

November 22, 2020
Christ the King, Year A
Matthew 25:31-46
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship During the Covid-19 Pandemic
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

This Doesn't Feel Like Ordinary Time

I don't need to tell you about all of the bad news in our world today. You are living it; I am living it; we are living it together.

We see it in plans for Thanksgiving that have been disrupted by disease, as we gather around tables where many are missing, people we cannot travel to see, friends outside of our bubble, and, for some of us, people who will never sit around our earthly tables again, a first Thanksgiving without a loved one. This year in addition to empty places left by people who died of other causes, there will be more than 250,000 families in our country who will have an empty place at their table and sometimes more than one, because of Covid-19 this year.

We see the bad news of this year in the unsettled election when, close to a month after the presidential election, we are not moving through the peaceful transition from one administration to another that is the hallmark of American democracy.

We see the bad news of this year in the millions who have lost jobs and in the food pantries and soup kitchens that have seen the numbers that they need to serve skyrocket since March, with the number of food insecure households just in Massachusetts alone almost double, from 8.4% of households to 16.4% of households. The number of food insecure children in our state has increased by 102% according to Project Bread.

We have seen the bad news of this year in the reminders that racism is still firmly entrenched in our society and that human beings, people of color in our country, their bodies, their dignity, their hopes and dreams, their future, their children are still, in 2020, being sacrificed on the altar of the idol of white supremacy.

We have seen the bad news of this year in the storms that have battered the Gulf Coast and the Southeast of our country. We have seen it in the fires that have devoured the west, consuming homes, businesses, towns, schools, farms and vineyards, animal habitats, and lives.

Today in the church it is the end of another church year and it is the end of ordinary time. Ordinary time begins after Pentecost and lasts through the summer and fall. And yet, for us this has not been an ordinary year, this has not been an ordinary summer and

fall. It has not felt like ordinary time. How many times have you said or have you heard someone say something like, “It’s 2020 and the hits just keep coming”?

Or upon getting bad news have you said or heard someone say, “It’s 2020, what do you expect?”

I have even seen New Year’s cards, instead of Christmas cards, available for sale, that have a space for a picture of your family and then have the caption, “Well, that was crazy! Happy 2021 (finally)!”

There seems to be a sense that there is nothing ordinary about what we’re living through this year.

Today, this final Sunday in the church year, this final Sunday in Ordinary Time is also called Christ the King Sunday. It’s known in some circles as “Reign of Christ” Sunday. I know that for some it has been a little bit hard to see, to experience the world right now as a world in which a benevolent and loving God is in charge. We have been shaken out of our complacency. We have had to give up the illusion of safety. We have had to give up the notion that we can just do whatever we want whenever we want. We are having to confront the fact that our actions have life and death consequences. We have had to give up so many things that are dear to us for the common good. We have seen so many people around us balk at an infringement of what we like to call our freedoms, because we are simply not used to having to consider much besides our own inclinations or perhaps our personal finances in making decisions about what we can and cannot do.

But of course, what we are experiencing as new, as 2020 aberrations in a life that prior to this, for many of us, was going very smoothly would not be considered new or aberrations for many people in the world.

Times of communally spread, rampant, and deadly disease has always been a reality in our world. It just hasn’t been a reality in our country for a long time, because of our access to effective and widespread vaccinations.

Times of civil unrest are something that people in other countries face as an almost constant reality, but for us, with all of its flaws and failings, with all of its unwieldiness, the idea of our public and political life being in chaos is an aberration.

Communities of color could have told us long before the summer of 2020 that the racism that many people in our country have wanted to imagine was a thing of our national past is alive and thriving, part of the very fabric of our nation, which gains strength and deadly power the more that it is ignored.

The natural disasters that have seemed to increase in frequency here this year are not new, though, perhaps, because of global climate change they are more frequent. But last year, in 2019, the Confirmation class started praying for the environment every week.

What prompted that to become one of our top 6 prayer requests was fires that were burning in the Amazon and then in Australia, because the kids were concerned about the impact that those fires would have on the local ecology but also on the global environment. Animals, people, dead and displaced, plants, crops, destroyed by weather crises across the globe is not something new in 2020. It is a yearly occurrence as people struggle under the destructive power of wind, rain, fire, drought.

