

The Reign of Christ

Revelation 1:4–8

Revelation begins as a letter from John of Patmos, but I interpret the first part as a poem due to the author's use of beautiful language and poetic techniques. This is particularly apparent in the First Nations Version, an indigenous translation of the New Testament. So, I wanted this sermon to take a close look at these brief verses before drawing relevant points for our time and place. Let us pray. Great Creator, as your Spirit moved over the waters of creation, send your Spirit to move over us. Come rest on us. Come rest on us. Amen.

The Jewish theological tradition did not even mention the name of God and often described the Lord by what God was not—for example, immortal and invisible, or not mortal and not visible. However, John names God the One “who is, and was, and is to come.” A simple formula that encompasses past, present, and future. It has a rhythmic quality and provides comfort by suggesting balance, order, and presence.

John then moves to Jesus Christ, who the First Nations translation names Creator Sets Free, picking up on his Hebrew name, which means salvation. By any name, the person of Jesus refers to a specific man in time and place; the title Christ means Messiah or Chosen One, the one foretold by the prophets and who comes from the All-Powerful God of past, present, and future.

John describes Jesus Christ with another three-part description: the honorable witness, the firstborn of the dead, and Grand Chief or ruler of all earthly kings. These descriptions are worth contemplating individually.

In Greek, witness and martyr are the same word—to be an honorable witness is to see or experience the truth and sacrifice for it, even to death. Jesus was faithful to both meanings.

Yet Jesus is also firstborn of the dead, meaning he was reborn after death. He was resurrected. Not only that, but the idea of being “the first” means that others will follow his lead. We recently lost Dr. Barbara Holmes, a leading scholar and contemplative in the Black Church. Before her passing, she noted that, because Jesus is the firstborn of the dead, she did not fear death. She knew that she would continue beyond time in the living God.

John's final description of Jesus is most poignant for today's liturgical observation of the Reign of Christ. Jesus is the king of kings—the Great Chief of earthly kingdoms, powers, and principalities.

In Greek, the word for “to rule” also means “to begin,” implying here that Jesus has ushered in a new reign. As John proclaims a verse later, we are a kingdom of priests or sacred nation of holy people; though followers belong to different earthly kingdoms or tribes, Christ is our ultimate and true allegiance.

It follows that we who believe in Christ's reign must follow his example. John tells us that this example was to love and liberate. The name of Jesus in the First Nations Translation is especially poignant: Creator Sets Free loves us and “sets us free from our bad hearts and broken ways” (Rev. 1:5). Jesus did this not with conquering armies but by sacrifice—not by raging battles against opponents but by offering his “lifeblood” to all.

While this message is in the scripture, there are forces today in our country who falsely equate the kingdom of God with the kingdom of Earth and also equate the teachings of Christ with methods of power, subjugation, and control. Jesus did not become emperor. He died at the hands of the state.

My beloved professor, Carson Brisson, taught that Rome had two rules: Rome kills whoever Rome wants, and whoever Rome kills stays dead. Jesus submitted to the first rule, but by breaking the second, he also broke the cycle of retributive violence. No more wars for peace, retaliation, or eye-for-eye vengeance.

Still, there are modern voices declaring that the only means of saving Western civilization is by a more aggressive, even violent Christianity. These words are wind and dust. These aspirations and actions fall short of bearing witness to the reign of Jesus Christ or the teachings of Creator Sets Free.

Once, while the disciples were following their teacher on the road, a couple of them stayed behind to argue over who was the greatest among them. They must have assumed that their teacher had not heard them. However, the wise rabbi later asked, “What were you arguing about back there?” Busted! At least they showed humility by acknowledging their error and choosing to remain silent instead of trying to defend themselves.

Then Jesus answered their question of who was the greatest by inviting a small child to join them and welcoming that little one with a hug. This is what the reign of Christ looks like when we are set free from our bad hearts and broken ways.

What would it mean to center the young, the vulnerable, and the least of these rather than the powerful, the self-righteous, and the violent?

A story by Ross Gay is fittingly titled, “Giving My Body to the Cause,” for it is a story of sacrificial love. The poet was walking with a huge crowd of people at a pride parade in New York City when one of his companions saw a little boy, probably seven years old, who had lost his mother in the crush of chanting, cheering folks. Of course, the child was scared and crying. When questioned about his mother's appearance, he managed to mumble that she was wearing a rainbow T-shirt. That did not narrow it down!

Ross is about six foot five, so he picked up the child and placed him on his shoulders in hopes that the kid would be more visible to his mom. Ross patted his knee and tried to reassure him, but the little one was still shaking with fear. Soon, other mommies were coming up and saying things like, “You’ll be okay” and “We’ll find your mama, don’t worry.” None of these well-intentioned folks prevented the child from continuing to sob at how tiny he felt in the enormity of the crowd.

Perhaps you too are feeling overwhelmed. Maybe even lost. Perhaps you have found yourself frustrated and upset. Maybe you have raged against injustice in the world and tragedy in your life. Life is not fair. No one promised otherwise—not even the Creator Sets Free.

But I happen to learn a simple prayer this week written by an anonymous fisherman about a thousand years ago. “O God, thy sea is so big and my boat is so small.” Yes, life can feel overwhelming. Yet the God who was and is and will be gave us Jesus Christ as a promise for the future and a comfort in the present. Maybe Creator Sets Free is also a life raft. A boat, though small, that can take us from here to there and keep us afloat until we are found.

The mommies at the pride parade saw that their individual efforts were not helping the child, so they began to chant, “Find his mom! Find his mom! FIND HIS MOM!”

Soon, a woman came running up, “There you are, my love!” Ross handed the boy into his mommy’s arms, where they held each other for several seconds, the boy wrapping his legs and arms around her, the mom placing her hand on the back of his head and nuzzling him, the crowd cheering and weeping, and the reign of Creator Sets Free suddenly visible and present.

Yes, the sea is so great and the times can seem overwhelming. Yet, the reign of Christ is breaking into the world, perhaps in small ways, like a boat, but enough to keep your head above water, your head above the crowd. And then, you see another boat, and another, a community is formed. Once again, Christ is present.

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