

## WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE?

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14

John 18:33-37

TEXT: Daniel 7:13,14 "I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven... . To him was given dominion and all glory and kingship . . .

PURPOSE: To encourage faith that, no matter what, Jesus is in charge of his church, the earth, and all who live in it.

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Wow. This is it. This is the last sermon I'll preach as a settled pastor, not just here with this congregation, which is very dear to me, but anywhere. Unless God totally surprises me, which has happened in the past, I'll only be preaching as a visitor or a supply for a colleague on vacation. I honestly don't believe it. I fully expect that sometime this coming week, I will, by the power of long habit, check out the scriptures for next Sunday and ponder what message they have for us. Then I'll smack myself back to awareness that I really am retired.

These past few weeks, I've spent a lot of time recollecting the ministry we've shared these last nine years, and the ways our lives have entwined during my time here. I remember a time when three women members of this church were being treated for breast cancer at the same time. Every Sunday after worship, they congregated at the back of the church and formed their own support group. I remember how earnestly we prayed with people whose children or grandchildren were dealing with overwhelming physical, mental, or behavioral health issues. I recall us grieving with many families who lost a loved one, including with me when my dad died and with Lindy when her mom died. We've watched as the kids in our Christmas pageants aged out of being shepherds or wise ones and found their wings in the world, and we've celebrated as a new generation of children age up to take those parts. We've been blessed with people who were willing to take on responsibilities even though they had no idea what they were getting into. We've managed to sustain our commitment to a vision that this church can be a center supporting the health of our wider community in spite of disappointments, disruptions, and disputes. Through it all, we've experienced the grace of God and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit enabling us to stay loose, to care for each other, to forgive each other, and to embody faith that God has a mission for us.

Be sure of this, church: this congregation is healthy. Yes, there are people in our congregation who are troubled, or who are uncertain of their place among us, or who are upset with others in this church. But we are learning how to address such matters rightly. Be also sure of this: the future of this ministry is bright, but it needs more people sharing the tasks of ministry than the people who currently are involved.

This Sunday is the last Sunday of the liturgical year. The church's calendar

begins with Advent, which starts next Sunday. It continues through the seasons of Christmas, Lent and Easter. Finally, it comes to this day, when we celebrate the “Reign of Christ,” affirming, with Handel’s Hallelujah Chorus, that Jesus is “King of kings, and Lord of lords, and that “he shall reign forever and ever.” That’s a nice thought, except that the realm we’re living in appears to be not at all subject to Christ. A world where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer doesn’t square with what I think a realm where Christ reigns would be like. A world where human overconsumption threatens the balance which sustains all life doesn’t square with what I think a realm where Christ reigns would be like. A world where the love of power trumps the power of love doesn’t square with what I think a realm where Christ reigns would be like.

The gospel passage appointed for today’s celebration of Christ’s reign tells a piece of the story leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus. In that story, it appears that it is Pilate, not Jesus, who is in charge. A little further on in John’s account, Pilate comes right out and tells Jesus that, “I have power to release you, and power to crucify you.” (John 19:10) But, it turns out that Pilate isn’t as in charge as he, or us, would expect. It’s the religious establishment, and the crowds they stirred up, who force the Roman governor to sentence Jesus to be crucified.

So who really was in charge? Faith tells us that God was, and that what appeared to be a win for the forces of evil was God’s plan to conquer sin and death. The biblical Letter to the Hebrews realizes that we don’t see everything in subjection to Jesus. I suspect we’d be quick to agree. But, that unknown author says, “we do see Jesus, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death.” (Hebrews 2:8,9) Yes indeed, the author recognizes, the world does not appear to be ruled by Jesus, but our ability to see Jesus – whether we see him in the church which bears his name and shares his life, or at the table he sets for us, or even in the inwardness of our prayer – is sufficient assurance that the crucial battle for control of creation has already been fought and won on the cross.

The Old Testament passage for this Reign of Christ Sunday comes from the Book of Daniel. The book of Daniel is set during the exile in Babylon, when it certainly looked like God’s people were the losers. But it was written centuries later to encourage God’s people to be resolute in faithfulness during the truly dreadful time when Antiochus Epiphanies ruled over Judea and violently persecuted anyone who was loyal to Israel’s God. Our passage today describes a vision Daniel had of the “Ancient One” enthroned on a fiery throne and conferring dominion and glory and

kingship on “one like a human being” – the literal translation of that phrase is “Son of Man” – which was the title Jesus most frequently used for himself. According to Daniel’s vision, the Son of Man’s kingdom is everlasting, and his kingship shall never be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13-14) Once again, that sounds wonderful. But Daniel received that vision at a time when the exact opposite of Jesus was in charge. Only in Daniel’s “night visions” is the Ancient One enthroned. Only in his “night visions” does the Son of Man rule the world. In the daytime, the Ancient One is sidelined and the Son of Man is crucified.

There’s an old hymn, the lyrics to which came from a poem written by James Russell Lowell, which states that “though the cause of evil prosper, yet ‘tis truth alone is strong. Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne.” That was how things appeared in the days that the Book of Daniel was written. That was how things appeared when Jesus hung on the scaffold of the cross. But Lowell knew what we need to know, which is that the night visions tell the truth, while the so-called reality of what is visible in daytime is not true. The hymn continues: “Yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind the dim unknown, God is standing in the shadow, keeping watch above God’s own.”<sup>1</sup>

In the conversation between Jesus and Pilate, Jesus said that the purpose for which he came into the world was “to testify to the truth.” To which Pilate rather cynically responded, “What is truth?” Well, Governor Pilate, the truth is staring you in the face. You are about to crucify the truth. But, what neither you nor the crowds nor the religious bigwigs can see is God enthroned in the night visions, God keeping watch from the shadows, God making certain that the plan for our salvation is on track. Reign of Christ Sunday may not celebrate a reign already established. But it does invite us to live as if Christ’s reign has already come – to be joyful in the face of adversity, to love when surrounded by fear, to live in life-giving harmony in a world which is way out of balance.

What about right here, in the South Newbury Union Church? What about right now, as I am about to retire as your pastor and teacher? Many of my colleagues don’t like being in charge of our parishes. Some don’t think it’s appropriate for us to be in charge. We are inclined to position ourselves as Paul positioned his missionary team, as “your servants, for Jesus sake.” (2 Corinthians 4:5) In case you hadn’t noticed, I

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<sup>1</sup>Lowell, James Russell; “Once to Every Man and Nation.” Based on his poem, “The Present Crisis,” written in 1845 to protest the Mexican-American War.

am a 'take charge' kind of guy. Over the years, I have learned that my style is a mixed blessing. It's an asset for the pastor to lift up the church's vision and to raise issues which others might prefer to avoid. It's an asset for the pastor to make sure that important tasks which lay people may not know need done get done. It's a liability because having a 'take charge' kind of pastor runs the risk of disempowering lay leaders. And it's definitely a liability if a congregation and its pastor assumes that it's the pastor who is in charge of the church's ministry.

So, when I'm no longer a leader in this congregation, who will be? Will our Executive and Deacon Boards more intentionally shoulder the responsibilities of leadership? Will you want your interim minister to take charge of aspects of this congregation's life and ministry which lay folk would rather not handle? Probably some leadership tasks will be handled both by our boards, who, during the past two months, have worked very hard to accomplish a smooth transition. Probably the pastors who will be ministering among you after I'm gone will take care of some leadership tasks. But for this church to be a vital, faithful witness, you will need to affirm, over and over, that it is Jesus who is really in charge.

Listen to these words from the preamble to the Constitution of the United Church of Christ: "The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior." Who is in charge? For a church to be the church of Jesus Christ, Jesus must be the one who is in charge. For a church to be the church of Jesus Christ, it must live under the dominion which the Ancient One conferred on the Son of Man. Exactly how that plays out within a community of faith is never obvious or easy. But here's the awesome thing about this: the congregation who affirms Jesus is in charge gets to live now what is not yet out there in the world. The congregation over which Christ reigns gets to show a world in which Pilates and mobs seem to be in charge what it's like to enjoy the peace, the harmony, and most of all, the love which are the characteristics of life under the dominion of Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior.

What I know about the South Newbury Union Church is that there is an ongoing intention to let Jesus lead this congregation. So I leave you in the hands of the one in whose hands we have been held before I served among you, and while I served among you. I leave you, confident that you will keep seeking ways to follow your true leader. I leave you, certain that you will continue to receive the blessings of shaping your life and your mission in accord with the real head of this church, with Jesus Christ, whose reign is sure, now and always.