

Thine Is The Power

Readings

Ezek 34:11-20

Ps 95

1 Cor 15:20-28

Matt 25:31-46

Opening

Stories that begin in the middle of the action—*in media res*—capture my interest most of all. Though I may not know the characters, the setting, or the crisis in play, I like to be thrown into the action. I trust the writer will lead me back to the beginning in due course to make sense of it all; to experience the story from its beginning to its end.

Before us today is this great narrative of how God becomes king. Yet we enter this story midstream. We hear a crisis escalating in the age of Ezekiel, the crushing oppression of the strong over the weak in Israel. We see a solemn glimpse of the story's end with Jesus' mini-story in Matthew's Gospel. Paul places this story on a cosmic stage, in the heavenly places, with mystery surrounding the end.

Yet this you must know from this start; this you must understand to comprehend the whole narrative: the story had a fatal flaw from its beginning. Rejection shaped this story from its very beginning. Israel renounced her God and King before a crown was ever laid on the head of her sons.

Rejection at the Roots

Consider for a moment the essence of any kingdom. Any kingdom has three features: a place (dominion), people (royal subjects), and the person of the king. Israel had received the place promised to Abraham, a land of milk and honey from the Red Sea to the Euphrates River.¹ The descendants of Abraham, the twelve tribes of Israel, were to be a kingdom of priests, the royal subjects of God who created heaven and earth.² The person of the king was evident: it was the Creator God who appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai amid clouds, thick darkness, lightning, and unapproachable glory.

Before Moses descended the mountain, Israel was smelting Egyptian gold to fashion idols of their own making. Rejection and idolatry were there from the very beginning of this kingdom.

You couldn't really see the features of a kingdom until Israel came to their homeland, that place God set apart for them from the Red Sea to the Euphrates River. Even then the nation was on the brink of collapse. Judges were appointed to uphold the integrity of the nation, but too many were corrupt. Most took quite a bit off the top. So the greatest judge Samuel faces a referendum of sorts. His sons couldn't resist a bribe and everyone knew it. The elders assembled to address the chaos with Samuel. They said to him, "You're old and your sons are corrupt. *Give us a king to judge us **like all the nations***"³

To Samuel's surprise, God told him to grant the elders' demand. their hearts desire for a king. The Lord said this was not a referendum on Samuel and his sons; it was outright rejection of God as their king. "From the day I brought them from Egypt, they have renounced me and chosen idols instead, Samuel."⁴ Rejection and idolatry were there from the beginning, putting down roots beneath Israel's throne.

¹Exodus 23.31

²Exodus 19.6

³1 Samuel 8.4-6

⁴1 Samuel 8.6-9

A Dependent King

When you look deeper into Israel's rejection of God as their king, here's what we hear: we want to be like the other nations. We want a human king *to fight our battles*. Just think of that statement in light of the whole story. The God who sent ten plagues over Egypt; delivered Israel through the Red Sea; drowned Pharaoh's chariots in that same sea; the God who brought Jericho's walls down at the sound of Israel's trumpets; who commanded Gideon to whittle his army from 22,000 men to a mere 300 men so Israel would be intentionally outmanned, yet would win a convincing battle against thousands of Midianites—*this is the God who Israel does not trust*. We want a human king to fight our battles—instead of God Himself. Put the power in our hands again because we don't like the way you fight our battles. You require us to wait; you take us through trials; you make us endure weakness. Yes, you have delivered our fathers in times past but we are tired of the way you fight our battles. We reject God as king; we choose power, safety, and security instead.

Last week I was listening to some teachings on the creation of Adam and Eve in Genesis 1 & 2. I have not fully grasped just how weak and helpless Adam is *before* sin and death enters the world, before sin corrupts the natural world itself. Adam depends upon God for his very breath. We are dust unless he breathes life into us. Helpless and weak without his grace and breath. In our sinless state, God made us utterly dependent on Himself. Adam's perfect life was his perfect dependence on God alone for life itself. And in their utter dependence on God for absolutely everything, God spoke something remarkable to Adam and Eve: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion...over every living that moves on earth."⁵ Adam and Eve were set apart to rule as king and queen of God's world. But the royal covenant was clear—you will rule well only when you absolutely depend on God for all things.

And we know how that story progressed: rebellion and idolatry—the desire to *be* God—shattered the peace of Eden. Rejection shaped this royal story from its very beginning.

⁵ Genesis 1.28

The Rejected Cornerstone

The remainder of the Old Testament is the story of kings rising and falling. When kings rise, you find a pattern—weakness and humility. Israel spurned God before Samuel, but when Samuel walked to Jesse’s house, the Lord rejected every one of Jesse’s sons, except the least one—David, the shepherd boy. It doesn’t look like kingly valor to walk into a sword fight with a fork, but that’s the same effect when David took up five smooth stones against Goliath. Goliath the great fell to the earth, defeated by a shepherd and his sling.

David was a king after God’s own heart, yet his greatest hour as king was not his victory but his repentance in abject weakness after tragic failures of adultery and murder. His son, Solomon, succeeded him, asking not for riches, but the treasures of God’s wisdom. Read the Book of Proverbs, especially chapters 1-9, and you hear a father instructing his son, preparing him for wise and humble rule. That he trust not his own understanding; that he place not his trust in riches; that he lend generously and care for the poor. This was Israel’s golden age of kings. But it did not last. You can anticipate the outcome. It ended with another renunciation of God as King. In the end, Solomon married foreign wives and with those marriages came idols. It may sound like just a household matter for Solomon, but it became a national matter. The return of idols in Israel split the kingdom in two, the dividing of kingdoms leading to the conquering of both Israel and Judah. As it turns out, rejecting God as King also becomes a violent rejection of one’s very own brother. Violence becomes commonplace. People go hungry in the land of milk and honey while the wealthy consume their delicacies. God will not permit his kingdom of priests to be consumed by corrupt priests and kings forever. God will become the Shepherd King again.

