

Thy Kingdom Come: A King Like No Other
Second Sunday in Advent, Dec. 5, 2010
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture:
Isaiah 11:1-10
Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19
Matthew 3:1-12
Romans 15:4-13

In the pantheon of fictional princesses, who is your favorite?

Granted, that is probably not a question most of you have on your mind this morning. Unless you have a little girl in your life and you are thinking about what might be under her tree on Christmas morning. If you do have a little girl in your life, then you simply see the world differently.

As parents of girls can tell you, there is a time – when a girl is about three to five years old – when princesses are very real and very important. For Kelly and me, that was the window when we took each of our girls to Disneyworld. When girls are that age and they see Snow White walking toward them, there is no question: It's *really* Snow White and their world is changed forever ... or, for most anyway, until they are teenagers.

The Disney company has built a franchise out of princesses. For the first half of the 20th century, Snow White and Cinderella seemed to be all the world needed. But then, long after Roy and Walt were gone, Disney figured out how to make the most of princesses. Beginning around 1980, like clockwork, every two to four years, new players took the stage in their own feature film: Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan, Tiana and now, just in time for this Christmas, Rapunzel.

I suppose it's easy to be cynical about the commercialism of it all. But when you see a little girl meet a "real" princess or open the right princess gift on Christmas morning, all that seems to fade away.

So what princess story speaks to you? And what might any of this have to do with this season of Advent, when we are expecting the Christ? (Hold those questions, if you will, and we will come back to them.)

Last week, we began a series of Advent sermons framed by the introductory phrase, "Thy Kingdom Come." We pray those words every Sunday in the Lord's Prayer. What do we mean when we say them? When we beckon for God's kingdom to come, what do we expect? What are we looking for and who are we expecting? What kind of kingdom and what kind of king?

If, in the Christian life, expectation can be equated with hope – and I would say it can – then that is our primary occupation as people of faith, and it comes to its crescendo in Advent. Advent calls on us to know the difference between the world as it is and as God wills it to be. We must understand what our roles are and what God expects of us. We must be clear about where we fit in with the kingdom in the here and now and the kingdom to come. And, we must be vigilant in looking for signs of that kingdom.

God's people have been doing all those things for thousands of years. Their hope for the in-breaking of the kingdom of God has been expressed in one word that is on the tip of our tongues in Advent and Christmas: Messiah. It's what we have in mind when we sing, as we did earlier, "O Come, O Come, Emanuel." It's what we contemplate when we hear Handel's soaring oratorio. But long, long before Christians thought of Jesus Christ as the messiah, God's people had hoped for one to come who would be a king like no other.

We trace our word "messiah" to the Greek word *Messias*, which in itself is derived from the Hebrew word *Masiah*, or "anointed one." In the context of the Old Testament, the anointed one was expected not to be divine but human. Following the tradition of King David, God's people considered certain kings and the occasional priest or prophet to be God's anointed servants, God's representatives on earth participating in God's sovereign rule.

One by one, in small ways and large, each king, prophet or priest eventually fell short of the high hopes of the people. So it is with earthly leaders. Still, oddly enough, rather than falling, the hopes of the people escalated through the centuries.

A few moments ago, we heard the high hopes of God's people in Psalm 72.

"Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son. May he judge your people with righteousness and your people with justice."

In those words, the psalmist doesn't ask for just *any* brand of justice or righteousness – but the anointing of God's justice and God's righteousness, which exceeds that of any human capacity, however great.

Did you hear the same kind of high hopes in the prophecy of Isaiah? He refers to the "stump of Jesse," a phrase that many of us have heard in the scripture for years. Isaiah means the line of King David, considered in ancient times to be the greatest Hebrew king. Jesse was David's father. Isaiah foretold a new shoot will come from that stump, even as late as the prophet's writing, years after the family tree of Jesse has grown out.

