

“The True Shepherd, the True Sovereign”

Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Reign of Christ Sunday

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

November 20, 2022

---

Jeremiah 23:1-6 Luke 23:33-43

I thought I would somehow blend the American calendar which celebrates Thanksgiving, with the liturgical calendar which celebrates the reign of Christ today. But sometimes a sermon can't be all things— and so I will count on you being thankful to Jesus, but I want to explore deeper with you what the reign of Christ means. This Christ the King Sunday didn't even appear on the liturgical calendar until after World War 1. With growing nationalism throughout Europe, the church needed a reminder that the Kaiser isn't the king. The Czar isn't the king. Hitler certainly isn't the king. Jesus Christ is the king to whom we must give our devotion and loyalty. In the United States, we don't have kingship *per se*, but we certainly aren't immune to the lures of kingship.

If Jesus Christ is to be our King— or to take a less gendered language, if Jesus Christ is to reign over us, what kind of sovereign is he?

“I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing.” According to the prophet Jeremiah, this is what the Lord promises. I don't have *any* experience shepherding sheep. Do you? It's not an occupation you get to see, really, in New Jersey, unless you want to volunteer to help with the Christmas Pageant. In fact, the only time I have ever met a shepherd was once when I was on a travel seminar in Amman, Jordan. I was staying on campus at the Amman University for Women. One of the fun parts about the university was that after 5 pm, when all the male professors and staff leave the campus, the female students residing on campus would turn up the music; those who were covered in hijab would remove them; and the campus would be one huge dance party.

When my college group stayed overnight at the University, we witnessed this transformation. Our hosts wanted to teach us a dance that uses a scarf to wave around. And so, I hurried back to the dorm where I was staying to get a scarf. On my way there, I saw a break in the back wall that separated the campus from a stretch of hilly pasture. There were two shepherd boys peeking through the wall, curious about the fun we were having. They looked to be about 11 or 12 years old. I greeted them with my very limited Arabic, but one boy softly called to the sheep gathered around him and together they quickly scurried down the hill— and I scurried to the dorm, got my scarf, and returned to the party. But it still stuck with me, how quick the sheep were to follow at the sound of a child's call.

Maybe the mysteries of what women a few years older than them might possibly do apart from the male gaze ignited the imagination of these boys, and so they strayed from their assigned roles for work and for gender norms. Maybe they wondered if the grass was greener on the other side.

What happens to sheep who stray? Sheep who go in search of greener pastures? An article I read last spring stuck in my head, about a sheep in New Zealand, who was discovered hiding out on his own, high up on a mountain crag. He must have been missing from his flock for more than 4 years, because his coat had grown... and grown... and grown. Unlike his wild ancestors, this sheep was from a domesticated breed. A wild sheep will lose its coat each year. But sheep who are bred to *belong* rely on a yearly sheering- otherwise their wool will never stop growing. And this sheep's fleece weighed more than its body. His eyes were so covered that he was wool-blind. And if he were to tip over, well, "he'd have rolled straight down" the mountain, his owner said. The tag on his ear showed *which* farmer he belonged with.

It was a big day for that farmer, and for the shearer who got to cut the 4 years of wool off of this sheep, leaving behind what looked like a spry little lamb. 300 people gathered to watch- the whole community came together to rejoice in the return of this lost animal back to its home.

I'm no sheep who needs to be sheared each year, but I do need to get a haircut every now and then. I did that Friday. I can tell it's time to cut my hair when the hairs in the bathroom drain increase from a few to a small handful. This means that I have enough split, unhealthy ends that they tangle into my healthy hairs, and convince them to leave the green pastures of my flock and follow them instead- right into the bathroom drain.

Israel and Judah were a tangled mess, too. When Jeremiah speaks of shepherds, it is first to say that the shepherds leading Judah, watching over Israel, have done a bad job. "You have scattered my flock. You have not attended them. You have driven them away." Even David, the shepherd boy who grew to establish the holy monarchy, had a habit of spying on women rather than tending his flock. The kings who followed weren't much better, and many were much worse. It's no wonder the people's love strayed toward other gods rather than the God their kings supposedly represent.

"The days are surely coming," God says, "when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as a King and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land."

This is the promise that has been left hanging for Jews. As for Christians, we will spend the next 4 weeks of Advent preparing the way for that prophecy to be answered as we wait for that manger in a stable to cradle a baby and all the hope and promise we can place onto a tiny body.

But on the eve of the new year- and you should know that in the Christian liturgical calendar,

next week, the first Sunday of Advent, starts the new year— we are given, instead, a Savior who needs saving. For our gospel passage has Jesus on the cross, where we know he will die, and brutally so.

It's like we are waiting for William and Kate to give birth to Prince George but instead we are given the broken, mutilated body of Emmett Till— a Black boy in Mississippi who in 1955 was lynched for allegedly flirting with a white woman. The message was clear, and it wasn't just for Emmett Till, but for every Black body in the South: don't stray from your flock. In fact, segregationists publicly used Till's murder to argue the message that Black people would be safer if they just kept to themselves.

His mother, Mamie Till, had a different message to give. She insisted that her son's bloated body, which had been ripped with barbed wire, shot in the ear, eye displaced, and drowned, be displayed in an open-casket funeral, so the world could see the violence of racism exposed. Photographs showed from coast to coast and even to other countries of this mother standing at the head of her son's casket, and it awoke something in people. Maybe it awakened their humanity. Maybe it awakened the divine part of them, the part that is still connected to the heart of God and not subject to the rule of white supremacy.

The great Black theologian James Cone drew the connection between Jesus' experience on the cross and the history of lynching in America, in his book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. The Jesus who meets us in scripture is hanging on a cross, nailed by wrists and ankles to wood, and in a very public way. There are people watching him suffocate— death by crucifixion doesn't come from the wounds, but from the diminishing ability to raise your ribcage enough to fill lungs with oxygen. Once the arms weaken, the person suffocates. His mama had to watch that happen. People watched that process, and not only that, they mocked him, giving him sour wine, taking his clothing as trophies, and placing a sign over him, "This is the king of the Jews."

What do we do with this? Can a dying savior actually save us? I much prefer babies, to be honest. We tend to a needy, vulnerable baby; we change her diapers, feed him, soothe him, because we have an investment *not only in* who she is, but in who she will become. But a broken and dead body? What can possibly come of that?

If you've stuck around church long enough, you know what comes of Christ's death. And I don't just mean resurrection— but also a subversion of the culture of violence and domination that lures us even today. The cross is all about power— but instead of a power that gets lorded over us, it is a power *with*, a power *shared*. Jesus suffers, even dies *with* us. If God is on the cross, then the ones who do the crucifying can't be God. The Roman Emperor was not God. The slave master was not God. Assault rifles are not God. Jesus suffered and died alongside the 3 victims of the shooting on a UVA campus last Sunday, and the 5 who were killed last night at a gay nightclub in Colorado last night. By his power, through his power, with his power, we can subvert the culture of violence that still dominates our world today. This power is right before us, but like the sheep that hasn't been sheared, we become wool-blind to its presence before us.

When we come together as church, we present ourselves before the divine Shepherd. With scripture, with prayer, with confession, with singing, with acts of service and justice, we can see all around us, north, south, east, and west, and we can distinguish the voice of our true shepherd from those who would lead us astray. As we step into that pasture and that power, we take part in a good and holy reign.