

Rev. Lisa Schrott
November 17, 2024
2 Samuel 23:1-5 & Revelation 1:4b-8
Grounded in Hope: Covenant Promises Fulfilled

Join me in prayer... Almighty God, your word is life and your promise is trustworthy and true. By the power of your Holy Spirit write your word upon our hearts so that we may be grounded in hope through your covenant promises; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This morning we are celebrating Reign of Christ Sunday. This day marks the ends of the Christian year, or what we sometimes call the liturgical year. Now technically, Reign of Christ Sunday actually falls next week, November 24, with Advent beginning on December 1 this year. We have advanced Reign of Christ the King by one week, so that we can celebrate the Agape Meal next week.

Reign of Christ Sunday is a relatively recent addition to the church's calendar, this festival was established by Pope Pius XI in 1925. It is now widely celebrated in the Protestant denominations, in addition to the Roman Catholic church. A book I have on the traditions of the Christian calendar notes that in England, this day is popularly known as 'Stir-up Sunday' from the opening words of the Collect for the day: 'Stir up we beseech thee, O Lord of thy wills, thy faithful people...' The book, written in 1974, also notes that Stir-up Sunday is a reminder for housewives that they must now begin to make (and stir up) their Christmas puddings.¹ You can ask Zora more about the traditions of Christmas puddings...

Now Reign of Christ Sunday doesn't always rank up there in the favorite holidays of the church. But it is one I have come to appreciate in my ministry, especially this year. As the PC(USA) *Book of Common Worship* tells us: "At the conclusion of the Christian year, we celebrate the sovereignty of the God who is known to us in Jesus Christ. On this day, as on every day, we give honor and glory to the Lord of heaven and earth and watch and pray for the coming of God's realm of righteousness, justice, and peace. Above all earthly powers, the crucified and risen Lord alone claims our adoration and allegiance. We proclaim that Jesus Christ is first and last, beginning and end, Alpha and Omega." In Christ all things began, and in Christ all things will be fulfilled. In the end, Christ will triumph over the forces of evil. So with that frame of reference, hear now these words from the Book of Revelation, Chapter 1:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

¹L.W. Cowie and John Selwyn Gummer. Pentecost XXIV. *The Christian Calendar*. G & C Merriam Co., 1974; p 145.

Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. So it is to be. Amen.

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

About a month ago, a few of us from the PCO Mission Committee attended a benefit for one of our mission partners - the Haiti Nursing Foundation. I expected the event to be a bit of a downer considering the state of affairs in Haiti. And the event did have some serious moments as stories were shared about the impact of the ongoing violence. And yet there were incredible moments of hope – in particular from the Haitian author Edwidge Danticat. She shared some wise words from an article she wrote in the *New Yorker* magazine last April titled *The Haiti that Still Dreams - The country is being defined by disaster. What would it mean to tell a new story?* Danticat said:

"I have hope, I say, because I grew up with elders, both in Haiti and here in the U.S., who often told us, "Depi gen souf gen espwa"—as long as there's breath, there's hope. I have hope, too, because the majority of Haitians are under twenty-five years old, as are many members of our family. Besides, how can we give in to despair with eleven million people's lives in the balance? Better yet, how can we reignite that communal grit and resolve that inspired us to defeat the world's greatest armies ..."²

Danticat's words have been echoing in my head over the past week or so: "as long as there's breath, there's hope." ... "Besides, how can we give in to despair with ... lives in the balance?" This is the same place where the audience to which the Hebrews was written found themselves; needing to be reminded not to give up hope in the power of the great high priest Jesus - even with the persecution they were facing. And this was also the situation for those to whom the Book of Revelation was written.

The author of Revelation is a man named John who was exiled to the island of Patmos, so he is often referred to as John of Patmos, to distinguish him from John the Baptist and John the writer of the gospel. He was exiled during a time of severe persecution, likely during the rule of the Roman emperor Domitian. John writes this letter of comfort to seven churches undergoing persecution, urging them to remain faithful and assuring them that despite all appearance to the contrary, the Roman Empire's power is not absolute. It is Jesus Christ who is the ruler of the kings of the earth and who reigns supreme. Despite all the appearances to the contrary, when the world appears chaotic and vindictive, arbitrary and capricious, it is Jesus Christ who reigns supreme. In times of anxiety over the state of the world or politics or illness or family struggles, it is Jesus Christ who reigns supreme.

