

Are God/Jesus Cosmic Monarchs?

Christ the King Sunday

Daniel 7:9-10; 13-14 Colossians 1:11-20
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
November 20, 2022

Today 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, the new cycle of the Christian story. And each year, this particular Sunday is a bit tricky for me. That's because it is always designated as Christ the King Sunday. To soften that language some, it is now also called the Reign of Christ Sunday. But that word, reign, like king, still rings of monarchy, wedded to social privilege, wealth, and power.

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, *Are God/Jesus Cosmic Monarchs?*, this is not going to be a comforting sermon on gratitude, which I preached about recently anyway. This year I've decided to share some of the long-standing **concerns that many of us in this community of faith have with using the patriarchal imagery of a king to describe Jesus, and an all-powerful divine cosmic monarch to describe God**. These are clearly expressed in the imagery used in both of today's scripture readings.

To approach this, I will be sharing from a favorite book of mine, ***What Does a Progressive Christian Believe? A Guide for the Searching, the Open, and the Curious***, written in 2008 by **Delwin Brown**, the dean emeritus of Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, CA. Introducing his chapter "God: Exploring the Depth", 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, somewhat satirically, "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 too far for some of you. Back in 2016, **Matthew Boswell**, a Quaker pastor in Camas, Washington, who has a PhD in Christian Spirituality, posted a blog to the patheos.com website. It's provocative title, **God Is Not in Control**. Boswell begins by reflecting on what he was hearing as a common response to the results of the 2016 presidential election. (You probably remember that one.) He was shocked by how many people responded with, "Don't worry, God is in control." And many of us also heard something like, "The results of this election are in accordance with God's will." So now, for your potentially provocative consideration, here is Boswell's thought-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.**

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!

Let me pause here for a personal note. I want apologize to you for all the times when my anxiety has led to frustration and irritability, that has affected you and this congregation. It's something us human pastors are not immune to. And the pandemic's chronic stress has had a negative effect on all of us, and it is still something I, and perhaps you, continue to work on. Back to Boswell's analysis.

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.

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, if you're wondering, here's my response. I find both Brown's and Boswell's words contain much wisdom to at least ponder and reflect upon. 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, among, 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 you to simply run these historic words through your own theological filter.** Words like: scepter, thrown, royal diadem, crown, the Lamb upon his thrown, King eternal, kingdom. Perhaps you automatically did that when singing our first hymn, or listening today's choir anthem "My Eternal King."

We must admit, however, **the texts to our hymns, and church music in general, carry more weight than we might suppose. Over the years it's all but natural to internalize these words, thus influencing our own theology about the nature and character of God. Therefore, we need to remember that many of our beloved hymns represent a traditional and orthodox Christianity, not a progressive Christianity to which most of us aspire.** Again, 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 a favorite Christmas Carol, 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." Set to a different tune with the same text, it makes us think of this hymn in a new light.

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.