

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 25, 2012 - CHRIST THE KING

SERMON - STANDING ON THE PROMISES

I WANT TO BEGIN THIS MORNING BY EXPRESSING MY APPRECIATION TO THE CHOIR, AND THE WORSHIP COMMITTEE, AND EVERYONE ELSE AT THE CHURCH WHO WORKED SO DILLIGENTLY TO PREPARE THE SPECIAL SERVICE OF MUSIC LAST SUNDAY--THE ONE IN WHICH WE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO SING OUR FAVORITE HYMNS. I HOPE THAT YOU WERE ABLE TO BE HERE FOR THAT, AND THAT YOU WILL PUT IT ON YOUR CALENDAR FOR NEXT YEAR AS WELL.

I KNOW A LITTLE ABOUT MUSIC, HAVING WORKED AS A BUSINESS PERSON IN THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY BEFORE BEING CALLED INTO PARISH MINISTRY. WE HAD A FAMOUS SAYING WHICH IS: “DON’T TRY TO FOLLOW SINATRA”. SO I WAS NOT REALLY SURPRISED WHEN THEY SCHEDULED ME—THE INTERN—TO PREACH ON THE SUNDAY FOLLOWING THAT EXTRAORDINARY SERVICE!

IN ANY EVENT, IT IS GOOD TO SEE YOU HERE THIS MORNING. FOR MANY CHURCHES, THIS PARTICULAR SUNDAY—THE SUNDAY AFTER THANKSGIVING—IS SPARSELY ATTENDED. PEOPLE ARE OUT OF TOWN VISITING FRIENDS AND RELATIVES. I SUPPOSE ITS SAFE TO SAY THAT SOME OF OUR MEMBERS HAVE ACTUALLY GONE “OVER THE RIVER AND THROUGH THE WOODS TO GRANDFATHER’S HOUSE”, AS THE SONG SAYS. OR MAYBE

THEY'RE JUST AT HOME RECUPERATING FROM THE FRANTIC CROWDS THEY ENCOUNTERED ON "BLACK FRIDAY" WHILE GIFT-SHOPPING AT WAL-MART.

THE CHRISTMAS RUSH IS DEFINITELY UPON US. PEOPLE ARE ALREADY IN FULL HOLIDAY MODE. BY NOW YOU WILL HAVE HEARD "RUDOLPH THE RED-NOSED REINDEER" AT LEAST A HALF-DOZEN TIMES IF YOU'VE TUNED IN TO ONE OF THOSE RADIO STATIONS THAT HAVE BEEN PLAYING NOTHING BUT CHRISTMAS MUSIC SINCE NOVEMBER FIRST.

BUT THE CALENDAR OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH—WHAT WE CALL THE LITURGICAL CALENDAR—IS VERY MUCH AT ODDS WITH ALL THIS. WHILE THE WORLD AROUND US IS SHOPPING AND CAROLING AND PARTYING, WE ARE GETTING READY—NOT JUST TO COMMEMORATE THE COMING OF THE BABY JESUS AT CHRISTMAS—BUT TO MAKE OURSELVES READY FOR THE PROMISED RETURN OF THE RISEN LORD JESUS CHRIST, AT THE CLOSE OF HUMAN HISTORY. THAT IS THE MEANING OF ADVENT—WHICH BEGINS NEXT SUNDAY.

TODAY IS "CHRIST THE KING" SUNDAY—AN IMPORTANT DAY ON THE CHURCH CALENDAR THAT CAN EASILY BE OVERLOOKED IN THE RUSH TO ADVENT. THIS IS A TRANSITIONAL SUNDAY—LIKE THE HINGE ON A DOOR—THAT CLOSES OUT THE LONG PERIOD AFTER PENTECOST AND OPENS US UP TO ADVENT AND THE CHRISTMAS CYCLE. WHILE THE SECULAR CALENDAR BEGINS ON JANUARY 1ST AND ENDS ON DECEMBER 31ST, THE CHRISTIAN YEAR

BEGINS ON THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT, AND ENDS ON CHRIST THE KING SUNDAY.

THIS IS THE DAY IN WHICH WE CELEBRATE THE KINGSHIP OF JESUS CHRIST—PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE.

AS MODERN AMERICANS, IT CAN BE DIFFICULT FOR US TO CONNECT WITH THIS NOTION OF KINGSHIP. WE DON'T HAVE KINGS HERE. IN FACT, SOME OF OUR ANCESTORS WENT TO WAR WITH GREAT BRITAIN IN 1776 TO GET AWAY FROM KING GEORGE III OF ENGLAND.