² Edwidge Danticat. *The Haiti That Still Dreams. The country is being defined by disaster. What would it mean to tell a new story?* April 23, 2024. Online at <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/essay/the-haiti-that-still-dreams>.

Imagine the comfort this good news gave to a people oppressed and persecuted. We don't know what the future will hold for us on any day, so how do we live as a people of faith? For the early Christians what they knew was persecution. They couldn't even imagine a world where Christianity is the most populous religion. But here is John giving them hope that what they are currently experiencing is not the forever reality.

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the **ruler of the kings of the earth**.

Imagine the people thinking back on their history.... Their long deep history as a people of the covenant. God's promise to Noah after the flood - a universal covenant to all creation that the Earth will never be destroyed by flood waters - sealed by the rainbow. The covenant with Abram: "Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, "No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you."

Years later the promised multitudes had migrated into new lands and swelled in number such that the powers sought to control them through enslavement. God freed the children of the covenant from their enslavement and made a covenant with them at Mt. Sinai, establishing the laws that would guide them as they sought to love God and love each other. The people must have thought about the covenant God made with David. In second Samuel, chapter 7 we hear the prophet Nathan tell David: "When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever ... Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever." We heard Rebecca read from the end of Second Samuel: "Now these are the last words of David: "One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God, is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning, gleaming from the rain on the grassy land." Is not my house like this with God? For he has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure."

And God indeed fulfilled that promise in Jesus Christ – an everlasting covenant – a throne secured forever. This is the covenant referred to by the author of the book of Hebrews, which echoed the prophet Jeremiah: "This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

For the audience to which the Letter to the Hebrews and the Book of Revelation were written, and to us today, I can't imagine anything more comforting and more inspiring than those words. I will be their God, and they shall be my people. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

A continuous presence with us despite difficulties, and despair and even death. A continuous presence with us, that in the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, makes us prisoners of hope. Shortly after he won the Nobel Peace prize, in an interview on his work fighting against the evils of apartheid, Tutu said, "In the middle of our faith is death and resurrection. Nothing could have been more hopeless than Good Friday—but then Easter happened, and forever we have to become prisoners of hope."³

Prisoners of hope – we are bound by hope because we are a people who worship a God who is not only way out there – a cosmic transcendent love, but also a deeply personal God – a God who throughout our whole history has chosen to dwell with us; who is and who was and who is to come.

Throughout this worship series Grounded in Hope, I have referred to a theology of hope offered by the contemporary reformed theologian Shirley Guthrie. Guthrie's thesis is that Christians are grounded and sustained by hope because we remember that scripture offers us not one but several hopes for the future. There is the hope of freedom after slavery. There is the hope of homecoming after exile. There is the hope of reconciliation after estrangement. There is the hope of community being formed from strangers. There is the hope of the outcast being welcomed to the table. There is the hope of new life after death.⁴

This is the capital "H" hope we celebrate on Reign of Christ of Sunday. All of these hopes we find in scripture are rolled into the hope of a new creation and a new tomorrow. We are freed from the weight of our sins, so we can celebrate that "He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him." "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come.

We need – I need - Reign of Christ Sunday each year to remind me that "...in Christ all things began, and in Christ all things will be fulfilled. In the end, Christ will triumph over the forces of evil. As sovereign ruler, Christ calls us to a loyalty that transcends every earthly claim on the human heart."⁵ The covenant of an everlasting ruler whose throne has been established forever; one who rules over people justly. This covenant has been fulfilled by Christ Jesus, the one who allows us tell a new story, for as Haitian writer Edwidge Danticat reminds us: "as

³ From an interview with Desmond Tutu by Sojourners Magazine *by phone on December 24, 1984*. Online at <https://sojo.net/magazine/february-1985/prisoner-hope>

⁴ From Shirley C. Guthrie. *Christian Doctrine*. Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press; 1994.p 384.

⁵ From the *Companion to the Book of Common Worship*; Geneva Press, 2003, p. 151.

<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/christianyear/christ-king-reign-christ>

long as there's breath, there's hope." ... "Besides, how can we give in to despair with ... lives in the balance? Better yet, how can we reignite that communal grit and resolve?"

This means we can approach the Agape Meal next Sunday with thanksgiving and love in our hearts. And we can approach Advent the following week with hearts open for a season of reflection and preparation. For we have a story of covenant promise fulfilled; we have a story of freedom and redemption; and we have a story of hope to tell the world. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, the one who is and who was and who is to come. May the Lord Jesus reign in our hearts.