

## ROYAL TITLES: MESSIAH, CHRIST, KING

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UMC Geneva, IL

Tuesday, November 3<sup>rd</sup>, was election day. Millions of Americans participated in one of the most sacred privileges we have in our democracy – voting. To date, record numbers of US citizens have voted – some 150 million plus. Every four years, in early November, we cast our votes to elect a President and Vice President, all members of the House of Representatives, and 1/3 of all our Senators. Every year, between the vote and the President’s inauguration, we enter a *liminal* time.

I was first introduced to the concept of liminality, or liminal time, by my Anthropology Professor at Northwestern University, Mary Douglas. She, and her colleague, Victor Turner, conducted ground breaking work on liminality in African religions – work that has since spilled over into many academic fields and mainstream society. (1) In fact, Pastor Lisa dropped off a book on my porch a few days ago...a book we are planning to use right here at UMC Geneva. It’s title? *How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going: Leading in a Liminal Season* by Susan Beaumont. Beaumont tells us that “liminality refers to a quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs during transition, when a person or group of people is in between something that has ended and something else that is not yet ready to begin.” It is an unsettling, often dangerous, time of “betwixt and between.”

Thank God for Advent! The season of preparation for the birth of our Savior, Jesus, the babe of Bethlehem. As Pastor Adam Hamilton of the Church of the Resurrection in Olathe, Kansas puts it, “This season puts into perspective all our political wrangling: Whatever Christians think about their president and those we voted for, we are meant to know that there is only one King. It is to him we give our highest allegiance. While our politics have divided us, Advent should bring us together, uniting us around the newborn King.” (2)

Over the next five weeks, we’ll be using Pastor Hamilton’s Advent book, *Incarnation: Rediscovering the Significance of Christmas* to guide our sermons and various discussion groups. This first Sunday of Advent, we consider the royal titles for Jesus in the Gospel lessons we read today. Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the King. The English word *messiah* comes from the Hebrew word *mashiach*,

referring to a person whose head has been anointed with sacred oil, setting them aside for God's purposes. The English title *Christ* comes from the Greek word *christos* and is the equivalent of the title *messiah*.

The titles Messiah and King are closely intertwined, so let's untangle their meanings by looking to the Hebrew Bible for an explanation. Around 1000 BCE, God had the prophet Samuel anoint Israel's first king, Saul, with sacred oil. The oil was poured in a circle around the top of his head symbolizing a crown. From that time on, Israel's kings were anointed by prophets and priests, signifying that each king was holy to God, set apart for God's purposes, ruling on behalf of God and doing God's work. 1st Samuel 16 recounts the prophet Samuel's anointing of David as Israel's second king. Verse 13 tells us that at his anointing, "the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David."

David went on to become the greatest king of Israel, its archetypal king. In one of the most important chapters in the entire Bible, 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 7, the prophet Nathan pronounces that God "will establish the throne of David's kingdom forever." This became known as the Davidic Covenant, promising that a descendent of David would rule over God's people forever. From David's time to the time of Jesus, this promise made a profound impact on the Jews who for nearly six centuries lived as colonized people - first under the Babylonians, then the Persians, followed by the Greeks and finally, the Romans.

As you know, Jesus was born under Roman imperial rule. Through all the centuries of foreign rule, Jews clung firmly to the hope that one day, a new King, a descendant of David, would rule over God's people once again. This hope for an ideal King, like David, was known as the "messianic hope." This hope continued on up to Jesus's day, when the Jewish puppet kings, the Herods, ruled Palestine under the Roman emperor. Both Matthew and Luke's birth narratives of Jesus refer to Jesus as the long awaited Messiah, the longed-for King, in the line of David.

Last week was Christ the King Sunday – the very last Sunday of the church calendar. In my sermon I emphasized how Jesus as King radically reversed the current understanding of the role of kings in his day. Instead of using power and violence to subjugate and exploit people, King Jesus exercised his power as a servant to meet the people's needs. Instead of pride and privilege, Jesus exuded

an attitude of humility and compassion. Instead of catering to the rich and powerful, King Jesus catered to the poor, the powerless, the marginalized and outcast. Jesus's understanding of kingship was an indictment of the understanding of kingship by those in power as well as the majority of the population.

I like the way Adam Hamilton continues to fill out the theme of King Jesus embodying the reversal of values around the role of kings. Pastor Hamilton notes that Presidential elections are focal points of wealth and power. Campaign costs were in the billions of dollars this past election season. The inauguration and ensuing celebrations will certainly be lavish affairs. And the newly elected President will reside in the White House, and become the "leader of the free world," Commander-in-Chief of the world's most powerful military.

Contrast all that with King Jesus who was born into poverty in a barn – a stable. Who grew up in the obscure village of Nazareth "on the other side of the tracks." Who worked as a lowly carpenter or handyman. At the age of 30 Jesus began his "campaign" for the office of King. He traveled from town to town repeating his stump speech on the Kingdom of God that he was inaugurating. A Kingdom that called people to love God, their neighbors and their enemies. A Kingdom marked by humility, kindness, integrity, selflessness and forgiveness. He asked his citizens to care for the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick and imprisoned as well as the immigrant.

His campaign finance team was a group of mostly women who travelled with his twelve disciples, who were his campaign staff. He made very few campaign promises – nothing about lower taxes, increased jobs or defeating the Romans. Instead of promising to make Israel a great nation again, his kingdom would be marked by putting others first, self-denial, taking up one's cross and shining God's light through their good deeds.

Instead of an anointing by the High Priest, Jesus was anointed by several women of low estate. His coronation was at the hands of Roman soldiers who placed a crown of thorns upon his head. His exaltation took place as they stripped him, nailed him to a cross, and hoisted it high into the air. The sign above his head read: "The King of the Jews." That, however, was not the end of the story. After his death and burial, God raised him, conquering death on the third day. The

risen Christ then went on to establish his church whose mission was, and is, to continue his work on earth until his Kingdom is one day consummated, and Jesus the Christ will dwell with his people, putting an end to sickness, suffering and death, and wiping all tears from their eyes. (Revelation 21:3-4)

For decades, Queen Elizabeth the 2<sup>nd</sup> has been one of the most respected leaders in the world. In his book, Adam Hamilton notes that at her coronation in June, 1953, her anointing was considered so sacred it was not filmed. The Archbishop of Canterbury poured anointing oil from a royal flask into a golden coronation spoon, then dipped his finger into the oil and anointed her forehead, upper chest, and hands, consecrating her head, heart and hands to God.

Pastor Hamilton is surely correct when he asserts that Advent beckons all of us Christians – whether Republican, Democrat, Independent or whatever – to come to Jesus’s stable, and there fall on our knees as did both the shepherds and the Wise Men (Kings from afar). And in so doing yield our allegiance, our hearts, hands, minds and voices to the new born King. Amen.

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- (1) Lyndon J. Farwell, “Betwixt and Between: The Anthropological Contributions of Mary Douglas and Victor Turner: Toward Renewal of Roman Catholic Ritual.” Unpublished dissertation, Claremont Graduate School, 1976.
- (2) Adam Hamilton, *Incarnation: Rediscovering the Significance of Christmas*. Abingdon Press, 2020, p. 17.