"So, You Are a King?"
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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John 18: 33-37

On this day when we celebrate Christ as King, that isn't the easiest thing for us to do in the United States. We don't have kings and queens like our European ancestors of old. We have presidents, senators, congressmen and women – officials elected by the people.

Prior to the 18th-century, "the king was the author and guarantor of the prosperity of his people . . . his proper function was to promote fertility about him, to ensure prosperity on land and sea. As a result, his subjects expected peace and prosperity, security and abundance from their kings" (Brian Stoffregen, http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john18x33.htm). Now, you could say the same things about our presidents – that we expect peace and prosperity, security and abundance while they are in office. But the difference with a monarch is that he or she was in that position for life: either a long-lived life until a natural death, or a short-lived life caused by a premature death, the result of a war or a revolt! The people of those days were stuck with a king or queen for much more than four to eight years, and that bond was unique. While today we do place many of these same emphases on our government, we also stress our own individual efforts to achieve prosperity. In the days of kings and queens, there was no individual ingenuity or drive: the people looked to their king for life itself.

Is that what we are saying when we profess that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior? Do we depend upon Jesus for our life? We are his subjects, and his is our king. How do we understand that in our culture of individuality and democracy? How do we know Christ to be King of the World?

The passage we have read from John's Gospel may seem strange for today, since it is from the hours before Jesus' death on the cross. But its importance lies in the dialogue between Jesus and Pilate, as the Roman governor makes his decision as to what to do with this man they call the "King of the Jews." Immediately prior to this passage, Pilate has heard the claim of the Jewish leaders, who state he is a criminal and must be put to death. Ironically, these very leaders would not enter Pilate's headquarters to talk to him for fear they would defile themselves prior to the Passover being celebrated. So Pilate has to go out to see them, then comes back in to meet this man who has been brought before him.

Pilate asks Jesus three questions. First, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Then, "What have you done?" And again, "So, you are a king?" In each of Jesus' responses, Pilate doesn't get a straight answer. To the first question, Jesus responds, "Do you ask me this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Jesus wants to know about Pilate: what he believes, who he thinks

Jesus really is, etc. To the second question, Jesus tells Pilate not what he has done, but more importantly where he has come from: "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

To the final question, Jesus turns it back on Pilate: "You say that I am a king." Throughout this dialogue, you almost wonder who is on trial here - Jesus or Pilate. Jesus could honestly tell Pilate anything – it really wouldn't matter, as his eventual outcome is practically sealed. But what becomes clear by Jesus' answers is that he is more concerned with what Pilate believes about him. Perhaps, if we take it a step further, Jesus is wondering what we believe about him. To illustrate this point, consider the following story: "An Amish man was once asked by an enthusiastic young evangelist whether he had been saved, and whether he had accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior? The gentleman replied, 'Why do you ask me such a thing? I could tell you anything. Here are the names of my banker, my grocer, and my farm hands. Ask them if I've been saved'" (ibid).

We can tell anybody anything about our faith. We can tell strangers and friends we believe in the Lordship of Christ and of the power of his death and resurrection for our lives. We can tell the grandest professions of faith anyone has ever heard. In the end, however, the true measure of our faith is not what we tell others, but how others know and see our faith in us. As Jesus wanted to know what Pilate believed about him, so too does he want to know what we really believe when we say he is our king.

There's something else we Americans struggle with whenever we read passages like this. In American culture, we stress the importance of the individual and how he or she is free to choose to whom we belong to and to whom we answer. Our sense of belonging to friends, family, church, communities all begin with the notion that we have the God-given right to choose when to enter those relationships, and when we can exit those relationships.

That specific cultural norm also influences how we read and interpret the Bible. "Bruce Malina writes that one of the greatest challenges for Americans in reading the Bible is to understand the difference between the U.S. emphasis on the individual and the Mediterranean emphasis on the community. Malina explains that in the world of the New Testament, a person did not think of himself or herself as an individual who acted alone, regardless of what others think and say. Rather, the person is 'ever aware of the expectations of others, especially significant others, and strives to match those expectations.'

"When Jesus tells Pilate that all who listen to Jesus' voice belong to the truth and are part of his kingdom, he is saying, in Mediterranean fashion, that belonging is less about individual decisions and more about collective participation in a community that transcends the self. The reign of God is larger than any individual, even Jesus himself. Our belonging is not up to

each one of us alone. Our belonging is up to God" (Rodger Nishioka, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, © 2009: 336).

In that light, what does it mean to proclaim Christ as King today? Does that affect our reactions to events of the past week in Paris, Mali, and the Middle East? Do we view the violence that takes place in our community as attacks on us if only the victims look like us, or do we believe Christ is King over ALL who are victims of violence? "Our belonging is not up to each one of us alone. Our belonging is up to God." Do we view the victims of religious persecution differently in light of this understanding of faith? How might our response to refugees seeking asylum be impacted by our remembrance this week that our European ancestors who settled this land were themselves escaping religious persecution in their homelands?

The ultimate irony of the Christian faith, of course, is that as Christ is proclaimed King of the World he is sent to his death by his very own people. The man who represents life is sacrificed so that all may be saved. Jesus is more than a king who provides food and clothing and security and prosperity. He is a king who dies for his subjects, so they might live eternally in his kingdom.

William Leety describes Jesus Christ as King in relation to the game of chess: "In chess, checkmating the king ends the game. Though all the king's horses and all the king's people and both the king's castles remain, checkmating the king means victory for the opponent. No loyal subject can be substituted for the king the way a pawn can be 'promoted' to a queen, should the pawn advance to the opposite end of the board . . .

"Christ the King owes [much] to chess . . . Pilate cannot imagine a people, even a subject people like the first-century Jews, allowing capture of their king. No one but a king could be a king's ransom. Pilate cannot imagine that all the king's horses and all the king's people would not protest, rebel. So, in the absence of insurrection, he must ask, 'Are you a king?' meaning 'Are you really . . .'

"The church raises the ante on the game, claiming that this king is also God; claiming that this God-monarch willingly enters captivity. Jesus says, 'For this I came into the world . . .' Our king is cornered. The game's over. Checkmate!

"No, let the games begin, begin again, specifically next week in Advent!" (Leety, "Checkmate", Presbyterian Outlook, November 13, 2000: 13).

Jesus Christ is king of the world. That is the proclamation made today, tomorrow, and throughout the history of the gospel. As we prepare for the King's arrival in Advent, remember that your Lord loves you, your Monarch shares in your pain, your King died for your sake. The game is never over; it's just beginning.

Thanks be to God! Amen.