The Longing for a Righteous King

And when God becomes king, he will choose the deepest identification possible with the poor, the meek, the humble. When God became king he chose the flesh of a virgin’s womb—a virgin betrothed to a common laborer who worked to make ends meet in a backwater town called Nazareth. A teenage girl rejoiced in the wisdom of God that Israel’s kings had rejected from generation to generation:

My soul magnifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked upon the humble estate of his servant.

The Mighty One had done great things with Mary's humility and she prophesied the kind of king her son would be:

"He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty." ⁶

That is the glimpse of her son's reign. Her Son, the King of Israel, would judge those who trampled the poor and abused their power. He announced that when he comes in glory and sits on his throne, all nations, all rulers will be measured by their actions toward the rejected ones of the world—the hungry and homeless, infirm and imprisoned. The King of Creation, who was hidden in the Virgin's womb, until the fullness of time, announced he will be hidden in plain sight; he will reside among the lowly, the discarded until the fullness of his kingdom comes in glory.

And it was that announcement, that prophecy (among others), that led to our Lord's final rejection. Three days after he told this parable he would wear a scarlet robe after his scourging, after soldiers spit in his face. When Pilate said, "Behold Your King" you can hear the echoes of the elders who defiantly opposed Samuel. They had said to Samuel, "we want a king like all the nations who will fight our battles for us." Here's the outcome of rejecting God and embracing our idols. Idols are never neutral in our hands. They either consume us or they consume the meek and lowly.

So on Good Friday, our ancestors took up the fight against God Himself when Jesus was crowned with thorns, a coronation by mockery. Above his head, in the language of the nations—Aramaic, Latin, and Greek—was written "King of the Jews." In the end, it was not Israel's desertion alone of her Messiah and King, it was an entire cosmic rejection of our

⁶Luke 1:51–53, ESV

Creator, announced for all nations to hear and see. And to the very end, our King took up our rejection on his very own body. *God the Son become King by clinging to a Roman cross.*

Defeated, but Not Destroyed, Enemies

Yet by taking this hatred upon himself, he fulfilled his mother's prophecy. By his cross and by his resurrection, the Lord Jesus "brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate." It sure doesn't look like it; it looks like total, abject defeat. *But power in this kingdom is hidden within weakness and defeat.* King Jesus disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in (the cross).⁷

These rulers are defeated, they are not yet destroyed. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. The King has come and he is coming. It is not Saul or Israel's sinful kings alone that will be judged; it is not Pilate or Caesar alone that will answer to God—when the end comes all enemies of God and all enemies of the cross of Christ, will come before the King once rejected now reigning in eternal majesty.

In recent weeks, I have spoken about the pervasive embrace of the idol of power in our age. Acquiring power, keeping power, using power for personal gain, these are obsessions on the political right and the political left. God save us from bending the knee to the idol of power. "We want a king to fight our battles!" echoes through the ages to our own time. But for all who are baptized in the Name of Jesus, there can only be cry, "I want the crucified and risen King to fight our battles!"

In the service of Holy Baptism, before one professes allegiance to Jesus as Savior and Lord, the candidate renounces the world, the flesh, and the devil. Broad categories, they are, but when you renounce the world, you're renouncing all its idols fashioned by the mind, imagination, and hands of mankind. So we reject all false gods of power, with all their deceitful promises of unending comfort and security. We are not seeking unending control,

⁷Colossians 2.15

we seek the Suffering Servant. We choose the cross of Jesus Christ instead because the cross alone is the power of God for those being saved. ⁸

Idols and the Trampling of the Poor

Here are three simple questions to examine or loosen the grip of power in our souls. I encourage you to write these down:

- Has your affection for the poor and vulnerable of our world *increased* through the years ?
- Are my thoughts and conversation more occupied by national politics, or am I more burdened that the needy will be forgotten and the hope of the poor be taken away? Taking Matthew 25 seriously means we will find Christ hidden nearby in the low-income families of Bearden Middle School than we will in Washington D.C.
- Is my heart turned toward the most vulnerable, the most likely to be discarded—the unborn, the immigrant, the refugee, the elderly?

So I pray through the years: soften my heart, where it has hardened, Lord Jesus. I pray the words of Evening Prayer: *that we may depart this life in your faith and fear; we entreat you, O Lord.*

Our Lord and King, Jesus Christ, has declared the open secret of his return. He is hidden in plain sight; he resides among the most vulnerable, the discarded, . The story remains, the warning remains, the calling remains. He came once to take up our rejection; he will return in victory. All nations will come before his feet and he will judge us according to the law of mercy in his Name. These are days when we can *live* the prayer, “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.” These are days to renounce again and again the vain and destructive idols of power; to bend the knee to Christ the King alone who gives life. To confess with heart, soul, mind, and strength “Yours is the Kingdom, Yours is the Power, Yours is the Glory for ever and ever.” Amen.

⁸1 Corinthians 1.18