for protection. We did not vote this king into power, and there won’t be another election. He is a ruler who has a right to our things and property, a ruler who we depend on to do justice on our behalf. Above all other things, our loyalty is to this ruler. And fortunately for us, that ruler is Christ. In Christ, God has rescued us and transferred us into the Kingdom of God’s son, where we have forgiveness of sins. In Christ we are created. Christ is before all things, and in him all things are held together. Christ is the head of the church. He is the beginning and the end. In Christ is all the fullness of God. Through Christ, all things are made right. So today, we celebrate Christ’s reign over our lives, the world we live in, and all things seen and unseen.

So whether or not you were even aware that there was such a thing as a Christian church calendar, know this: As followers of Christ, we order our lives around his. For the past year, we have been on a journey traveling through the Christian church year, also known as the liturgical year. Together we have followed in the footsteps of Jesus, as he took his first breaths, as he walked the dusty hillsides of Galilee, as he preached to the crowds and taught his disciples, and as he walked towards the cross, was crucified and buried, and three days later rose again. Together we have celebrated the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, reflected on the mission of the church, and sought to live as disciples of Jesus. Today is the final Sunday of that year long journey before we begin all over again next week, as Advent begins and we await our humble savior’s birth. So today, Christ the King Sunday, we’re going to take a moment to practice telling time at church, looking back at the entire liturgical year together as we recommit ourselves once again to watching and waiting, to living as disciples, to helping God’s love grow in the world. We’ll use the colors of the many stoles I’m wearing to help us mark the time, and Paul Shane will guide us with a hymn from each season, to awaken our memories as we go.

We’ll begin at the beginning, the season of Advent.

Hymn 88: O Come, O Come Emmanuel

*O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.*

Purple, the color of royalty, marks the season of Advent, as we await the coming of Christ the King, as a vulnerable infant. From the very beginning of time, God has been present with God’s people. For generations, women and men longed for that presence to be more real. They waited for God to step in and make God’s presence known. And so in Advent we too, stop and wait, remembering that God comes to make all things new. After worship today, we’ll decorate our sanctuary with evergreen branches, signs of enduring life and twinkling lights, signs of Christ’s presence with us. Advent is a season of hope, as we prepare the way for God to come again. This year, our theme for Advent is “What Can’t Wait.” As we wait for the Messiah together, we’ll wonder together, what things can’t wait? What demands our attention now? What is it that God can’t wait for? In the ways we prepare and prioritize our lives, we’ll order our life around Christ as we wait with anticipation.

 Hymn 266: Joy to the World

*Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her king;
let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing.*

White and gold, colors of purity, truth and joy, mark especially important days in the Christian year, like today, and like Christmas, when we celebrate how God became human in Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us. At Christmas we remember how Jesus was born of Mary, how his humble birth shows that God stands with the poor and powerless, how Jesus is fully human in all his vulnerability and fully divine in all his divinity as the son of God. For Christians, Christmas isn’t just one day, but a full season that follows December 25, the 12 days of Christmas (you know that song too), that lead us through the end of our secular year into Epiphany in January. The tiny babe born in the manger was and is a King, with all the splendor of God, come to dwell with God’s people. At church we celebrate with special music, costumes, candlelight and that familiar nativity story, and are sent out to live in the joy of our savior’s birth.

Hymn 151: We Three Kings

*O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright,
westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light!*

On Epiphany, white and gold continue to be worn, reminding us of the light of the star the magi followed and how the light of Christ shines into our hearts and lives, transforming us into the people God intends us to be. In Christ, light broke into our weary world, shining the brightness of God into all the brokenness, pain, sorrow, suffering, and sighing, into every uncertainty and anxious and hopeless place. The season of Epiphany begins on the day of Epiphany, January 6. During this season, which lasts until Lent, we reflect on God’s self-revelation to a world desperately in need of God’s love. The word epiphany means, “appearance” or “manifestation.” We are called to journey to see God’s light, and like the Magi who visited Jesus, acknowledge and rejoice that Jesus is our king. At church we celebrate with the retelling of the story of the Magi, and reflect on how to be witnesses of Christ’s light and life in our everyday lives.

Hymn 482: Baptized in Water

*Baptized in water, sealed by the Spirit, marked with the sign of Christ our King;
born of the Spirit, we are God's children; joyfully now God's praises we sing.*

Just as we do, Jesus grew in age and stature, following in his parent’s footsteps. Like his father Joseph, he took up carpentry as his trade. Like his mother, he opened himself to the fullness of God’s life in his own. When the time was right, he journeyed out into the wilderness and responded to the call of his cousin, John, who was baptizing people to show they were changing their hearts and wanted God to forgive their sins. On Baptism of our Lord Sunday, we not only remember Jesus’ baptism, but we celebrate our own. This day always falls on the Sunday right after Epiphany, and white continues to be the color of the liturgical calendar, as we celebrate the washing away of our sins, our dying and rising with Christ. Jesus’ baptism was also the public declaration of his ministry to bring in God’s rule. Baptism joins us to Christ and his church, and we are called to share in Jesus’ ministry. This day is a reminder of our identity as followers of Christ: beloved children of God.

