

So You Are a King?

**A sermon given by Rev. Dr. Gregory Young
Presented on Sunday, November 22, 2009
Christ the King Sunday**

Sermon prayer:

Please pray with me. Gracious God, you speak to us in so many different ways. We thank you for this time of worship where we have many opportunities to hear your voice speaking to us, with us. Pray that as we gather around your Word this day, and as you seek to plant that Word in our hearts that you would find a congregation ready to receive, hands ready to serve, and voices ready to praise your Holy name and witness to the goodness of your Kingdom. In Christ our Lord, Amen.

Sermon:

Did you ever play the childhood game "King of the Hill"? Maybe you've heard about it, maybe you played it as a child growing up. I remember playing "King of the Hill" with my friends as a little boy. And I remember one particular time in the neighborhood there was a construction project, building project at a local school and as the men prepared to do that work, they brought in a whole pile of dirt that they would need for the construction project and that was just an open invitation to all the boys of the neighborhood to gather around that big mound of dirt. And one day we looked at it and said "Let's play "King of the Hill" here." And so there we stood at the bottom of this - what seemed like a mountain to us - of dirt, and we did one of the childhood rhymes that boys use to choose whose going to be the first king of the hill.

And as the one who it fell to climbed that mound of dirt the rest of us scattered out around the base of the pile of dirt and started to think how were we going to dethrone the king so that we could be king, one of use could be king. Everybody had their own little strategy on how they were going to do this. But the whole point of the game was whoever was standing on top of the hill was deemed King and the rest who were at the bottom of the hill had the glorious task of dethroning that King and it usually meant really getting physical as boys can sometimes do. And trying to throw people off the top of the hill until one is left standing, the new king. And then the game starts over again. Usually

there were two reasons why this game would end: either we would wear ourselves out because we just played it too many times, or – and this was usually the way – somebody wound up getting hurt. Just imagine being thrown off a big pile of dirt.

Well, today is Christ the King Sunday and as I thought about that I was reminded of this little game we played as boys, this “King of the Hill” game. For us in the church, for those churches that follow the liturgical year as it’s developed over the centuries, this is the last Sunday of the church’s year. Next Sunday begins a whole new year with the anticipation of the birth of Christ, with the prophets’ call that we’ll hear on the first Sunday in Advent. Today is a day for us to look back over the past year and to affirm that the one who has been at the center of our worship and at the very center of our life together as a community of faith is the king of our lives, indeed is the king of the universe. It is also a time for us to look ahead to the approaching new liturgical year, vowing to follow our King wherever he leads. At the same time that we affirm Christ as king of our lives we also come to see him as the one whose being fills the universe with God’s holy presence, reigning over all of creation by means of the grace of God. This is no tyrant king whom we serve. This is the king of justice, of peace, of love, mercy and redemption.

Years ago I once drove by a church that was preparing in the coming Sunday to celebrate this day in the life of that congregation, the day we call Christ the King. And on the front sign that was by the road of this church, it announced each week what the sermon topic was going to be. And on that day as I drove by, the sign read – “One World, Two Kingdoms.” And it is a title that ever since reading it has caused me to step back and to reflect – “One World, Two Kingdoms.”

The Sanhedrin, the council that governed and ordered Jewish life from the time of Jesus; Pontius Pilate, who was the appointed governor, the representative of the Roman Empire, sent to rule and to represent Rome in Jerusalem; and Jesus – these three - the Sanhedrin, Pontius Pilate, Jesus - come together in our Gospel reading today, all living in the same world and yet with different allegiances. Who will be the king of the hill? When the conflict that brought these three together is over, who will be the most powerful, who will be the one left standing at the top, or who will tire or be injured and fall from the top? The Sanhedrin, and in particular the chief priests who had a stranglehold on the politics of the ruling council that ordered the life of the Jewish

community, by bringing Jesus to Pontius Pilate reveal their true allegiance. In this capital case where the members of the ruling council are looking to Rome for a solution, the chief priests reveal that they have bowed to Roman rule.

As Leon Morris in *The Gospel According to John* has written: “[The chief priests] had no king, but the dictate of a foreign power, they had sunk to that point by choice. They had turned their back on God’s gift; soon they would see him nailed down and launched up into the sky for all to see. What sort of a King was that? For them, even a foreign heathen power was to be preferred!” The chief priests, in order to retain their power over Jewish society which Jesus had challenged with his teaching and with his ministry, the chief priests manipulated the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, by publicly pledging allegiance to the kingdom of Rome. Pilate found himself between the proverbial “rock and a hard place.” He had been sent by the Roman emperor as governor to keep the peace; that is the peace of Rome. The Jews refused to bow down completely to Rome, but the land in which they lived was critical for Roman commerce and trade. And so rather than entering into another war of conquest, Rome sought to govern the land of the Jews by means of influence and a strong military presence. Money and favors changed hands between chief priests and the Roman governor. Pontius Pilate and the influential families of the Sanhedrin manipulated one another with one side trying to retain a semblance of Jewish rule and the other trying desperately to keep the peace of Rome. Jesus and his disciples posed a threat to both. Pilate was caught between the threats of the chief priests, Jesus and his small band of followers (although Pilate had no way of knowing just how influential Jesus had been) and the heavy hand of Rome. In the end, when Pontius Pilate was forced into making a decision concerning Jesus, what mattered most to him was his job and his skin.

“So you are a King?” was Pilate’s question of Jesus. What a scene it must have been. Try to picture it in your mind: a Roman governor with almost limitless power to back him in any circumstance and Jesus with his rag-tag band of followers, all of whom had by now deserted him - Jesus all by himself. Even what little power the rulers of the Jews had, was stacked against Jesus. Pontius Pilate’s question is even more rhetorical than it is one seeking an answer – “So, you are a King?” You can almost hear Pilate laughing as he chokes out the words. One world, two kingdoms.

As I said in the beginning of our sermon, when one plays "King of the Hill" it is played until the group gets tired playing or until somebody gets hurt. During the playing of the game, however, strategies develop and allegiances are formed all in an effort to win the prize. If one chooses, one can learn a lot about life and politics while playing "King of the Hill." If a particularly strong boy was standing at the top of the dirt hill, it would take two or three of us coming together to figure out a way to depose the King that would allow one of us to stand in his place. We might approach from different angles in an attempt to distract the strong king long enough for one of us to throw him off balance and send him tumbling down the hill. Alliances can be helpful when one is playing "King of the Hill". The problem is there can only be one king. Only one person can stand at the top of the hill and declare, "I am the king of the hill!"

While it appears that the allegiance between the chief priests and Pontius Pilate has won out over Jesus, there can only be one King. Caiaphas, the chief priests, the Sanhedrin, the ruling council, and the Jews lived in the kingdom of Israel which would soon become part of the Roman Empire. Pilate and the Roman army of occupation in Israel were servants of the Emperor and enforcers of the Emperor's will; they were part of the Roman Empire. Jesus, on the other hand, had refused to bow to either of these kingdoms, choosing instead to be loyal to his Father's Kingdom - the Kingdom of God. At the end of the day, it was Jesus who was on top of the hill and the name of the hill was Golgotha. There, suspended on a cross for all to see, is our king; the king of the universe; the king of our very lives. He was the one who was left on top of the hill that day and he has become, because of the power of God, Christ the King; our king, the king of the universe who sits at the right hand of God enthroned forever. And we give thanks and praise and pledge our allegiance to his Kingdom each time we enter these doors and bow before this cross on our altar.

Thanks be to God, Amen.