WE HAVE PRESIDENTS, AND ELECTED LEGISLATORS. BUT FOR MOST OF HUMAN HISTORY—including the period in which our sacred scriptures were written—the world was ruled by kings.

SO IT SHOULD NOT SURPRISE US THAT THE OLD TESTAMENT TEXT FOR TODAY, FROM SECOND SAMUEL, IS PART OF AN ANCIENT HEBREW POEM THAT MAKES REFERENCE TO A PROMISE THAT GOD MADE TO KING DAVID OF ANCIENT ISRAEL. THIS IS NOT A FAMILIAR TEXT FOR MOST OF US. AND IT TAKES SOME DIGGING INTO THE HISTORY OF ANCIENT ISRAEL TO UNDERSTAND THE SITUATION IN WHICH IT WAS ORIGINALLY WRITTEN.

THE OLD TESTAMENT TELLS US THAT, WHEN GOD DELIVERED THE HEBREW PEOPLE FROM SLAVERY IN EGYPT, AND BROUGHT THEM INTO THE PROMISED LAND, ONE OF THE THINGS THAT MADE THEM DIFFERENT FROM THEIR NEIGHBORS IN THE MIDDLE EAST WAS THAT THEY HAD NO HUMAN KING. THE LORD GOD WAS THEIR KING. GOD SPOKE TO THE PEOPLE

THROUGH PROPHETS—LIKE SAMUEL. AND GOD RAISED UP JUDGES—LIKE SAMPSON—TO HELP THE ISRAELITES FIGHT OFF THEIR ENEMIES.

BUT THIS UNIQUE SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT BETWEEN A PEOPLE ON EARTH AND A KING IN HEAVEN DIDN'T LAST. BECAUSE, LIKE US, THE HEBREW PEOPLE WANTED TO BE LIKE EVERYBODY ELSE. THE BIBLE SAYS THAT THEY "CRIED OUT" TO GOD FOR A HUMAN KING.

ISRAEL'S FIRST KING, SAUL, WAS A DISAPPOINTMENT. BUT THEN GOD SENT SAMUEL TO THE LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM, AND CALLED A YOUNG SHEPHERD BOY NAMED DAVID IN FROM THE FIELDS TO BE ANNOINTED AS THE NEW KING OF ISRAEL.

DAVID EVENTUALLY BECAME A GREAT MILITARY LEADER AND A GREAT KING. THE BIBLE EVEN SAYS THAT GOD DESCRIBED DAVID AS "A MAN AFTER GOD'S OWN HEART." AND GOD MADE A PROMISE TO DAVID—TO ESTABLISH THE THRONE OF DAVID'S KINGDOM FOREVER.

LIKE ALL OF US, DAVID WAS FLAWED. AMONG OTHER THINGS, HE HAD AN AFFAIR WITH A MARRIED WOMAN, AND THEN HAD HER HUSBAND KILLED IN A FUTILE ATTEMPT TO COVER UP THE AFFAIR. DAVID BROKE HIS PROMISE TO KEEP COVENANT WITH GOD. BUT GOD DID NOT BREAK GOD'S PROMISE TO DAVID.

IN THE HEBREW TEXT OF SECOND SAMUEL, 23:3-5, KING DAVID—SPEAKING AT THE VERY END OF HIS LIFE—SAYS THIS: "THE GOD OF ISRAEL

HAS MADE WITH ME AN EVERLASTING COVENANT, ORDERED IN ALL THINGS AND SECURE, FOR ALL MY SALVATION.”

THE HEBREW WORD FOR "SECURE" IS SHA-MAR. IT MEANS PROTECTED AND PRESERVED. AND WHEN SHA-MAR IS USED IN THE HEBREW LANGUAGE TO DESCRIBE A COVENANT, IT IS LEGAL TERMINOLOGY INDICATING THAT THE AGREEMENT TO WHICH IT REFERS IS IRREVOCABLE.