Hymn 423: Create in Me a Clean Heart

*Create in me a clean heart, O God; create in me a clean heart, O God;
create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.*

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, a day we come before God in repentance, leaving with ashes on our foreheads to remind ourselves that we were formed from dust and to dust we shall return. Like Advent, the color of Lent is purple again, and not only reminds us of royalty, but marks seasons of preparation and penitence. Lent lasts for forty days, mirroring Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness, and Israel’s forty years of wilderness wandering. During Lent, many will give up something as a show of sacrifice or will take on a new spiritual practice. These acts give us an opportunity to reorient our ordinary everyday lives toward God on the journey towards the cross.

Hymn 228: Were You There

*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*

*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
O! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.*

 *Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*

Lent culminates with Holy Week, the last week of Jesus’ life on earth. We begin this week with the waving of palms and shouts of “Hosanna!” as we celebrate Jesus’ kingly entrance into Jerusalem. At PHPC, we come together to worship around the dinner table on Maundy Thursday. We remember during the Last Supper, the meal that instituted the sacrament of communion. We remember Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. We remember how he was betrayed, beaten, mocked, and crucified. We remember the sign on the cross that said with irony, “This is the King of the Jews.” By the end of the service, all signs of the purple of the Lenten season are stripped bare. We end in darkness and silence. We remember the humanity of Christ, his great joys and deep sufferings, and his death, the most human thing he could do. And we leave living in the tension of the hope that we know comes with the end of this story, and the grief that those who loved Jesus were wallowing in.

Hymn 232: Jesus Christ is Risen Today!

*Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia!
Our triumphant holy day, Alleluia!
Who did once upon the cross, Alleluia!
Suffer to redeem our loss. Alleluia!*

The story of God did not end on the cross. On the third day, something amazing happened: Jesus was raised from the dead! In the resurrection, God shows us once and for all that death does not have the last word. The bareness and darkness of Good Friday is dispelled, and the sanctuary is filled with color and light. The color of the day is white, a reminder that the darkness does not overcome. Our lives are infused with Easter joy and hope. Easter is not just one day. On the church calendar it is a season of 50 days, spanning over 7 Sundays. Of course, Easter really isn’t just a season either. In the fullest sense, Easter is a new way of life — in which we are “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 6:11), called to “walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). Every year the church celebrates and rehearses this new way of life in the Season of Easter — as we await its completion in the fullness of Christ’s reign. God reminds us that nothing can keep us from the fullness of God’s love, and that God’s love reigns supreme over every part of our lives.

Hymn 280: Come, O Spirit, Dwell Among Us

*Come, O Spirit, dwell among us; come with Pentecostal power;
give the church a stronger vision; help us face each crucial hour.
Built upon a firm foundation, Jesus Christ, the Cornerstone,
still the church is called to mission that God's love shall be made known.*

The season of Easter concludes with the eighth Sunday of Easter, the Day of Pentecost. In the days after his resurrection, the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples and made it clear that he was not a ghost, but a real being, living once again. He promised his friends that even though he wouldn’t be staying with them in person forever, God would send them the Holy Spirit to journey with them. On Pentecost, we celebrate that God kept this promise, rushing wind and tongues of flame appeared among a room of disciples, signs of the Holy Spirit among them. On Pentecost, we wear a vibrant red, remembering the ways we are fueled and kindled with the Holy Spirit. We remember how the Spirit inspires us to believe the good news of the gospel, how the Spirit opens us to new relationships with God and one another, how the Spirit helps us to join in God’s work of making all things new.

Hymn 543: God, Be the Love to Search and Keep Me

God, be the love to search and keep me;

God, be the prayer to move my voice;
God, be the strength to now uphold me:

O Christ, surround me; O Christ, surround me.

The season after Pentecost, Ordinary time, is the longest season of the church year, stretching all the way to today. The color for the season is green, the color of life and growth. It is the season in which we look to the growth of God’s kingdom: in our world, in our communities, and in our hearts. Many of the scripture lessons for this season come from Jesus’ preaching and teaching, from his ordinary days on earth. This long and “ordinary” season reminds us of God’s extraordinary steadfast love, always available to our ordinary lives. Amidst the time of our lives, we can know and trust the God who reigns over all our days.

Which brings us back to today, Christ the King Sunday. We’re back to white, just for today, celebrating the authority of the one who rules not with the violence and power of earthly rulers, but with mercy and love, forgiveness and grace. We gather today to celebrate the reign of Christ, his victory over death, and to await the fullness of all things yet to come. If you check your calendars hanging on your wall at home, or on your phone, you probably won’t see Christ the King Sunday mentioned. But when we’re telling time at church, today is where we end, with a new beginning right on the horizon.

Christ the King Sunday is all about acknowledging that in every moment in our life, Christ reigns in first place. In the waiting, in the births, in the journeys long and short, in the wilderness, around the table, in suffering, in death, in new life, in community, in every single ordinary moment, Christ reigns in first place. Thanksgiving is a time we consider what we are grateful for, the things that hold first place in our lives. I’m not saying that the first thing you name as you go around the table must be “I’m thankful for the reign of Christ in my life.” But consider how the things and people you are most grateful for, perhaps your family, your health, the food before you, reflects how the order of your life serves Christ. Over the last year, what have you been through? How has Christ been present in those things and through these people? How might Christ be present in what is to come?

So, go out today telling one another, Happy New Year!

This Thanksgiving, make a New Year’s resolution to put Christ first. Let the life of Christ be the pattern for your own. Let Christ rule your life, not your calendar or your school schedule or your work-life or anything else. Live your life under the reign of Christ.

For as Paul wrote, Christ “is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.”

Amen.