

“The Coming of the King”  
Easter 4c  
John 10:22-30

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In Jesus' Name.

The king's soldiers ransacked the city, tore down its walls and wheeled a statue of Zeus into the holy of holies in the temple. They sacrificed pigs on the high altar. The king's agents spread into the countryside. They burned Bibles. A new law repealed the law of Moses and made it illegal to follow the old religion. The new law prohibited parents from circumcising their sons. Those who did so were put to death. The king's name was Antiochus of Syria. The year was 167 BC. If he thought these measures would subdue the people, he was wrong. A man named Judas, nicknamed Maccabeus, the Hammer, led a revolt. Three years later Judas Maccabeus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. Riding on a donkey meant he came in peace. It meant there was no threat to his rule. People cut palm branches, waved them in the air and threw them on the ground in front of him. Three years from the time the temple was desecrated they cleansed the temple and dedicated it for the worship of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They proclaimed that every year thereafter they would remember and gather together for the festival of Dedication, known by its Hebrew name, Hannukah. It was a festival of lighting of lamps and rejoicing. Judas Maccabeus was not a descendant of David. But he came close to doing what David and David's son Solomon had done. Judas was crowned king. He founded a dynasty that lasted 100 years until the Romans took control. The Romans installed Herod the Great as king. To legitimize his rule, Herod took a Maccabean princess for his wife. Every year, during the Festival of the Dedication, Hannukah, people thought about what makes for a proper king for Israel. And they thought about how one becomes king.

It was during the festival of the Dedication, Hanukah, that Jesus came walking in the precincts of the temple. People gathered around him. We might better read it “ganged up on him.” These were members of the religious establishment. No one from the crowd of 5,000 that Jesus fed with bread and fish was present among those who gathered around Jesus. Likewise, not one person was present from the family and friends of the man born blind to whom Jesus gave his sight. No one who heard Jesus say, “Let the one without sin cast the first stone,” was in their company that day. There were dozens of witnesses present at the Pool of Bethesda when Jesus

healed the lame man. None of them was keeping company with the movers and shakers in the temple. We know for certain there were no Samaritans present, especially none from Sychar where Jesus met the woman at the well. And probably no one was there from the wedding in Cana of Galilee where Jesus turned the water into wine and where on a subsequent visit he healed the son of an official of Herod's court. Yes, even the palace of a pretender to the throne experienced the mercy of God in Christ. None of those who experienced God's mercy in Jesus Christ were in the gang of Solomon's porch.

Those who gathered around Jesus were the ones who had the most to lose if Jesus continued to upset things. They asked him, "How long will you keep us in suspense?" I read that in Modern Greek the expression used here means, "How long will you continue to annoy us?" Even in ancient usage the expression had a note of irritation or hostility. I'm guessing it was more the latter. They said, "If you are the Messiah, the king long-expected, tell us plainly."

As I pointed out before, talk about kings was to be expected during Hanukah. In response Jesus talked to them about sheep and shepherding. We might think Jesus misheard the question until we remember King David was a shepherd. From then on, down through Israel's history, kings were referred to as shepherds. Some of them were good shepherds, leading the people to green pastures and still waters. Others were bad shepherds, leading people astray. Psalm 80 calls God the shepherd of Israel. God is the Good Shepherd, the king. No one can snatch the sheep from the hands of that shepherd. So the good-shepherd king is the one whose shepherding is in harmony with God.

"No one can snatch out of my hand the sheep my Father has given," Jesus said. "The Father and I are one." Our confidence about our future beyond death is based firmly on nothing less than the unity of Jesus with the Father. This shepherd will not lead us astray. He will lead us to green pastures and still waters. When we walk through the valley of the shadow of death he will be with us. His rod and staff will be a comfort to us. He spreads a table before us in the presence of those who trouble us. (Sometimes we are our own worst troulbers.)

I wrote in the bulletin summary today that when planning funerals Psalm 23 is the Bible passage family members most often request. In the early church Psalm 23 was recited as the newly baptized came up out of the water. Early baptisteries were pools dug into the ground. Some were cruciform; others looked like graves. A set of stairs led the fledgling Christian out of

their old way of life into the watery grave with Christ. Newly baptized, they walked up steps at the other end into new life. A new garment was placed over them as the presiding minister announced, “You are clothed in the righteousness of Christ and invited to his great feast.” After that they received their first communion. We are among those invited to the feast. We believe Jesus is the shepherd, leading us to that table.

During Hanukah people thought about shepherds and kings. What makes for a proper shepherd king? It is the one who acts in harmony with God. Better yet is Jesus, who is united with God his Father in the work they do. The second question was, “How does one become king?” They would have thought about David and Judas Maccabeus and those who followed them on the throne. Jesus shows us something new. He becomes king not by leading a conquering army. He does not impose martial rule. He does not get even with his enemies. He does not buy followers with patronage. It is not by dynastic inheritance. Jesus becomes king by dying. Remember the hymn stanza that Paul quoted in his letter to the church in Philippi: Jesus did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself taking the form of a servant. And being found in human form he became obedient unto death, even death on the cross. Wherefore God has highly exalted him and given him the name that is above all others.” That would be God’s own name. “That at the name of Jesus every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.”

Paul quotes hymns. John paints pictures with his words, images that look like things we have never before seen. In his book Revelation, he gives us a lamb standing as if slain. He would have us see the white robed martyrs, who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb. Worthy is Christ the lamb that was slain to receive honor, blessing, glory and might. We sang that today. We got the song from the heavenly hymnal. John quotes hymns as well. Everyone thought death by crucifixion was shameful. But worth is Christ, the Lamb that was slain. The lamb is the one worthy to break open the seal, revealing God’s plan of redemption. Today we are asked to picture “The lamb at the center of the throne [who] will be [our] shepherd, and the lamb-shepherd will guide [us] to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes.” As one writer put it, “In heaven tears do not have a

future. They only have a past.” Jesus, the Lamb of God, takes upon himself all our sin and sorrow and dries all our tears.

Jesus becomes king by dying. He is recognized as king by his acts of mercy. I listed before the people who would not have been part of the crowd ganging up on Jesus on Solomon’s porch. They had experienced Jesus’ mercy. They recognized his rule. The ones gathered in opposition to Jesus didn’t need mercy. So they thought. The biggest thing they had to lose was their self-righteousness. Jesus spent a good deal of time on the sorts of folks who ganged up on him. He tried his best to convince them that they too were in need of forgiveness and healing. They were blind and lame in their own way. What they and we have to lose is our pretense at righteousness. Like the doctor with an X-ray, we hold up the diagnosis the law makes on our lives. It shows that our righteousness is rags. The only righteousness we have belongs to Jesus. And thanks be to God who shares it with us, it is more than enough to cover us.

The royal robe we wear is our baptismal garment. We are the entourage of this king. Paul calls us ambassadors for Christ. More than that, we are the body of Christ the king. We reveal his royalty in harmony with the way he went about it. We do his works, words and deeds of mercy. In this way we tell it plainly, Jesus is the Messiah.