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They seem to be everywhere you look. They are in the nursery rhymes many of us were raised with. They are in fairy tales and fantasy stories and feature prominently in historical novels. Of course, history itself is just lousy with them. Whether it's Old King Cole, the vain emperor who got tricked out of a lot of money for the suit he was born in, the Pevensie children who became Kings and Queens in C.S. Lewis's land of Narnia, the kings in Tolkien's Middle Earth, the King of Siam, the Caesars, the King Henrys, Queen Elizabeth's, or King Georges, there is no shortage of monarchs for us to consider, learn from, aspire to, or blame. Even the Bible is full of monarchs who are both vilified and idealized.

Perhaps the most notable monarch first encountered in the Bible is the Pharaoh of Egypt. One Pharaoh saw brilliance in a God-fearing man named Joseph, whose jealous brothers sold him into slavery. That Pharaoh learned to appreciate Joseph and welcomed his family suffering from starvation in Canaan into Egypt. However, that particular Pharaoh died and a new one rose to power who didn't share the first Pharaoh's opinions and enslaved the Hebrew people, the People of God, who cried out to God to rescue them from slavery. I'm sure you remember the rest of that story, how God called Moses who led God's People out of Egypt into the wilderness where there was a lot of wandering and grumbling as the people learned how to be God's People again. You'd think after that experience, the People of God, or Israelites, would swear off kings, queens, and monarchies in general. Sort of like how the founding fathers of America made sure to set up this Republic so that there is a President with a limited term, not a monarch with unlimited power.

God told God's People that God's intention in rescuing them from slavery was so that they would be free to live as God's People in the world, showing all the people of the world that God exists, that God loves them. The people of God were to worship God only, and by doing so show other people how they might live too. However, it didn't work out that way.

Starting at about the Book of Judges, after the People of God were all settled into their Promised Land, they were getting over their disappointment that other people also lived in the territory God has set aside for them and were discovering those people lived differently than they did. Perhaps in an effort to blend in, assimilate, avoid conflict, or whatever the reason, the People of God started changing their ways and according to Book of Judges started worshipping other gods. Eventually bad things would happen and they would cry out to God who raised up leaders, often flawed leaders, called Judges, who would do what was necessary to get the People of God out of whatever pickle they were in. The result of this repetitive cycle was that the People of God came to believe what they needed more than anything else in the world was a king. A ruler, a monarch, a person who would make sure they stuck to following God, someone who could bring consistency to their way of life. Besides, the People of God added to their argument, everyone else had a king, so they wanted one too.

Eventually God gave in to their request and there is a good portion of the Old Testament dedicated to the stories of the kings of Israel: Saul, David, and Solomon are perhaps the best known but there were others. Some were okay, some were quite terrible, some were mere puppets, a few were heroes, all made costly mistakes, none were perfect nor permanent. These kings came and went just like the kings of fantasy novels and history. By the time the New Testament started, the People of God were under the power of the Roman government, the heady days of King David were long past, and God's People were waiting for a messiah, warrior king who would bring them back to power.

Instead they and we got a very different kind of king. A king who is God Incarnate, God with us, who we see today dying on a cross, the method of death for criminals Rome believed posed a threat and used as a way to send a message about what happens to anyone who threatened the power of Rome. This king, though, if you noticed from the Gospel we just heard, was treated like a joke. The symbols of kingship that appear in Jesus' crucifixion were intended to further humiliate and demean him. At his left and his right were criminals, not heads of state like a real king or queen would have around them. The crown on Jesus' head was not made of fine metal and jewels like a proper king. The sign above his head was also a mockery and the wine offered was all part of the joke. These were signs of Jesus' extremely disappointing failure to deliver the hope God's People wanted. Rome was winning. Jesus had lost. So much for love wins.

Yet, at least in Luke's account of the crucifixion, there was more going on than meets the eye. The words of the leaders, soldiers, and thief were words similar to what Jesus heard from Satan back in the wilderness during his days of fasting and temptation: "If you are the Son of God, save yourself". It seems Jesus was being tempted not once, but three times, just like Satan's three temptations in the wilderness, to show the people what they wanted to see: power to defeat Rome, power to defeat suffering, power to defeat injustice, the power of a true king. That Jesus once again fought such temptation tells us what kind of a king, what kind of a savior, he really is, and what we really need.

Jesus is not the kind of king the People of God made for themselves from the people God raised up for them. Jesus is the kind of king that eschews human power for the power of God's love. A love powerful enough to endure suffering so that injustice is recognized, a love that has no fear of death because resurrection is the way God works. And resurrection is a completely different kind of power. One where hope can really be found when the powers of the world, the politics, the leaders, the systems, the institutions, the celebrities, whoever or whatever we put our trust in disappoints us, betrays us, hurts us, uses us or fails us. Jesus' resurrection shows that when whatever we have put our hope and trust in that was not of God proves to not have been enough, God provides a way. Jesus' death and resurrection give us the kind of king that not only leads us closer to God's kingdom, but brings God's kingdom closer to us. A king of hope that shows us when all else is failing, God is just beginning.

That is what we mean when we celebrate Christ the King Sunday, we don't mean Christ is a monarch like the human monarchs whose reigns all came or will come to an end when another more powerful monarch comes along. What we mean is Jesus is the one whose life, death, and resurrection has started bringing God's kingdom into a world that has been and is still longing for God's love and mercy and justice. That is the kingdom we have been baptized into, which means it is God's hope that we will live as the People of God, bringing that Love of God to the world. To help people see the difference between abusive and redemptive suffering, to stand beside the vulnerable, those who are afraid, those who feel they have no voice, to see disappointments or injustices as opportunities to rise up and find ways for God's will to be done here on earth as it is in heaven. These opportunities could look like any number of activities or conversations or programs, and they may not be easy or fit into expectations of what is usually done or has been done and that's okay because we have the reminder that if

Jesus can be a different kind of king the ways we follow him can be different too. It's okay to be different because we have hope that God is with us, and when it looks like love is losing, the story really isn't over yet. That is why I don't believe love wins, I believe love, the Love of God in Christ, endures through it all to the very end of time.

In addition to being Christ the King Sunday the vestry and leaders of the vestry here at Church of the Good Shepherd have designated today as our In-Gathering Sunday, the day they are asking for our community to come together and pledge a financial commitment to the parish for another year. At first glance, these two events seem to not match up, but I believe they go together well, as I have heard some concerns about the future of not only this parish but the future of the Church in general, and even for the country. There are those who feel we are coming to the end of Christianity as the world grows more secular. While I do not intend to ignore, discount or gaslight those feelings, I do believe they can be challenged. Christianity has existed in various forms for thousands of years, and has encountered other periods where it was not as popular or powerful as it has been in other time periods. But despite the ups and downs the church has endured and will endure. There is a larger picture to see and learn from, and when we feel disheartened or discouraged, there is an opportunity to look at what is honestly happening and to find positive ways to address them. There is an invitation to respond to any challenge, whether it is challenges we have as individuals, a parish or wider church as the People of God and Hope. Hope in Christ our King who is the Love of God enduring with us, sustaining us, encouraging us so that in all we do and all we say we show that it is the Love of God who is our king.

So when we make our pledge today, maybe we can prayerfully consider how our pledge can be a bold act of hope to reflect our love of God, in the financial commitment we make and in the other commitments we make: the commitment to worship together, to pray together, to celebrate together, to welcome everyone who comes through our doors and be the loving presence of hope to those outside our doors. Perhaps making a pledge today can be our opportunity to express hope as the People of God rising up to show the love of God in Christ in all we do and say, so that we can show the world who our king is.