

Moving Beyond Imagining God/Jesus as a Cosmic Monarch Christ the King Sunday

Colossians 1:11-20
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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November 20, 2016

Each year, this particular Sunday is a bit tricky for me. It is the last Sunday of the liturgical church year, for next week is the First Sunday of Advent, marking the beginning of a new year on the liturgical church calendar. This final Sunday in the church year is always designated as Christ the King Sunday. To soften that language some, it is now also called the Reign of Christ Sunday. But it's still rings of monarchy to me.

As it turns out, most years this is also the Sunday before Thanksgiving. Given these two very different options of focus, I have usually made the safer choice of preaching a sermon on giving thanks and living life as grateful people. But as you can tell by the title of today's sermon, *Moving Beyond Imagining God/Jesus as a Cosmic Monarch*, if you were hoping for a comforting sermon on being thankful, you are probably already disappointed.

This year I've decided to share some of the long-standing issues that many of us in this congregation have with using the patriarchal imagery of a king to describe Jesus, and an all-powerful divine cosmic monarch to describe God. This is expressed in both of today's scripture readings.

In order to do that, I will be sharing from the book, ***What Does a Progressive Christian Believe? A Guide for the Searching, the Open, and the Curious***, written by **Delwin Brown**, the dean emeritus of Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, CA. Introducing his chapter on God, Brown states:

Americans overwhelmingly believe in God. It is not clear that they overwhelmingly *think* about that belief – what it means, whether it is credible, and its consequences for everyday life. For Christians, however, an unreflective faith is not possible if we take seriously the injunction to love God with the mind as well as the heart and soul. A faith immune to open and self-critical reflection – reflection subject to the full range of evidence at hand – is not a progressive Christian faith.

Progressive Christianity seeks to unmask and reject the repressive view of God that has infected so much of Christianity.

Many Christians view God as the all-powerful ruler of the universe whose will controls the direction of human life, the development of history, and the destiny of the entire creation. God is the cosmic monarch. Whatever happens, good or evil, is caused or permitted by this God in “his” infinite wisdom.

There may be temporary comfort in believing that everything is determined or at least permitted by God, but there is also puzzlement and moral distress. One puzzle is why, if all that happens is in accord with the will of God, we should try as diligently as we do to make things better. Why seek to improve upon the course of events that accord with the will of God? Or, if God has ordained that we should seek improvement on the things that “he” has caused or permitted, why did God cause or permit them in the first place?

Brown concludes, “If that is not an intolerably callous way to run a universe, it is, at the least, poor planning.” I want to take this even further today – perhaps for some of you, too far. On Wednesday of this past week, **Matthew Boswell**, a Quaker pastor in Camas, Washington, who has a PhD in Christian Spirituality, posted a blog to the patheos.com website. Provocatively entitled, **God Is Not In Control**, Boswell begins by reflecting on what he was hearing as a common response to the results of the recent presidential election. He was shocked by how many people, both on the political right and left who responded with, “Don’t worry, God is in control.”

This assumes that either God was on Trump’s side (and God’s will was done – a call to fall in line), or God was on Clinton’s side (and God’s will was thwarted – a call to diligence and action). But what if God was on neither side? What if God was on all sides? Well, for your consideration, here is Boswell’s thought-provoking response:

To all my brothers and sisters in Christ who find solace in “God’s in control”: I respectfully encourage you to stop. **Stop needing God to be in control.** It’s a problematic theology that’s not truly helping you or others. But why? Five reasons come to mind:

1. We use this in a theologically inconsistent way.

It’s really hard to avoid implying that God causes numerous atrocities while saying God is in control. No matter how many times you defend the sentiment with “God’s ways are not ours” or “we can’t see the whole picture,” you’ve made a theological choice. But please, don’t appeal to “mystery.” Sure, there is mystery in life, and humility requires us to admit there is much we do not know. But what about our actual lived life? What about the many choices we face every day?

Our theology is not a non-factor in these things. What we believe implicates our actions. You can choose the “master planner God” who permits genocide and rape and exploitation because God has some point God wants to make and wants us to just trust and “wait and see.” Or you can choose a God who for whatever reason cannot stop such things but weeps because of them, empathizes with us, and is actively working to lead and grow us out of such atrocities.

I’ll take the second God. I don’t need God to be in control to be a good God.

2. We say it [God is in control] because we’re scared, not because it’s true.

Much in life makes us anxious. Especially when other people are anxious—that really makes us anxious! But we do others’ experiences (and our own) a disservice by too quickly trying to reassure and resolve. We need to listen to our anxiety, not ignore it. **“God is in control” is like a drug, distracting us from potentially solvable problems rather than leading us to courageously face them.**

3. God's upset.

When people say "God's in control," I have a hard time believing God is cool and calm when violence, hatred, and oppression rear their ugly heads. I think God is [hacked off]. But **I also believe God is more like a caring, attentive and responsive parent than a stoic, hard-[nosed] one.** Which, by the way...

