

## “Have You Seen the King?”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

11-22-20 Christ the King Sunday

Based upon Matt. 25:31-46; Phil. 2:4-11

As most of you probably know by now, the popular actor Sean Connery died recently. Most of the world thought of him as the best James Bond there ever was, or perhaps in the role of Indiana Jones' father in the third of the *Raiders of the Lost Ark* series. I like those movies too. But when I think about him, an additional image comes to mind, that of him playing Danny Dravot in the very first PG-rated movie I ever went to see, an adaptation of a Rudyard Kipling story called “*The Man Who Would Be King*.”<sup>1</sup> The movie is about two ex-sergeants in the British Army, Connery's character and another played by Michael Caine, who lend themselves out as mercenaries to the powers-that-be in Kafiristan, hoping to get rich. But one day their plans change when Dravot is shot by an arrow in battle. When he doesn't die, (because the arrow actually pierced some leather under his shirt not his heart), the people he was working for mistake him for a supernatural savior. Hailing him as a king as well as a god, they present to him their royal treasury. Connery's sidekick wants to take as much gold as they can carry and run, but Dravot by then likes the idea of being all-powerful as well as rich. Drunk on the adulation of the crowds, he takes the throne, and for a brief time is on top of the world dreaming of meeting the Queen of England on her level. But when the woman whom he chooses for his bride reveals to all that he can bleed, the nation turns against him, and Dravot soon finds himself plunging to his death in a great ravine. At some point in the movie, whether the very beginning or the end, I don't remember, his friend presents Kipling with Dravot's severed head as proof that his tale is true.

When I think about that movie now, I can't imagine what my father was thinking when he took a 10-year old me to see it. He must have really wanted to see the movie himself and brought me and my sister along not realizing how violent, dark, and adult it was going to be. But now that I am an adult myself, I can see that the movie was interesting both for its compelling portrayal of the destructiveness of human desire for power and wealth, and for the way it illustrates this by turning the classic folklore conceit of a king in disguise on its head. Connery's character Dravot is not a king but pretends to be one in order to gain power and glory. Usually in folk tales it is the other way around. Real kings disguise themselves as peasants or even beggars, voluntarily relinquishing their power temporarily, in order to gain something that they think is better— either a trustworthy and faithful heir or true love. King-in-disguise stories exist across a wide variety of cultures, along with a handful of true stories about actual kings who liked to go incognito for various reasons.

I am not an anthropologist, but I can't help wondering if the folk tales at least, if not the activities of real kings, were inspired by today's Gospel lesson. It would have predated many of them and is the ultimate king-in-disguise story in the Bible. In the judgment parable we just heard from *Matthew*, neither the sheep nor the goats recognized the king as they went about their lives. The sheep cared for lots of people that the goats did not, but both groups were confused

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<sup>1</sup> *The Man Who Would Be King*. Directed by John Huston. Columbia Pictures (International) Allied Artists Pictures Corporation (North America). Dec. 16, 1975.

when the king, who was judging them, identified himself with the hungry, thirsty, foreign, sick, and imprisoned. “When did we see you again?” they ask repeatedly. Matthew included this parable near the end of his gospel with two others about Judgment Day as the culmination of his teaching about discipleship. For Matthew it was not enough to profess your belief in Jesus Christ. Discipleship for him was about action. No one knew when Jesus was going to return, but Matthew wanted to be sure that those who learned about the Gospel through him were ready for whenever Jesus did. He would find them serving “the least of these” as he had commanded; he would be able to tell from their behavior, not just their words, that they believed Christ was their Lord and lived in the kingdom of God on earth.

That lesson is important, and probably why the people who created the Lectionary picked this text for today, Christ the King Sunday, in the liturgical year. Every year, the Lectionary picks texts which mention kings on this day to mark the theological finale of the liturgical cycle. We end one year by celebrating Jesus as king, and then begin the next by waiting and preparing ourselves for the coming of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords into the world. People tend to either love or hate this day depending upon their threshold for tolerating metaphorical language, which seems anachronistic in our day when we celebrate and prefer democracy. For some, the idea of the “kingdom of God” is like a fairytale, it’s a dream place we wish we could dwell in forever; for others the language is too hierarchical and potentially oppressive or sexist to evoke either understanding or yearning or both.

But this year’s king story is the story of a king in disguise. It isn’t about a hierarchical, oppressive, or sexist ruler, or about conquering, gaining crowns, or wealth. That means that in addition to teaching us about the importance of being active, not passive disciples, this story also has something to teach us about power. Although the king in the story has the power and the authority in the end of time to judge between the sheep and the goats, his judgment is grounded in whether or not they recognized him when he was powerless. Did they see him in the faces of those who were starving and thirsty? Did they recognize him in the faces of those who were strangers— that is foreigners with no status or rights? Did they appreciate that when they looked in the eyes of someone who was behind bars— about as powerless as you can get— that they were actually gazing into Jesus’ own eyes? Do we?

The idea of a powerless king is more than an oxymoron to most people; it is almost incomprehensible. Yet we heard this very idea celebrated in the epistle lesson from *Philippians* today as well. “Though he was in the form of God,” the text says, “he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.” The person described in this text is the exact opposite of Connery’s Dravot. Jesus starts at the top with the power and glory of God and then relinquishes that by “emptying himself.” Although the text doesn’t say specifically of what, and we know that Jesus still retained the power to work miracles, and more wisdom and knowledge than a typical human being, in order to be a slave, Jesus had to relinquish the power to control others. He also had to let go of his social status, and potentially the adulation and affluence that would have come with it. He chose to have less than he could and should have had, and ultimately was celebrated by God and the heavens for it.