NOW, FAST FORWARD ABOUT FIVE HUNDRED YEARS. KING DAVID IS LONG DEAD. HIS DESCENDANTS HAVE FOUGHT AMONG THEMSELVES AND SPLIT THE KINGDOM OF ISRAEL INTO TWO PARTS—BOTH OF WHICH HAVE BEEN CONQUERED BY STRONGER NATIONS. A REMNANT OF THE PEOPLE WHO ONCE LIVED IN THE NATION OF ISRAEL ARE NOW IN BABYLON, WHERE THEY HAVE BEEN CARRIED OFF AS CAPTIVES. EVERYTHING THEY HAVE KNOWN IS GONE: THE LAND, THE TEMPLE, THE KINGDOM OF DAVID.

THE COVENANT THAT GOD HAD INITIATED, IN WHICH AN EVERLASTING DYNASTY WAS GRANTED TO DAVID AND HIS DESCENDANTS, NOW APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN AN ILLUSION. SO THE EXILES WERE FACED WITH THIS QUESTION: CAN THE PROMISES OF GOD STILL BE TRUSTED?

AND I THINK THAT, IN SOME WAYS, THAT’S STILL THE QUESTION TODAY--FOR US. AS CHRISTIANS, WE CAN SOMETIMES FEEL LIKE EXILES IN OUR OWN COUNTRY. THE OLD ASSUMPTION THAT WE ARE “ONE NATION, UNDER GOD” IS NO LONGER ACCEPTED BY THE CULTURE AT LARGE. WHILE THE MAJORITY OF PEOPLE IN AMERICA STILL SAY THAT THEY BELIEVE IN

GOD, RECENT SURVEYS SHOW THAT “NONES”—MEANING PEOPLE WHO, WHEN ASKED ABOUT THEIR RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION, SAY “NONE”—IS THE FASTEST GROWING SUBGROUP.

OUR OWN DENOMINATION, THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA), IS IN DECLINE—ITS MEMBERSHIP AND ITS INFLUENCE ON SOCIETY FALLING AWAY. WE ARE FIGHTING AMONG OURSELVES OVER SOCIAL ISSUES AND CHURCH PROPERTY. WITH DIVISION AND DISSENTION IN THE BODY OF CHRIST--THE CHURCH--HOW CAN WE, AND THOSE WHO ARE WATCHING WHAT WE SAY AND DO, POSSIBLY BELIEVE THAT WHAT WE ASSERT ABOUT OUR CHRISTIAN FAITH IS TRUE? LIKE DAVID, WE ARE NOT FAITHFUL TO THE COVENANT. WE DO NOT KEEP OUR PROMISES TO GOD. SO CAN GOD'S PROMISES TO US BE TRUSTED?

BIBLICAL SCHOLARS BELIEVE THAT, WHEN THE HEBREW PEOPLE WERE CARRIED OFF INTO CAPTIVITY IN BABYLON, THEY WERE ABLE TO SMUGGLE SOME OF THEIR ANCIENT WRITINGS OUT WITH THEM. AND THAT, IN THIS ANCIENT POEM CONTAINING THE LAST WORDS OF KING DAVID, THE EDITORS OF SECOND SAMUEL WERE ABLE TO POINT TO SOMETHING THAT COULD COMFORT AND REASSURE THEIR PEOPLE IN EXILE.

IT WAS A MESSAGE ABOUT THE NATURE OF THE GOD THAT THEY WORSHIPED. A GOD WHO KEPT COVENANT WITH THEM, EVEN WHEN THEY DID NOT KEEP COVENANT WITH GOD. IT WAS THE GOOD NEWS THAT, EVEN THOUGH THEIR EARTHLY KINGDOM HAD BEEN DESTROYED BY THE

BABYLONIANS, GOD WAS STILL THEIR KING--AND HAD A PLAN FOR THEIR SALVATION. AND I THINK THAT IS STILL THE MESSAGE FOR US--IN OUR TIME AND PLACE.

THE BABYLONIAN EXILE ENDED AFTER ABOUT 50 YEARS, WHEN KING CYRUS OF PERSIA DEFEATED THE BABYLONIANS AND TOLD THE HEBREWS THAT THEY COULD GO HOME. SOME DID, AND THE HISTORY OF THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL WENT ON.

IN ANOTHER FIVE HUNDRED YEARS OR SO, A DESCENDANT OF KING DAVID WAS BORN IN BETHLEHEM--IN THE STABLE OF A ROADSIDE INN. AND THIS BABY WOULD GROW UP TO BE A KING LIKE NO OTHER. FOR, IN JESUS CHRIST, THE GOD AND CREATOR OF THE UNIVERSE, THE COVENANT MAKER, ALSO BECAME THE COVENANT KEEPER....FOR ALL OF HUMANITY...WHEN HE DIED ON A ROMAN CROSS, AND WAS RAISED FROM THE DEAD.

