

## Reading I

Dn 7:13-14

As the visions during the night continued, I saw  
one like a Son of man coming,  
on the clouds of heaven;  
when he reached the Ancient One  
and was presented before him,  
the one like a Son of man received dominion, glory, and kingship;  
all peoples, nations, and languages serve him.  
His dominion is an everlasting dominion  
that shall not be taken away,  
his kingship shall not be destroyed.

## Gospel

Jn 18:33b-37

Pilate said to Jesus,  
"Are you the King of the Jews?"  
Jesus answered, "Do you say this on your own  
or have others told you about me?"  
Pilate answered, "I am not a Jew, am I?  
Your own nation and the chief priests handed you over to me.  
What have you done?"  
Jesus answered, "My kingdom does not belong to this world.  
If my kingdom did belong to this world,  
my attendants would be fighting  
to keep me from being handed over to the Jews.  
But as it is, my kingdom is not here."  
So Pilate said to him, "Then you are a king?"  
Jesus answered, "You say I am a king.  
For this I was born and for this I came into the world,  
to testify to the truth.  
Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

The Gospel of the Lord

Praise be to you, Lord Jesus Christ

This was a tough one. The first two times I preached, the words came more easily. The scripture passages seemed more down-to-earth and the meaning seemed more accessible; I could draw life experiences more easily from them. This one, I had a tougher time. In my anxiety around this, I remembered to return to basics: to sit with our gospel reading in prayer. The more I did this, the more the reflections, the insights, and the words began to flow, albeit slowly and painfully at times. All I can say is thank God Paulo asked me to preach this weekend six weeks ago! Because it took every bit of those six weeks to come up with what I will share with you this morning.

To begin, I would like to share with you a few things I learned while doing some research on Reign of Christ Sunday. It has a few different parts, so please bear with me. I promise, or at least I hope, that it will all come together in the end.

#### Part I:

Growing up Catholic, this Sunday - the last Sunday of our liturgical year, the Sunday before we enter into the lovely weeks of Advent and then Christmas, of course - it was referred to as The Solemnity of Christ the King. That being the case, I made the assumption that the UCC referred to this Sunday as The Solemnity of Christ the King too, and I immediately started Googling "The Solemnity of Christ the King" and, in doing so, I learned something new: that there is a special reason for this feast day and title of Jesus as King. This feast day is actually a relatively new addition to the Western liturgical calendar. It was instituted in 1925 in response to the dictatorships rising throughout the western world. Think Benito Mussolini of Italy and Joseph Stalin of the

Soviet Union, and then later, of course, Adolf Hitler of Germany. According to a blog I discovered on the University of Notre Dame website titled Faith ND, “The establishment of [The Solemnity of] Christ the King was to remind the world that Christ is the leader of our church.” Today’s Gospel reading shows us that, “the Kingship of Christ overturns the systems of power, wealth, and force which rule over the world. The Kingship of Christ belongs to the Kingdom of God which God inaugurated through the self-emptying love of Jesus.”

So that was the first part of my research: that this day, which I assumed was called The Solemnity of Christ the King, AND which I assumed existed forever, was actually founded in recent history as a reaction to the historical context of 1925. Interesting, I think.

## Part II:

Then I tried to look up “The Solemnity of Christ the King” on the UCC website and found nothing. After digging a bit more, I began to learn that in the UCC, this Sunday is not referred to as “The Solemnity of Christ the King” but as “Reign of Christ Sunday.” I even emailed Paulo to double check on this, and he confirmed to me that, yes, this Sunday in the UCC is in fact referred to as “Reign of Christ Sunday.” Now, that may not be significant to many of you, but to me it is. And this is why: It is a notable difference in language. Now I understand there is a whole history of kings being divinely ordained, but still...“Christ the King” always felt odd to me. Christ the King seems out-of-character; it makes Jesus feel distant; the title even feels hypocritical, to me; it is a curious title for Jesus when in just a month, we will hear the story of his humble birth

in a barn - hardly the setting for a king. We even hear in today's gospel Jesus's own struggle with the title when he responds to Pilate's inquiry of his being a king.