4. It's patriarchal.

Humans are perpetually at risk of making God in our own image. The notion of a controlling God, where nothing out of God's will is taking place, sounds like a relic of the days of kings. Or an expression, in more recent times, of a male-centered world, where the man is the head of the household, not because of his character or talents or personality but simply because he has a [you know what]. This is the God of slave-owners and abusive men, not the God of lighthearted but weepy, fiery but gentle, confident but teachable, foot-washing but foot-washed Jesus.

5. It [God is in control] creates passivity.

"My child just got punched in the face by another kid, who is on his way to punch my other child in the face! But it's okay: these things happen, but God is in control!" Nobody would really react like this right? If you are a half-decent parent, and you see that second punch coming, you would actively intervene!

The "God is in control" narrative is silencing. It's the kind of thing the oppressors tell the oppressed to maintain the status quo: just accept your suffering, God has a reason for this. What a horrible lie. **If "God's in control" means Christians take a "wait and see" approach when injustice is prevalent, we've missed the point.** Missed the point of Jesus, who did not wait for God's action but acted on behalf of justice himself. Missed the point of *following* Jesus, which means doing what he did in the way he did it rather than simply saying every Sunday, "boo me, yay Jesus!" **"God is in control" creates complacency, inactivity, and makes us complicit in the horrors we are abstaining from addressing, relying instead on faux-faith to let us off the moral hook.**

Boswell concludes:

I don't need God to be all-powerful to be good. I don't need God to be all-knowing to be good. I don't need God to be "in control" to be good. I just need God to be close. To be present. To care. To be gritty. To be hopeful, having a vision or dream for creation that keeps God actively moving in the world, luring creatures toward greater goodness and love. This close, present, caring, gritty, and hopeful God is the God for whom I have affection. The God who entices me.

God has graced humans with creativity and passion and a longing for justice. If our theology silences these impulses—as I believe a theology of divine control does—it needs to be rejected, because it is allowing not good but evil to flourish under the guise of "God's plan."

God is with us. But God is not in control. And this gives me hope.

Well, here's my response. I find both Brown's and Boswell's words contain much wisdom to at least ponder. That is because **my own understanding of the nature and character of God has also moved from a controlling interventionist monarch to a Sacred Presence that dwells beyond, with, and within all people, and all of creation itself.** As many of us have learned, this is the understanding of God that defines the theological underpinnings of Celtic spirituality.

And yet, this is Christ the King Sunday. Our Presbyterian hymnal, *Glory to God*, contains a section entitled, *Jesus Christ: Ascension and Reign*. It includes traditional hymns steeped in patriarchal and monarchical language. Therefore, I encourage perhaps most of you to run these words through your own theological filter.

Hymns like:

#260 – *Alleluia! Sing to Jesus; his the scepter, his the throne... Alleluia! King eternal, Lord omnipotent we own.*

#263 – *All hail the power of Jesus' name! Let angels prostrate fall; bring forth the royal diadem, and crown him Lord of all!* [The name of this hymn tune, by the way, is CORONATION.]

#268 – *Crown Him with Many Crowns, the Lamb upon his throne;*

#269 – *Lead On, O King Eternal! The day of march has come; henceforth in fields of conquest your tents shall be our home. Through days of preparation your grace has made us strong, and now, O King eternal, we lift our battle song.* (Great, patriarchy mixed with militarism.)

And today's Closing Hymn, which I have remarked in the bulletin I plan to retire, at least for a while, #275 – Martin Luther's classic, *A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing. Our helper he, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing. For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe.* (Now we have Satan to fight.)

The texts to our hymns carry more weight than we might suppose. Over the years we internalize them and they influence our own theology about the nature and character of God. Remember, however, many of our hymns represent a traditional and orthodox Christianity, not a progressive Christianity to which many of us aspire. And yet, I have not had the courage to purge all the classic hymns that have meant so much to so many for so long. Again, that is why **I encourage you to carefully run these texts through your own theological filter.**

Saying that, we will now sing our Hymn of Response that surprisingly it isn't only in the Birth of Jesus section of our hymnal, but also in the same Ascension and Reign section. It's *Joy to the World*. It has been placed here because of the line, "Let earth receive her king." But I'll never retire this hymn!

Oh, and by the way, have a blessed and Happy Thanksgiving!

Amen.

Delwin Brown, *What Does a Progressive Christian Believe? A Guide for the Searching, the Open, and the Curious*, Seabury Books, 2008.

Matthew Boswell, *God Is Not in Control*, www.patheos.com. Boswell is the pastor of Camas Friends Church, a Quaker meeting in Camas, WA. He recently obtained a PhD in Christian Spirituality from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA.