

SERMON: First and Foremost
TEXT: Colossians 1:11-20

Does anyone remember playing a game called King of the Hill when you were growing up? This was in the olden days, of course, when kids ran around the neighborhood all day, creating fun wherever we found ourselves. King of the Hill was the game that resulted upon discovering a large pile of dirt or snow. The idea was to be the only kid remaining at the top of the hill. So, you had to be big and strong in order to stand your ground – or at least mean enough to push the other kids down. And, if the hill was a pile of dirt, you certainly couldn't be afraid to get dirty. I remember that feeling of victory when I was the "king" left standing at the top, looking down upon those I had defeated. It was a good feeling, even if it only lasted a few seconds, until my enemies came after me again.

Another memory I probably share with many of you is that of watching the old TV show *The Honeymooners*, starring Jackie

Gleason, playing the part of Ralph Kramden. Loud and obnoxious Ralph claimed to be the "king of his castle," saying that he was the boss of his household and laying down the laws that he expected his wife, Alice, to follow. If she dared to question him, he'd threaten her with his "bang, zoom, straight to the moon, Alice." She, however, would not even flinch when he raised his voice and pounded his fist on the table. She would just cross her arms and give him a look of disdain that said in classic Dirty Harry style, "Go ahead – make my day." Alice Kramden, pioneer of the Feminist Movement.

These are the images that I have in my head of what it means to be a KING. A king sits up high above the people he rules, and he controls them. A king gets to do whatever he wants, and no one is allowed to argue or disagree with him. A king is strong and powerful, and he uses his power to keep others down.

So, this being Christ the King Sunday, I have to say that Christ as KING, is an image that causes some difficulty for me. I guess I feel a certain kinship with Alice Kramden – I cross my arms and dig in my heels because I refuse to be ruled by a king who bellows his demands and threatens violence at even the hint of disobedience.

In my study for today's sermon, I learned about the history of Christ the King Sunday. "It began being observed in the mid-1920's, a practice instituted by Pope Pius XI out of a concern for the growing secularism and the rise of fascism in Europe." (Jill Duffield, Looking Into the Lectionary, The Presbyterian Outlook, November 18, 2019) The Pope wrote, "When once men recognize, both in private and in public life, that Christ is King, society will at last receive the great blessings of real liberty, well-ordered discipline, peace and harmony."

One hundred years later, we still – perhaps more than ever – need to be reminded at least once a year that Christ is King. Christ is Lord of all. Christ is Ruler of our lives. But Jesus was a different kind of king. Nothing like Ralph Kramden, bellowing at his wife and threatening her with physical abuse. Jesus was nothing like the King of the Hill from our childhood games who would push others down and keep everyone else beneath him. Jesus was not even the kind of king the people were looking for.

The Apostle Paul, however, wrote in his letter to the Colossians, a description of Jesus which left no doubt that Jesus was a true and supreme king over all; **FIRST AND FOREMOST** in all things. Let's hear some of those verses again.

“He is the image of the invisible God, the *firstborn* of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—*all things have been created*

through him and for him. He himself is *before* all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the *head of the body*, the church; he is the *beginning*, the *firstborn* from the dead, so that he might come to have *first place* in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

In case you didn't catch it: Jesus. Is. First. Number one. Top dog. Supreme ruler of the universe for now, for all time, and forevermore.

But notice that Jesus never says such things about himself. If you're a true king, you don't have to proclaim yourself or push your way to the front of the crowd. A true king has no need to blow his own horn.

Even as he was dying on the cross, he refused to defend himself against the soldiers who mocked him. “If you are King of the Jews, save yourself!” There was also an inscription over him that read, “This is the King of the Jews.” And when Pontius Pilate asked him if he was King of the Jews, Jesus answered, “you say so.”

He wasn't much of a king, they figured, if he couldn't save himself. If he had been a true king – or at least the kind of king they were looking for – he would have been a great military leader. A king would have organized armies to overthrow the Roman government. A king would have demonstrated both physical strength and the power of a leader who takes charge and who motivates people to obey his commands. A king would *not* have walked among common people, touching lepers and eating with sinners. A king would have sat on a throne and had servants do all his dirty work for him.

Jesus was a different kind of king. He didn't wear purple robes and live in a luxurious castle and eat bon-bons while counting his riches. Jesus was a **shepherd king**.

We also heard today the prophecy of Jeremiah proclaiming that God would raise up a shepherd to bring the scattered sheep of Israel back into the fold so that they may no longer fear. But then the prophecy moves rather abruptly from the metaphor of shepherd and sheep to talk of a king. "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety."

This king will be like a shepherd – one who protects the sheep, who feeds and cares for them, who finds them when they are lost, who picks them up when they stumble and fall. "He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still

waters, he restores my soul.” He is wise, he is strong, he is courageous. He is gentle, he is merciful, he is loving. This Shepherd-King does not save himself as other kings might. This Shepherd-King lays down his life for his sheep. He loves them so much that he would sacrifice his life for them. The Shepherd-King is FIRST AND FOREMOST, but he puts others before himself.

That’s the kind of king I want. You know, we all have the opportunity to choose who or what will be the ruler of our lives. I would think we all want someone whom we can trust to never leave us or forsake us. Someone who will never lead us astray. Someone who loves us so much that he values our lives above his very own.

Christ, the Shepherd-King, who has already laid down his life for us, wants to be the Ruler of our hearts, our souls, our minds, our very lives. He wants us to follow in trust. He wants us to

stay close to him so that we don't get lost. He wants us to place our lives in his hands.

This week, as we are counting our blessings and meditating on the reasons for thanksgiving, may we count Jesus, the Shepherd-king at the top of our list. **FIRST AND FOREMOST.** For he is the source of all life, the embodiment of love, the giver of all good gifts. May we choose him as the ruler of our lives, and then follow and give thanks.

To the glory of God!

AMEN.