So this is what I learned in the second part of my research: that the UCC adopted this celebration of Christ the King, but it made an intentional shift in its language from The Solemnity of Christ the King to Reign of Christ Sunday. And that led me to Part III of my research: "Why this shift in language?"

Part III:

According to the UCC's Inclusive Language Covenant, "We believe that the imagery conveyed by language and language itself is important and that they articulate and influence our understandings of what is revealed to us about the nature and activity of God and the dignity of all God's people as created in the image of God." Let me read that again.

The page where I found this on the UCC website goes on to provide examples of words that exclude vs. words that include. For example, words that exclude are brother, brotherhood; while words that include are brothers and sisters, siblings, friends, neighbors. Words that exclude are man, men, mankind; while words that include are people, persons, humanity, humankind. Then further down the list of examples, I came across this: Words that exclude: kingdom; words that include: kindom, realm, reign of God.

And this led me to explore this language of the Reign of God, or for today's purposes, "The Reign of Christ." To begin with, what even is the Reign of Christ? Because it's definitely different from the Kingdom of God. It even feels different saying the words.

According to a blog titled The Peace Pulpit, "the Reign of Christ is a time when all of creation -- all of human life, every human person, and I would include our natural world -- will come under the dynamic power of Christ's love. The reign of Christ is Christ's love over all of us and within all of us. The reign of Christ is the Love (capital L) according to which we live."

According to Richar Rohr, a Catholic/Franciscan priest and the founder of The Center for Action and Contemplation, "Jesus announced, lived, and inaugurated for history a new social order. He called it the Kingdom or Reign of God and it became the guiding image of his entire ministry." Rohr goes onto explain that oftentimes, people can misinterpret the term "Kingdom" to be synonymous with heaven, as in the Kingdom of Heaven -- a state or place "out there," beyond us, in another world. It is my thinking that this may be why the UCC uses the language of "reign" of God/Christ rather than king/kingdom. Not to mention that king is solely male (exclusive language) and a king has power over others in such a way that rules and controls. Rohr concludes, "[The Reign of God, or the Reign of Christ,] is a new world order...a promised hope begun in the teaching and ministry of Jesus, and continues in us." So this is what I learned in the third part of my research: The Reign of Christ is not a lofty theological place located out

there that we must go searching for and find; but it is happening here, now. It is evolving and it enfolds all of God's creation.

I've been thinking about Paulo's sermon from last month, where he preached about returning to the Source. In that, and in several of his sermons, Paulo asks us to ask ourselves the question, "What kind of church do we want to be?" It's an important question. Today, I invite us to reflect on the kind of church we are already.

I think we can hold these two questions - "What kind of church do we want to be?" and "What kind of church are we already?" together.

Let me share a bit of my own faith journey with you. I mentioned at the beginning of my sermon that I grew up Catholic. I loved growing up Catholic. And there are parts of Catholicism that I love deeply and will be forever grateful for because it has formed who I am today. But the Catholic church of New England, particularly the Catholic church of Boston, is very different from the Catholic church of my youth, which originates in the midwest. As a little girl living in Southern Indiana, I was one of two Catholic kids in my grade. Being Catholic in our small town, I was a minority. I can remember on multiple Ash Wednesdays, when my parents would make us get up before school to go to Ash Wednesday Mass, and then the rest of the day kids and adults alike would tell me I had dirt on my forehead. In New England, people understand the ashes on Ash Wednesday and no explanation is necessary (usually). Another example of the difference: The parish priest at our church, Our Lady of the Springs, Father Blackwell. He walked

around town in his torn jeans and flannel shirts while smoking cigarettes. He even caught the rectory on fire TWICE. During Mass, his dog (who I'm sure was a stray he picked up off the streets) would walk into the sanctuary and plop down before the altar. We kids thought it was hilarious, but I could see my parents exchanging glances of disapproval. The organ sat vacant because no one in the community knew how to play it and we couldn't afford to hire an organist. But the people, the people were what made that church shine. The people who made up that church were salt of the earth, hard working, good and simple folks. And in that church, I knew I was safe. I felt known. Sitting in our regular pew each Sunday with my family gave me the feeling of home. Now I understand that this was the experience of a little girl who, in all honesty, had a blind faith; who did not have an intellectual understanding of Christianity or a deep prayer life with God, but I can still re-member the feeling, that bodily felt sense of being home.

