



“The King of Kings and Lord of Lords”

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Revelation 19:6-16

“On the third day, he rose again, in accordance with the Scriptures” “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ” “With the Father and the Son, he [the Holy Spirit] is worshiped and glorified”

from the Nicene Creed

This week we turn to the Christ in all his glory, for “Christ” means “anointed one/Messiah/King.” It is a royal term, a title, not a name. Jesus is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. But to grasp the full import of this, we have to go back to the time of ancient shepherds and kings . . . and the desire for a good shepherd, a good king.

Good Shepherd

The imagery of God as the good shepherd (see week 3 of this series, January 21) and we as his flock is one of the dominant portraits of God in the Bible.¹ It is not a very complicated or intellectual portrait. God cares – that’s it. He cares for his flock and for each sheep in it. Even in a flock of a hundred sheep, the good shepherd will search high and low for the one who is lost (Matt 18:10-14). God finds for us the green pastures and the still waters.

The fact that we need a shepherd seems to be a lot harder for us to learn than it is for the sheep. We cherish our supposed independence, whereas the sheep are perfectly content being wholly dependent on the shepherd. In fact, sheep need the shepherd’s caring and protection in a way that other herd animals do not, for sheep have lost the ability to defend themselves. They are an easy meal for the wolves.

We think we don’t need a shepherd when, in truth, we do. We can’t accumulate enough wealth to forestall sorrow. There is no doctor who can prevent our death. We can’t have enough police to stop crime or armies to prevent war. We imagine that the wolf is our problem to fix, when it is actually the shepherd’s. God knows better than we do that a good shepherd is exactly what we need.

Kings of old

The kings of old were not like the kings and queens of today, who are largely figureheads, stripped of any real power. In the ancient world and up to the time of the Magna Carta,² the kings, as well as the occasional queen, were absolute monarchs. Some exercised their total sovereignty with the good of the people in mind. Most used the power to satisfy their personal desires. But in nearly all cases, their rule was absolute. This is why assassination was such a popular way of dealing with an errant king, such as King Amon of Judah (641-639 BC). He lasted only two years on the throne!

Throughout the ancient Near East, including Israel, the shepherd was a metaphor for the kings and their responsibilities to guide, protect, and care for their people. Jeremiah 23, like Ezekiel 34, opens with God’s indictment of Israel’s shepherds, their kings. Both prophets promise that God will raise up proper shepherds, culminating in “a righteous branch.”

¹ Allen Coppedge helps us to see that Scripture paints more than a few portraits of God, including one of God as the Good Shepherd. In all Coppedge identifies eight portraits of God: Transcendent Creator, Sovereign King, Personal Revealer, Priest, Righteous Judge, Loving Father, Powerful Redeemer, and the Good Shepherd. All are found in the Old and New Testament, and all are revealed in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Coppedge’s book, *Portraits of God: A Biblical Theology of Holiness* is excellent, though more of a reference book than a read-from-front-to-back book.

² The Magna Carta, signed in 1215 AD, marked the beginning of limitations on the king’s power. King John agreed that his will could be limited by the law. This was a very different arrangement than the ancient kings had with their subjects.

This shepherding King will be, as Peterson paraphrases it, “A ruler who knows how to rule justly. He’ll make sure of justice and keep people united. In his time Judah will be secure again and Israel will live in safety” (Jer. 23:5-6 *The Message*).

Longing for a good king

When the Israelites settled in the promised land, 1,200 years before Jesus, they did not have a king like all of their neighbors. God was their king; men and women called judges settled disputes and led the people into battle with their oppressors. But things deteriorated until everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes, not God’s eyes.

And so the Israelites began to demand a king, a human king, like everyone else. And, God granted their request, raising up Saul to be their first king. And after Saul, David was king of Israel. David, slayer of Goliath (1 Sam 17). David, a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam 13:14). David, Israel’s greatest king, to whom God had promised that he would establish the throne of David’s kingdom forever (2 Sam 7:13). But . . . four hundred years after David’s death, Jerusalem burned. The temple built by David’s son, Solomon, lay in ruins. The Ark of the Covenant was gone. Tens of thousands of God’s people were in exile. The king of Israel was imprisoned. Indeed, to many Israelites it seemed as if God had abandoned them.

And for the next six hundred years, there was no king in Israel. Sure, there were pretenders, like the various Herods, who were “kings” only at the pleasure of conquerors. But the people of God knew that they had no true king, no king from the House of David. For centuries, the Jews had traded one oppressor for another. For centuries, the Jews had cherished the stories and promises of the king to come, such as in today’s passage from Zechariah. This true king to come, long promised by the prophets, would be the one anointed by God, the *mashia* in Hebrew, the *christos* in Greek, the Messiah and Christ in English. This true king would be the one through whom God would usher in his kingdom, when all the world would see that the Jewish confidence in their God had not been misplaced.

By the time of Jesus, the expectations and hopes that God’s king would come were so powerful that many Jews tried to hurry things along. Believing that rebellion against the Romans would bring about God’s kingdom, a few Jews put themselves forward as the long-awaited *mashia*, gathering around themselves bands of followers. Of course, these would-be messiahs collided with the Romans, who had no tolerance for anyone who might challenge the authority of Caesar.

The true king, the Shepherd King

In 27AD or so, one Jew, a carpenter from tiny Nazareth, came to Jerusalem with his own band of followers. Differently from all the other revolutionaries, this Jew, named Jesus, had not advocated violent revolution against Rome as the path to the kingdom of God. Instead, for more than two years, Jesus had taught that the true path was the path of mercy not vengeance, and peace not rebellion. Like the prophets of Israel, Jesus had called the Jews back to God. But unlike the prophets of old, Jesus had also pointed the Jews to a new way of being God’s people. Not only was he on a collision course with Rome, to whom all revolutionaries were threats, but Jesus was also committed to a confrontation with the Jewish leaders who clung to their power and prestige.

