

**Sermon, Proper 29B, Christ the King, November 25, 2018, Jane A. Beebe**

“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... But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” (John 18:36)

Today is the last Sunday of the liturgical year. Imagine a kind of New Year’s Eve when we look back on what has gone before but then refocus our gaze on what is to come. My favorite season of the year is Advent, so I like to think of today’s celebration of Christ the King as a kind of advent to Advent. The days are getting shorter and shorter. Soon the world will turn, and the light will gradually come back. In the meantime, we light candles and gaze in wonder at what has been and what is yet to be. For a brief, mysterious moment the alpha and the omega come together. There’s a lovely traditional ballad called the “Riddle Song” in which four gifts are given that are not what they seem: a cherry without a stone, a chicken without a bone, a ring that has no end, and a baby with no crying. How can this be? It’s simple.

“A cherry when it’s blooming, it has no stone.  
A chicken when it’s pippin’, it has no bone.  
A ring when it’s rolling, it has no end.  
A baby when it’s sleeping, has no crying.”

What better description for the Kingdom of God could there be?

The few verses we hear from John’s Gospel relating the conversation between Pilate and Jesus are hard to interpret on the surface. It takes place inside

the Praetorium, the governor's residence and place of judgment. The Jewish people preparing for the Passover cannot enter the Praetorium as it would mean ritual defilement. What does it mean that Jesus goes to that place? Pilate is being his most difficult and subtle, seemingly out to trap Jesus with words, asking: "Are you the King of the Jews?" Yet Jesus insists on testifying, not on his own behalf, but on behalf of the truth. Jesus declares his kingdom is not *from this world*. (John 18:36) For me, that begs several questions. What world is his kingdom from? Can it be seen? What is it like? Can we get there?

The word "kingdom" occurs only once in the Gospel of John. I find this fascinating! In Matthew, Mark, and Luke Jesus has a *lot* to say about the kingdom: what it is like and who is likely to have an easier time entering it. Several times in Matthew Jesus says, "The kingdom is like..." "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind..." (Matthew 13:44-47) Clearly God's kingdom is a place of joy, of abundance, of devotion, of peace.

And to whom does the kingdom belong? “Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.” (Matthew 9:14) “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:3) God’s kingdom belongs to those who, on the surface, are powerless. But they are grace-filled in their dependence on God alone. It is as if we can see the kingdom on the other side of a fence. The best way is maybe not to try to climb over it, but to crawl under it.

The fact that the idea of God’s kingdom shows up in John only at the end of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem is telling. It makes the idea of God’s kingdom even more important. Yet I also believe that God’s kingdom is accessible. God doesn’t play games with us—even if sometimes exhibiting a sense of humor. If it seems hidden, it is only because the world as we know it blinds us to it. Some of our favorite stories, whether we come to them as children or adults, are about other worlds: The Land of Oz, Narnia, or a galaxy “far, far away...” We have the imagination; we just need to know where to look. If we lift our gaze to the horizon we can just see where the alpha and omega meet, where the “yellow brick road” begins.

Back in the seventies I became intrigued by the existence of black holes through the popular science books of Stephen Hawking. A black hole occurs when the density of matter is so compact that its gravitational pull prevents light

from escaping. It is only possible to discern the presence of a black hole by what is nearby such as radiation or X-rays emitted by orbiting bodies. The black hole, as a kind of “Cloud of Unknowing,” has become a metaphor for me in my understanding of how to approach God through centering prayer. One is unable to discern the light, yet light is still there in a highly concentrated form. Scientists tell us the center of every galaxy has a black hole, including the Milky Way. In my imagination, at the center of the Trinity is also a black hole with its powerful and inexorable gravitational pull that draws us into the life of God, into God’s kingdom.

Clouds, too, along with fire and wind, appear often in Scripture as visible signs of God’s presence. Clouds generally manifest above us so it is not hard to conceive how clouds became associated with the heavenly. As it says in Revelation, “Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him...” (Revelation 1:7) This past Wednesday I rose early to finish getting ready to drive to central Pennsylvania to be with family for Thanksgiving. My bedroom windows face almost due east. I noticed that they were glowing a deep rose pink. “Red sky in the morning, sailor take warning!” The sunrise through that morning’s cloud formation was extraordinary. Years ago, on a hike in the mountains of western North Carolina, I remember looking out over a valley from a large outcropping of

rock near the top. Gradually, mist and clouds drifted up the side of the mountain to my feet. I had the sensation of standing on the clouds.

God provided a pillar of cloud during the day for the Israelites to follow during their Exodus from Egypt. The pillar of cloud would remain over the tabernacle wherever they were camped. It served as a signal for when to remain and when to move on. A cloud by day would have been a comforting, protective presence in a hot, dry desert. God comes to Moses and the Israelites on Mt. Sinai in a “thick cloud” that also erupts in thunder and lightning—not such a comforting presence—but becomes the locus of God’s giving of the Law. The cloud is there so that the people and Moses can see and hear what is going on. This seems a generous, albeit terrifying, gesture on God’s part. Much later in 1 Kings, when Solomon’s temple is finally built in ancient Jerusalem, God’s glory is revealed in a cloud that does not simply hover over the temple but enters and fills it.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Maier, “The Divine Presence within the Cloud,” 79–101.