As I grew up, I decided to attend Catholic college and then I went to a Catholic graduate school and chose to study Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry. I worked in the Archdiocese of Boston for a few years before starting a family. My spouse, Anthony, and I were married in the Catholic church (and the Greek Orthodox Church, but that's a sermon for another day). Our children were baptized in the Catholic church. I share this with you because I took my Catholic identity very seriously and I wished to pass that onto my children.

Now, I don't think I need to go into much detail about the challenges of being a Catholic in today's culture. Between sex abuse scandals and crimes; a toxic, patriarchal system; homophobia; the lack of lay leadership; the lack of women in leadership rolls and in decision making; and other personal feelings, I was feeling conflicted. Plus, raising two young, smart, and savvy children, who have been raised to think critically and justly, the more complicated it got to remain part of the Catholic church.

When our family moved to Acton some eight years ago, I decided that maybe it was time for a change. Maybe it was time to look for a new spiritual home. So I went searching. It took a few years, but then one day I received an invitation to attend a service at ACC from my friend Jennifer Nelson. One of my first experiences of ACC was a group of Christmas carolers arriving on our doorstep one December evening, singing carols and bearing Christmas cookies. It was so joyful! When I reflect on the question I posed earlier, "What kind of church are we already?" I think of Jen's invitation to come to ACC and the encounter with Christ's festive joy through the group of people singing on my doorstep and giving me cookies.

Where else do I witness the Reign of Christ at ACC?

I see it in families who bring their children to church in the hope of passing on their faith to the next generation. And I see it in the families who struggle to get their children to church and have the grace to let go, and trust that God will meet their child in a unique way along their journey.



I see it in the friends who reach out to each other when a loved-one dies.

I see it in our youth who serve dinner to those in need at the Community Supper.

I see it and hear it in our music ministry, where ordinary people share their passion for and gift of music and create something extraordinary.

I see it in the elderly, who are so devout and dedicated to their faith.

I see it in the hand-written notes of care and concern deacons write to congregants who may be struggling.

I see it in the women who preach and bring a different, expansive perspective from the pulpit.

I see it in our congregation as an Open and Affirming community; in its acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community, and in its work to do justice.

I see it in congregants who wish to learn more about Jesus and participate in book groups in the hope of doing so.

I see it in congregants who wish to experience Jesus through the living word and prayer.

I see it in the humble practice of praying for and with others.

I see it in the desire to learn more about social injustices and talk with fellow congregants about how things can be different, and what we can do to make a difference.

I see it in congregants standing on the town green, standing up in solidarity with the oppressed, standing up for change.

I see it in the welcoming of visitors, both in person and on FB.

I see it in the people who share their knowledge of technology to bring us our Sunday services on FB.

I see it in the compassionate hearts of those serving in our caring ministries. They mirror the compassion of Jesus back to those who suffer.

I see it in our children, our sweet children, who are blessed each Sunday to go out and learn more about God through play.

I see it in the women who run the thrift shop.

I see it in our leadership who recognize the gifts of our community and empower us to share these gifts with the congregation.

I see it in Mark and Tracy, how they run things behind the scenes with warmth and a ready smile.

I see it in congregants' desires to grow closer to God through nature.

I see it in the generosity of our Mission and Outreach that provides financial support to organizations who work with the poor and serve the most vulnerable of God's children.

And I know there are so many other ways that you have seen our church mirror the face of Christ.

Richard Rohr says, "The reign of Christ is always now and not yet." He calls this space of now-and-not-yet a "threshold space" between the Reign of Christ in the here and now, and the Reign of Christ yet to be lived. Which is why it's important to hold these two questions "What kind of church do we want to be?" and "What kind of church are we already?" together.

But today, on this Reign of Christ Sunday, let us acknowledge and celebrate the community that we are: a welcoming, inclusive, compassionate, just community that is

seeking to live God's love. And make no mistake, the Reign of Christ is here. You, we are the Reign of Christ. The more I'm here, the more I witness and experience it. So on this Reign of Christ Sunday, and during this time of thanksgiving, may we be be grateful for our congregation, this beautiful community that we are so blessed to call home.