

An Advent Resolution
Reign of Christ Sunday
November 20, 2016
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Texts: Jeremiah 23:1-6
Colossians 1:11-20
Luke 23:33-43

Our brothers and sisters in the Orthodox tradition practice what is called a “Nativity Fast” for 40 days before Christmas. It started this past Wednesday and extends all throughout advent. This was a new piece of knowledge to me, discovered on social media, but it struck me in an interesting way in where I am this week. So I did some research. The Orthodox Church in America says that the purpose of the fast before and during Advent is “to shift our focus to others... spending more time in prayer and caring for the poor” and “we learn to gain control over things which we sometimes allow to control us.” The way I interpreted this is, the purpose of a dedicated time of abstinence before Advent is for re-centering on some of the foundations Christ came to teach us.

Today is Christ the King Sunday, and we are on the eve of advent. I think the Orthodox tradition is on to something. It is sensible to me to see this Sunday, and the coming advent as a whole, as another opportunity for us in the Christian life to examine the year past and make changes to further align ourselves with the mission of Christ. Christmas, like Easter, is a celebratory event, that signals a turning, in the life of the Church. It is not unlikely, I am making a claim here, but I don't think it is out of bounds, that we need several weeks to reorient our focus, and renew our minds, to take in what Jesus would have us learn from his time on earth. After this year, I think I can claim that as a reality for many of us. We have spent this past year on a roller coaster. Sure, we have had our highs, but for me it feels like our lows are what is carrying us this Sunday. We have dealt with our personal tragedies, our global fiascos, our national mishaps, violence, loss, hate, anger, discrimination, and division.

I suggest the possibility of engaging in an advent tradition of reorienting our focus back on Jesus' life and ministry because I personally have never needed it more. My sense is most of the community of believers agree. I have heard one question asked in so many ways from so many different people in the past week

and a half, that I think our whole nation is asking this question: Where do we go from here? How do we respond to what has happened in our nation in the past few weeks?

Perhaps an emphasis on the Reign of Christ is exactly model that we need to answer that question.

Our text in Jeremiah is a sharp word from the prophet that is directed the Kings in leadership over Judah. Jeremiah is putting the full weight of the blame for the demise of Israel on the leadership of the Kings.

He says “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture.” Jeremiah is using metaphoric language here that equates the king to shepherds, and the sheep to the people of God, and the scattering as the fights for occupancy that was destroying nation after nation. Jeremiah is delivering a word of rebuke to the kings for being too distracted to meet the needs of the people. He challenges them for focusing on their own need for power and their gluttony and greed for land. He challenges their lack of attention to the poor and marginalized as what causes God’s people to become scattered. Later in the passage he describes the people as being fearful, dismayed and lost. In other words, the people of God have essentially lost their trust in God because of a leadership structure that left them feeling abandoned and uncared for.

It is important that we understand the power structure at play here. Contextually, Kings represented God to the people. Kings were supposed to execute justice, demonstrate compassion, and offer protection in many of the same ways that the Israelites had come to expect from God. The kings were also charged with keeping the Israelites aligned with God’s moral will and desire for the believing community. When their kings failed to steer them towards God, the people panic and they falter without direction. When the kings failed to care for the people of God, they began to feel that God himself had abandoned them. So when God sees that this system of maintaining power and order was not working for the lowliest of His people, He said forget it. I will do it myself. I will redefine power.

We then hear at the end of the Jeremiah passage a promise from God to the people that there will be a leader who rules with absolute justice and righteousness, and will restore the faith of the people. We now know that this King is Jesus. We sit here this morning on the eve of advent, looking forward to the day when Jesus came to set all of our wrongs right. We are privileged to

celebrate. But not all believers are that privileged- I wonder what would it feel like to live under a power structure that ignores the needs of God's lowliest?

Good people of faith, this I think offers us a reminder that we are not to look on corrupt and broken power structures to be our way to God or executer of the ways of God. We look to Jesus for our way to the Kingdom.

Jesus is an example of a paradoxical leader. Our Gospel lesson from Luke poignantly reminds us that Jesus Christ is the highest, and he had to suffer terribly to accomplish his reign and rule over all creation. Jesus' reign is a reign of peace. It is a reign of consistent self sacrifice. It is a reign concerned deeply with those on the margins. Jesus reigns sovereignly over all of creation- every single aspect. Jesus was the firstborn of all creation, and he is the author and perfecter of our faith. In other words, Jesus was before creation, and he has promised to walk with us now, and to journey with us far into the unforeseeable future. Jesus' reign is both here in our present context, and in the promised Kingdom to come when all will be set right. To put it simply- Jesus' reign is for the purpose of redemption of the whole earth to usher in the Kingdom of God.

This reign is what we are called to orient ourselves towards. It is this reign only; one marked by sacrifice and not power; one marked by the now and the then, and not just the present; that moves us closer to the Kingdom of God.

So what are we to do now? The question persists in light of what the Jeremiah passage teaches us about power structures and as we examine the structure abolished and reestablished by Jesus. Does this carry any weight on our current structures of power? So what are we do to now?

For me, the answer is clear. On this Christ the King Sunday, set a resolution for advent. Set a resolution that pulls you away from the desire to hold on to power, and one that challenges you to be self sacrificial. Not for a 40 day period but for your lifetime. Perhaps one that might look like more graciousness to those that disagree with you. One that might include radical inclusion of those on the margins. One that speaks up against the abuse of power on both a macro and micro scale. Whatever you need to recommit to in this tense time in our nation to deeper acknowledge and absorb advent, make sure you are at least committing yourself to the truth that it is Christ who reigns supreme. It is Christ who is our orientation. Jesus Christ is the only provision that we need.

Now I am not advocating for a church wide advent fast or that we conform ourselves to the Orthodox Church in America, but if it suits you to create a resolution for moving forward and grounding in Christ in this advent or post election season, then do it.

But if not, then at least do this: Remember your baptism. Remember that it is an act of grace that we are invited into God's covenant community, and our baptism represents our inability to earn that grace but that we have received it nonetheless. Remember that grace offered to you at your smallest and extend it widely in the next few weeks. Be an extension of the reign of Christ to all, to this community and beyond.

And know that as you seek to walk faithfully towards the Kingdom of God, Jesus has promised to walk that path with you. Jesus is both King and Shepherd in every meaning of Jeremiah's metaphor. Jesus the King is reigning and calls us extend that reign to the margins, and Jesus the shepherd is gathering and herding us, and walking all of us home. Were in this together church, you, me and Jesus. Praise be to God.

Amen.