

Rev. Kate LeFranc

Preached at Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church, November 24 2013

“Full of God”

Psalm 46

Colossians 1:11-20

It's that time of year when I have no idea what season we're in. The stores have been doing Christmas since before Halloween, and now we're looking towards Thanksgiving and it's still not yet Advent. So we find ourselves today on this “Christ the King” Sunday facing one of my very favorite juxtapositions of the church year – or really, of the Christian faith itself. While the rest of the world is looking toward Christmas (sooner than ever, it seems) we in the church are looking towards Advent, which begins next Sunday. And in Advent, we are waiting expectantly, looking to see our own most holy God, somehow defying all expectation and showing up in the most humble of places.

But today, it is not yet *quite* Advent. Christ the King Sunday is the last week of the church year, and we celebrate a whole different aspect of God, and of Christ: an incomparable, incomprehensible bigness. Words are inadequate but we must try anyway, to capture a small glimpse and to praise our God. Paul draws on an early Christ hymn to do that, which many of the early Christians probably knew by heart and spoke or sung together when they gathered in each others' homes to share a meal together.

That man Jesus, *he* is the image of the invisible God. In him, by him, for him all things came to be (visible and invisible), *all* things including thrones and powers and rulers and principalities were created by him and are subject to him. Somehow – somehow – these early Christians saw in Jesus a perfect window to the God they were searching for. And their words paint an extravagantly grand picture: he himself, that man Jesus, *he* is before all things, and in him all things are held together.

And yet. This is the same Jesus who, in a few short weeks, will be remembered as a squalling infant, born like any other human child, dependant on his human parents to feed him, protect him, change his diaper. It is an almost untenable paradox, and yet this paradox is also at the heart of the Christian faith. Somehow, all the grandeur and mystery of the universe, past, present, future; *somehow*, all the majesty of swirling galaxies and a love so powerful as to sustain every living thing; *somehow*, all of that is born into our world in the most ordinary of ways, wrapped in bands of cloth, and laid in a manger.

But on this Reign of Christ Sunday, we are pointed first and foremost to the grand and powerful parts of the story. We are reminded that we can belong to a different kingdom, a different world. The language in the Colossians passage is strangely militaristic, which our translation tones down a bit. People in that time and place, particularly Jewish people, were very much used to being under the control of some foreign government. Over the centuries, it had been Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and now Rome. And each time someone conquered their armies, the regular people came along with them, subject to a whole new ruler.

So in the same way that at some point, the people woke up and found that they were under the control of Rome, Paul uses a phrase which gets translated into “God has transferred us into the kingdom of the beloved Son,” and his language would have been immediately familiar – as if to say, God’s armies have taken over, and you are no longer a Roman subject. Now you are a subject of a totally different kingdom, with different priorities, different rules, and a different future.

But all this language about kings and kingdoms and subjects falls pretty flat on our ears in 2013, in a country where our closest knowledge of “kings” is “that system our founders rebelled against,” an antiquated, un-American symbol. Or maybe “king” is just Elvis.

But in those days, in that context, “kingdom” was something very different. “Kingdom” encompassed all the little cultural expectations of Roman subjects, imposed on top of their cultural patterns and so ingrained that soon it was hard to tell the difference: the mandate to raise a cup of wine at the end of the meal, dedicated to the emperor; it becomes habit, like playing the national anthem before a baseball game. Kingdom meant seeing Roman centurions on city street corners, watching hawk-eyed like police and harassing anyone whose look they didn’t like. Kingdom was who you paid taxes to, and who held your debts, and who turned a blind eye when the tax-collector middle management robbed and cheated to scratch together a decent living at the expense of the most vulnerable people. Or, paid barely minimum wage with no sick time or health benefits; and some folks grumble but that’s just the way this “kingdom” works.

Kingdom was big and all-encompassing; not just government, but all of life and most of culture too. And so the idea of belonging, suddenly, to a whole new kingdom – a world and worldview like nothing anyone has known before, with a past and present rooted in the earthly life of Jesus, and a future hope imagined in his resurrection – that changes everything. Suddenly nothing is just “the way the world works” anymore. Because this world we’ve known is not the way it has to be. More than anything else, the way Jesus lived on earth was by upending everyone’s expectations. Somehow, every time someone thought they had him cornered, trapped by the world’s logic, Jesus managed to throw everyone a curve ball and make everyone question the rules and the world they knew.