IF WE BELIEVE WHAT WE SAY--THAT WE WORSHIP A LIVING GOD--A KING WHO MAKES PROMISES AND THEN KEEPS THOSE PROMISES--THAT HAS IMPLICATIONS FOR US. IT TELLS US SOMETHING ABOUT LIFE NOW...AND ABOUT LIFE IN THE FUTURE.

ONE WAY WE SEE GOD'S PROMISES BEING KEPT IS IN THE CONTINUING LIFE OF CALDWELL CHURCH. THIS SANCTUARY, WHICH WAS HOME TO ONLY A HANDFULL OF WORSHIPERS A FEW YEARS AGO, IS BEING FILLED AGAIN. EVIDENCE THAT WE ARE A RESURRECTION PEOPLE.

AND NOW OUR CHURCH IS MOVING INTO YET ANOTHER A TIME OF TRANSITION: IN THE MONTHS AHEAD WE WILL BE CHALLENGED BY A CHANGE IN OUR PASTORAL STAFF AND BY THE CLOSING OF CALDWELL HOUSE. BY CONCERNS ABOUT HOW TO BEST USE OUR PHYSICAL RESOURCES, SUCH AS THE PRICE BUILDING AND BELK HALL. BY HOW BEST TO LIVE INTO OUR MISSION STATEMENT--OUR CALLING TO BE A PROGRESSIVE, MISSIONAL COMMUNITY, STRIVING TO REFLECT THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN THE HERE AND NOW.

THE SESSION IS WORKING ON A FRAMEWORK THAT WILL ENABLE US TO TALK TOGETHER, PRAY TOGETHER, AND DREAM TOGETHER AS A CONGREGATION AS WE ACCEPT THIS CHALLENGE. AND YOU WILL BE HEARING MORE ABOUT THAT IN THE WEEKS TO COME.

THERE IS WORK TO BE DONE. AND AS WE ENTER THIS PERIOD OF DIALOG AND DISCERNMENT, THE GOOD NEWS OF THE GOSPEL IS THAT IT'S NOT ALL UP TO US! THAT WE CAN MOVE FORWARD INTO THE FUTURE, WHEREVER IT TAKES US, CONFIDENT IN THE KNOWLEDGE THAT WE PARTICIPATE WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT IN WHAT GOD IS ALREADY DOING AT CALDWELL.

AS AN INDIVIDUAL, YOU MAY BE FACING SOME CRISIS IN YOUR LIFE THIS MORNING. IT MIGHT BE ILLNESS, OR UNCERTAINTY ABOUT EMPLOYMENT. YOU MIGHT BE AT A CROSSROADS IN SOME IMPORTANT PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP IN YOUR LIFE.

GOD HAS NOT PROMISED AN END TO SUFFERING AND PAIN IN OUR LIVES. WE ARE STILL BROKEN PEOPLE, LIVING IN A BROKEN WORLD THAT IS NOT AS GOD INTENDED IT TO BE.

BUT OUR LORD AND KING, JESUS CHRIST, HAS PROMISED TO BE WITH US, WHATEVER WE FACE IN OUR LIVES. THE APOSTLE PAUL HAS WRITTEN THAT NOTHING--NOTHING--CAN SEPARATE US FROM THE LOVE OF GOD. AND ONE OF OUR HISTORIC CONFESSIONS, THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM, SAYS THAT OUR ONLY COMFORT IS THAT WE BELONG--BODY AND SOUL, IN LIFE AND IN DEATH--NOT TO OURSELVES BUT TO OUR FAITHFUL SAVIOR, JESUS CHRIST.

AS INDIVIDUAL CHRISTIANS--AND AS A CONGREGATION--WE ARE STANDING ON THE PROMISES OF GOD.

AND SO, AS WE BRING THIS CHRISTIAN YEAR TO A CLOSE, AND TURN OUR FACES TOWARD ADVENT, LET US REJOICE. THAT THE THRONE OF DAVID'S KINGDOM IS ESTABLISHED FOREVER. THAT GOD'S SAVING COVENANT WITH HUMANITY, FULFILLED IN JESUS CHRIST, IS EVERLASTING AND SECURE.

THAT GOD IN CHRIST IS KING

OF PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE HISTORY.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.