2020 has been hard for us because so many things that are always global realities have happened this year to us, so that we cannot close our eyes to the pain of the world, so that we cannot ignore it because it is happening somewhere far away to people who don't know, to places that we have never seen. No, this year it has been our neighbors, our friends, our family, who have been sick, who have been lost. This year it has been beaches we have played on, it has been forests we have walked in, mountains that we have gazed on in wonder, that have been devastated by wind, rain, and fire. It has been crops that we rely on that have been destroyed, it has been our stores where shelves have been empty. This year, we have not been able to close our eyes to the way that the sin of racism still infects our country and terrorizes our neighbors.

So, if we have ever said, in any year, prior to 2020, that Christ is king, if we have every celebrated this day, this festival in the church year without question or doubt, if in 2019 we sang with confidence, "Crown him with many crowns, the lamb upon his throne", when we must be able to do it this year, even though this year the troubles of the world have seemed to gather at our collective door. Even though this year we have known turmoil and griefs that might have been unimaginable to us 11 months ago, when we started a new year, a new decade.

In fact, as much as it's hard to believe and in some ways, to accept, general well-being on the earth as never been a good litmus test for whether or not God was reigning. The world has forever been groaning under the weight of sin and God has never been separate from that suffering. In fact, the very story of Jesus says that God has come to walk with us in the pain, has come to share the burden with us, has come to strengthen us in our struggles, has come to give us joy and peace that is not born of complacency or ease, but that passes all understanding, joy and peace in the storm.

While our faith does tell us, does promise us that Christ's reign is full, complete, and unquestionable, it also makes it clear that that reign is not yet fully realized on the earth. Christ reigns in heaven and, yet, Christ chooses to live with us on earth, to walk with us while we struggle, to walk with us while we wait and sometimes to give us glimpses of the inbreaking of that holy, healing, beautiful kingdom, over which Christ is king; the holy, healing, and beautiful reign of the Prince of Peace.

So, how do we experience that reign of Christ now, in 2020, when we cannot say that is because things on earth are good, easy, calm; when we cannot say that we do not fear? How do we join our voices with those of our brothers and sisters across the globe who, in years past, and this year as well, struggling with us under the weight of a pandemic, have known and know disasters, diseases, and struggle and yet still have sung, “All hail the power of Jesus’ name?”

Our gospel reading for today is the gospel reading that inspires what we call, here at Emmanuel, our Matthew 25 fund, our fund that is one of the ways that we reach out to our neighbors in need. The Matthew 25 fund provides money that I can use to help people when they ask. Over the past year, we, as a community of faith, have helped people with money for food and medications, with rent, with electric bills and phone bills, with money to buy a bed for a family member who had come to live with someone when the family member lost her home, all ways that we have been able to see and respond to the needs of our neighbors. All ways that have been able to help people who have come to us, as Christ says that he will come, hungry, sick, stranger, needy. When we have served them, we have served Christ.

In the vision of Christ as King that we have in our gospel reading for today we find Christ is the powerful son of man coming in glory to be seated on his throne and to order the world according to the values of the kingdom of God. In that kingdom of God valuation, those who are least according to the world are the ones that God identifies with and the categories of worth and value that human beings assign to people based on wealth and success are completely meaningless. In this vision of the kingdom of God, Christ enters into the suffering of the world, the suffering of his people, and is identified most closely with those who are considered by the value system of sin, to be “the least of these”.

So, what does it mean to live in this troubled world, this troubled world where Christ reigns, now, in 2020 just as much as Christ reigned in years that were, for us, easier times, easier years? What does it mean to say that Christ is our king?

Christ himself, the Son of Man, says in our gospel reading for today that we will find him in those who are struggling and suffering and in serving them we will experience the reign of God. This year, perhaps we will be the ones who are Christ to others, in our own need, in our own struggle. As we travel through this world of time and wait for the fulfillment of the reign of Christ on earth as it is in heaven, the reign of God is made known to us not in the perfection of the world where there is no need. The reign of God is made known in a world where our eyes are open to each other’s need, when we are honest about our own need, and when we honor Christ in each other, the presence of

Christ our king, in a mutuality of care and service, that reflects the beauty of the reign of Christ, in our world, in our lives, even in this, the year of our Lord, the year of Christ, our King, 2020. Amen.