Just like in Jesus’ day, the stories that capture our attention now are those stories that are a little bit unexpected. Those stories that force us to look at the world in a slightly different way. This week, a woman named Linda Tirado wrote an essay about her experiences of living in poverty. She called it, “Why I Make Terrible Decisions, or, Poverty Thoughts.” She painted an eloquent picture of her life, the demands of managing two jobs, a full-time course load, a veteran husband with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and two small children. She shared details from lives lived at the edges of society, her own and others’, of living in weekly motels with a minifridge and microwave – and hence a diet of peanut butter and frozen burritos, the cheapest way to eat and the only things she could prepare without a real kitchen – of having no money for dental care following an accident, and then applying for decent jobs as a legal secretary, for which she was well qualified, or wait staff in the front of a restaurant, and being turned away because her broken teeth meant she “did not fit the corporate image.”

The Huffington Post picked up her post, retitled it “This Is Why Poor People’s Bad Decisions Make Perfect Sense,” and it spread like crazy across the internet. It is a voice and a perspective that middle-class people don’t often hear, and it resonated even though for many people, it turned the world upside down. Her education and articulate writing meant that people would listen, and those relative

privileges give her the chance to speak up for the world she knows of lives lived on the margins of getting by, of borrowed rooms, mounting debts, children with disabilities, of deciding each month whether the money goes towards food or the electric bill.

Her words shake many people out of their understanding of the world. And so her post was shared and shared, and people started to ask how she could keep writing. Keep telling her stories and others'. So she set up a page where people could donate towards her project. At this point, almost 1800 people have contributed over \$50,000. She's been contacted by a literary agent, and while she continues to work the night shift in the kitchen of a chain restaurant, she will write a book. She says she feels fairly overwhelmed by this support, understandably, and that she'll use some of the money to pay off some bills for close friends who are struggling, to see if she can make some difference with it. Her new bio on the Huffington Post begins: "Linda is a completely average American with two kids and two jobs. She also writes essays on poverty and class issues, which is a skill she really only realized she had a week ago."

Most of the time our experience of the world is pretty mundane. We work, we play, we take care of the ones we love, or vice versa, and things are good or they are bad, but mostly things just sort of are. Mostly what we see is what we expect to get. Mostly we don't expect that the woman flipping our pancakes at 1 am is a talented writer and cutting social commentator. Mostly we don't look for the divine ruler of the cosmos in a baby's cradle. We don't look for enlightenment in the eyes of a stranger. We even have a hard time looking for God in our own lives, sometimes, as we get caught up in all the busyness of minutiae and forget to stop and look for the big stuff.

And yet. We as Christians affirm above all else that our God - in all God's holiness and splendor - lived and lives in this world in a human body just like ours. And that belief is, at its core, the audacious suggestion that we can see God here, in our world, reflected in one human being; we can touch a person who is made of flesh like ours, brown skin full of desert sun, and that ordinary body is also a divine being like none we have experienced before; we can smell his sweat like ours, and it is the smell, somehow, of all that is good in the universe.

Sometimes when I think of myself preaching, I imagine that I have reached down into a satin-lined case to lift up the multi-faceted jewel of the scriptures. I hold it up to the light, turn it slowly, and hope that it catches somewhere and sends a ray of light across the floor. Maybe a rainbow, if I'm lucky. And that's not about me, at all. I'm just holding up God's word, looking at it from a new angle, and hoping that you see something powerful there.

Some weeks, some days, are just like that. When all we can do is lift ourselves up into God's light, shards of colored glass broken by all the things life has thrown at us, and allow God to shine through us.

In the words of the Psalmist, the cities will rage and foam around us, the mountains will topple and the seas will roar, and our God is with us through it all. Sometimes all we can do is reach up towards the light of God, and through the chaos we hear that final line, "Be still, and know that I am God."