It is in Jesus that we meet the Good Shepherd, The Shepherd King, the King of all kings, the Lord of all lords. It is good to be reminded exactly who it is that was born in a manger more than 2,000 years ago, who lives still and always shall. Jesus, born in a humble manger in the most obscure of places, is the shepherd King in whom “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Colossians 1:19). Long live the King!

The King’s victory!!

John’s visions in Revelation tell the story of a cosmic struggle between the Lamb of God (see week 2 of this series, January 14) and those who oppose the Lamb. In the visions of chapters 6-11, this story plays out as a struggle between the heavens and the earth. As devastation rains down on the earth’s inhabitants, the question is whether any will repent and give glory to God. Some do. John sees martyred believers hiding under

the altar of God. Later, John hears and sees a great multitude of faithful from every nation. Yet many (most?) resist; they do “not repent of the works of their hands or give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood” (9:20). Finally, God sends two witnesses who testify to God. Though they are killed, their resurrection causes, at last, many people to give glory to God.

After another scene of triumphant and joyous worship, John’s visions take a turn. The cosmic conflict is now cast as a struggle between Satan and God – and, yes, you can guess how that ends.

Beginning in chapter 12, Satan is seen as a great red dragon. After failing to devour Christ, who is depicted as the child of a heavenly woman, Satan is defeated by the forces of Gabriel, the archangel, and is cast down to the earth, where Satan is penned in, much like a caged animal. Satan is able to roam back and forth across the planet doing great harm. He forms his own little demonic trinity: Satan, a beast from the sea, and a beast from the land. They wage war on the followers of the Lamb, getting drunk on the blood of the saints. As John’s visions proceed, it soon becomes clear that the Roman Empire, “Babylon”³ as it is called in the visions, is the latest in a long line of Satan’s minions. Chapter 18 describes the fall of Babylon, after which all the heavens sing “Hallelujah!”⁴ to open chapter 19.

In chapter 19, John again hears the sound of all creation worshiping God. And he hears the announcement that the time for the marriage supper of the Lamb has come at last. Before racing on to the scene of the final battle which concludes chapter 19, we need to reflect on this staggering image of the Lamb and his bride.

The bride and groom

Marriage as a metaphor for God’s relationship with his people is one of the most enduring and profound of all biblical images. The power of the metaphor is grounded in the significance of covenant. The marriage of a man and a woman is a covenant, instituted by God, to which both are expected to remain faithful. The relationship between God and his people is lived out in a covenant – to which both are expected to remain faithful. Thus, just as adultery is forbidden in a marriage, even making the Top Ten list, the prophet Hosea⁵ uses adultery to describe Israel’s relentless chasing after other gods (Hosea 2). But Hosea also describes God determination to woo his bride anew so that “she shall respond as in the days of her youth” (Hosea 2:15).

In the New Testament, Jesus is repeatedly referred to as the bridegroom. John the Baptist is a friend of the groom (John 3:22-30). When Jesus is asked by the Pharisees why his disciples don’t fast, he tells them that the disciples are wedding guests who won’t fast while they are with the groom (Mark 2:18-22). Numerous parables liken Jesus’ ministry and the coming kingdom of God to a wedding feast.

All this prepares us for the images in John’s vision as we near the end of the story. The Lamb, Christ, is almost ready for his marriage to his bride, the Church. Jesus’ second coming will be the consummation of this marriage. An angel then arrives, bearing a message of salvation, the third of the book’s seven beatitudes: “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb,” recalling Jesus’ parable of a wedding feast that focuses on invitations rejected and accepted (Matthew 22:1-14). John is so overcome by all this, that he falls on the ground to worship the angel. He is, of course, scolded by the angel, for we are to worship only God.

It is important to grasp that the Lamb and his bride are married not only in the future, but in the present. We often make the mistake of thinking of time as only linear. But we live post-Einstein. According to his theories, which have been borne out, time passes more slowly for an astronaut circling the earth at high speed than it does for us on the ground. The astronaut’s “after” is my “before.” If the astronaut’s “before” and my “before” aren’t the same, why should I assume that “before” and “after” have any fixed meaning with God?

We struggle to make sense of the New Testament’s perspective that God’s kingdom has come already, but not yet. We struggle to grasp that the people of God are not just waiting to be the bride, but are already the bride.

³ 600 years before Jesus, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and burned down the temple.

⁴ Revelation 19 is the only place in the NT where “Hallelujah” appears. It is an Old Testament phrase meaning “praise the Lord!” Handel’s Hallelujah Chorus in Messiah is taken from Revelation 19:6 and 11:15.

In the glorious images of Revelation 21, God comes to dwell with his people. And yet God dwells already with his people. We are God's temple. The Holy Spirit is God dwelling amongst us.

All this takes a massive feat of imagination, and Revelation is written for the imagination. John's visions are meant to help us imagine the truth of a reality larger than we see and touch in our daily lives.

The battle that isn't

From the marriage scene we move on to Jesus' victory over the beast and all those who do his bidding (19:19). But to our surprise, there is no imagining of the great battle. Instead, we see Jesus, KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS, riding out to do battle and then we see the aftermath. Perhaps this is because when Jesus decides to mount his white horse, in that very moment he has won. Who could ever hope to win a fight against the Lamb? The end of the beast from the land and the beast from the sea are assured before the fight even begins. How could it be any other way, short of God forsaking both his promises and his creation? But if we know anything at all about God, it is that God is faithful. God is the great promise-maker and the great promisekeeper, even if that means that his only begotten son will die on a cross for the sake of those whom God loves. Praise God! Praise Jesus, the KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. AMEN!!