Most scholars believe that these verses in *Philippians* were part of a hymn that was circulating at the time which Paul appropriated for his own purposes. The language is far more poetic and abstract than Paul typically uses. For example, the word which is usually translated “emptying,” *kenosis* in the Greek, is not a typical Greek verb for emptying, like the kind one would use to describe dumping sand from a bucket. Everywhere else *kenosis* appears in the New Testament and outside of it the word is translated as “without profit, content, or value,” as in “empty words,” or means “to no purpose” as in “in vain.” Even in Paul’s day, therefore, hearing or seeing *kenosis* in the context of God’s activity in Jesus would have caught people’s attention. Jesus, the hymn says, “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself” even there was no profit for him in doing so. He did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but made himself valueless in the eyes of society.

Think about the people on the king’s check list in today’s gospel lesson: the hungry and the sick, the foreign and the imprisoned. In Jesus’ day, as in our own to a degree, they were seen not just as powerless, but in many ways also as valueless or irrelevant. We don’t prioritize feeding the hungry in our world– if we did, everyone could be fed. We certainly don’t prioritize helping foreigners or those in prison, and as far as caring for the sick, well that depends on who is sick. Yet the king was disguised in these kinds of people. No wonder the sheep and the goats failed to recognize him. He was cloaked as one of the invisible suffering, not robed as a conquering king. In order to find him, the sheep and the goats had to see what others failed to see. In order to serve him, they needed to serve the “least of these,” not just themselves or the greatest.

Author/theologian Walter Wink once wrote that Jesus came “not just to reconcile people to God despite the Powers, but to reconcile the Powers themselves to God.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, he came to show those who would use oppressive power that God’s power is not oppressive; it is relational, creative, and healing. He came to show those who would use the power of fear and hate, that God does not trade in those emotions. God’s power is the power of love and mercy. He came to show those who would use their power to have control and wealth and adulation, that God’s power is accessible when we relinquish control, and the worship of material things, and the need to glorify ourselves. Jesus came to reconcile the powers by demonstrating that we have things upside down and backwards. Empathy, not envy should drive us; helping others, not hoarding stuff or power for ourselves, should be our life’s pursuit.

I don’t need to tell you how far we still have to go to get to embrace his teachings. Just look around. Jesus may have reconciled humanity to God through his death and Resurrection, but the powers-that-be are no closer to being reconciled to God in our day than they were in his. The power struggles in our government have all but paralyzed us from doing good. The power struggles between genders, races, and nations have done more to magnify the number of suffering than minimize them and reconcile all. Like Dravot, too many of us are still striving to be at the top, not realizing that the man who really was God and king is hanging out down below at the bottom. He wants us to join him there, not because he wants us to become hungry, sick,

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<sup>2</sup> Wink, Walter, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Double Day, 1998), 199.

ostracized, and imprisoned ourselves, but because he wants us to do as he did: recognize the value in those society deems valueless, and give meaning to those whose lives society deems meaningless. He wanted us to empower and liberate the world with love.

Two images come to my mind when I think about the work of our God-King in disguise and his commission to follow him. The first is another movie— this time the heartbreaking film *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*.<sup>3</sup> It's about an 8-year old German boy named Bruno, who feels lonely and ignored by his father, who is a highly ranked Nazi who has moved his family to the country to be the commandant of one of the concentration camps in Germany during World War II. Left to his own devices, the boy wanders off where he is not supposed to go and finds himself at the edge of the camp. There he meets another little boy his age who is prisoner. While his own father is plotting destruction, the German boy brings food to his new friend, passing it through the fence. He doesn't understand what the camp really is and cherishes his new friend. So, when that friend says he can't find his own father in the camp, the German boy volunteers to go inside the camp to help look for him. He digs a tunnel under the fence, takes off his clothes and puts on camp garb so he won't get in trouble with his father for being where he shouldn't be. But once inside, when he is indistinguishable from the other prisoners, he finds himself as powerless and undervalued as they. Soon he and his friend, along with hundreds of others, are taken to the showers. It is a very upsetting and haunting film, yet one of the best illustrations of Christ-like kenosis I have seen. The German boy in the striped pajamas is the equivalent of Jesus on the cross.

The other image that comes to my mind is much more upbeat. Years ago, when I was serving another church, I traveled with a bunch of teenagers on a mission trip to a huge nursing home/retirement community. Our mission was to help with the day care center's activities and to visit residents. Some days we helped seniors with physical and mental limitations to do crafts or play bingo; other times we visited more independent people one on one. It was a challenging mission trip for many of the teenagers, who didn't know what to say to older folks, especially those with mental impairments. The teens were used to painting and hammering mission trips, which required less intimacy with strangers. But this one required seeing and being open to vulnerability all day. So, we talked a lot before the trip started about how they should approach each visit. I said, "I want you to imagine that every person you meet, whether they can talk or not, is Jesus in disguise. If you relate to the person with the love and care you would show Jesus, then when you leave, the person you visited will be able to say they saw Jesus in you." It took a little while for the teens to get comfortable, but they got it. Every day we would end the day by asking, "Where did you see Jesus today?" And every day I saw him, not just in the residents, but in the teenagers, who had spent their day making strangers to them feel seen, heard, and loved.

There may always be people who are willing to lie for power, and people who think ruling and oppressing are the same thing. But the king we celebrate today did not and does not. He came to empower with love and transform with mercy, and to remind those who were suffering that they were beloved and deeply valued by God. He came to invite us into a realm in which people are judged by their compassion, not their wealth or connections. We can dwell in

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<sup>3</sup> *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. Director Mark Herman. Heyday Films, Miramax Films, November 7, 2008.

that realm now even when the rest of the world does not; we can spot the king in disguise. In our age when so many feel lost and broken, he is everywhere you look. Keep your eyes and your hearts open, serve as he served, and some day someone will tell another that they saw Christ in you. Amen.