This new branch or shoot from the base of the tree, Isaiah said, will be even greater. He would be of royal lineage and come with all of the normal earthly signs and symbols of royalty. But there would be more. Unlike kings that had come and disappointed before, including even David, this messiah would rule with "wisdom and understanding,"

“counsel and might” and the “knowledge and fear of the Lord,” all sealed by the Spirit of the Lord. This messiah would judge the poor with righteousness and the meek with equity.

That was the earthly messiah the people of God expected for centuries, one who would be anointed by God and equipped by the Spirit. He would fulfill the vision of the prophets and the prayers of the psalmists that made up the Hebrew scriptures thousands of years ago.

Fast forward now to our times. If this were a Disney princess story, these visions, prayers and expectations would form the glass slipper that, one day, one day, would fit the foot of the long-awaited messiah, the kind of earthly leader we still long so desperately to find.

But God’s last name is not Disney. The slipper that the people imagined would never find its foot. Instead, Christ came into the world not as royalty but born in a barn to an unknown, unmarried couple just a step above the peasantry.

Jesus was of the line of King David. However, he cared for the poor. He concerned himself with the lowly. In these ways and others, he did resemble the one the prophets had foretold. So, it’s understandable that the disciples and others were quick to apply the label of messiah to Jesus. The expectation had built for so long, the hype so strong. The well-known Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says it this way:

It is no wonder that the early disciples of Jesus brought him within the orbit of (their) treasured poetry (They) began to notice as they watched him and then as they remembered him, that he did justice with righteousness, that he exhibited wisdom, that he was filled with the spirit, that he cared about the poor and the needy, and that he was the light of the world. They used old categories for him but they noticed that he filled them with new content. Where they watched for power, they found mercy. Where they watched for authority, they saw self-giving generosity.¹

Brueggemann nails it, I think, when he says that the king who came in Christ filled old categories with new content. A range of other scholars and theologians have come to similar conclusions about how Christ related to messianic hopes. Paul Tillich wrote that to think of Christ as the prophesied Messiah is both “adequate and inadequate.” The shoe didn’t fit exactly because Christ’s kingship, and thus the kingdom of God, stretched beyond what the world expected, often in directions the world and its rulers didn’t understand or respect. Tillich points out that even Christ himself seemed uncomfortable with the label of messiah and “prohibited his disciples to use the term.”²

¹ Presbyterian Outlook, Nov. 29, 2010, p. 27

² The History of Christian Thought, pp 14, 15

Marcus Borg, known for his focus on what's become known as "the historical Jesus," chimes in here, too. Borg emphasizes that the one he calls "the pre-Easter Jesus consistently pointed away from himself to God. His message was theocentric, not christocentric – centered in God, not centered in a messianic proclamation about himself."³

* * *

What, then, do we make of all of this? Does this disrupt our Advent journey?

Does it upset what might have been our comfortable understanding of it all supposedly worked – how the Old Testament prophets said a messiah was to come and how Jesus fit the bill, or the slipper, as it were?

Could this mean that Christ was *not* the messiah that God's people expected? And, if that's true, then who *was* Jesus? And, if Advent is a time of expecting the messiah, then what are we doing here? For that matter, what holds true about our faith altogether?

Is this an unwelcome perspective offered at the very worst time? We came here today to sing Christmas carols and imagine sweet nativity scenes. Call the Presbyterian police, you might say, and level charges that all of this is 'indecent and 'out of order'?

Or . . . maybe, just maybe, we see the power and sovereignty of God in the king who did come. Jesus the Christ was not royalty but a commoner; he sought the company of outcasts more than the affluent and influential; and, in the end, he willingly humbled himself on a cross.

In all of these ways, God outwitted the most gifted poets and the wisest prophets. God caught the world by surprise and still does if we know how to spot signs of God's kingdom around us.

Maybe, just maybe, knowing all of that enriches our understanding of the king who did come and the possibilities of an Advent prayer whose words are "Thy kingdom come."

Amen.

³ Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, p. 29