

## FIRST ABOVE ALL POWERS

The Reign of Christ Sunday  
*Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 1:68-79*

How in the world do we make sense of a scripture  
like the one we just heard from Colossians 1,  
when we live in a world like we do?

How can we *say*—  
in a world of war, of domination,  
of violent dictatorships, of abuses of power,  
of nations who inflict or turn a blind eye to torture and atrocities,  
of the grossest of evil that we humans do to each other—  
how can we even *begin* to say that Jesus,  
the cosmic Prince of Peace,  
is truly Lord of all these powers?  
That [quote], “in him all things in heaven and on earth were created,  
. . . thrones, dominions, rulers, powers—  
all things have been created through him and for him.”  
That Christ “is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”  
That “he is the head . . . the beginning . . . the firstborn . . .  
[the one who has] first place in everything . . .  
whether on earth or in heaven.”

What does it mean to claim Jesus Christ is Lord of all,  
when our world looks anything *but*  
like a place where Christ wields any power?  
Are the powers of this age *really* subject  
to the crucified and risen Christ?  
Or are they happily and freely running roughshod  
over the power of Christ,  
and all that is good and peaceful and life-affirming?

I admit that’s a pretty big question to deal with  
in the second half of a 20-minute sermon.

This is “The Reign of Christ” Sunday—  
the last Sunday in our yearly worship calendar.  
Next Sunday is the church’s New Year Day: Advent 1.

On The Reign of Christ Sunday we prepare us for the season  
that celebrates the coming of the God of Salvation,  
coming in the flesh, in the form of a helpless child.

And not by *coincidence*,  
one of the assigned scriptures for this “Reign of Christ” Sunday  
is the song of Zechariah from Luke 1, that we heard a minute ago.  
The elderly Zechariah, father of John the Baptist,  
sang this song when his baby was born,  
and his tongue was set free to speak and sing again.  
Zechariah sang a song of confidence in God’s salvation,  
confidence in the power of the Messiah, the Mighty Savior,  
who would rescue his people from their oppressive enemies,  
and once and for all put the powers in their place.

Yet, here we are.  
*Here we are.*  
Living in the crushing grip of the powers of this Age.  
As citizens of one of the nations that *exercises* these powers,  
sometimes fearfully so.

Recently, hundreds of thousands of classified war documents—  
detailed logs from Afghanistan and Iraq—  
were leaked to major newspapers around the world.  
We can say what we will about  
the recklessness and illegality of the leaks,  
or about the seedy character who leaked them.  
And we would likely be correct.  
But no one disputes that the documents are real.  
The information in them paint a horrific picture  
of what can happen when the power we possess  
begins to possess us.

We learned that civilian deaths in Iraq  
were far greater in number than previously claimed,  
and many were carried out by Iraqis themselves.  
Now available, for public reading,  
are detailed accounts of nearly every violent death in Iraq,  
the location, date, circumstances, and number killed.

There are narratives detailing incidents of torture and prisoner abuse.  
We learn that in some areas there were commands given  
to military investigators to avert their eyes, close investigations,  
when torture or execution was being carried out  
by Iraqi security forces.

And this led some of our troops to threaten prisoners  
with the torture or execution they would certainly *get*  
if they were turned over to their Iraqi compatriots.

It's not that these leaks told us a lot we didn't know already.

We know that in war we *must de-humanize* the enemy,  
in order to do our job.

And we know that sometimes, unspeakable things happen,  
when we no longer see in the other our shared humanity.

It's no surprise, really, that atrocities often happen in warfare.

That innocent people are often *targeted* for death.

For no reason, other than they wear the label, "enemy."

There is death by murder, torture, by means unimaginable,  
inflicted by human beings who *formerly* may *well* have been  
described as compassionate and rational beings.

But the power of war which they were given to wield over others,  
began to dominate and enslave *them* instead.

This power rendered them strong in weapons,  
but weak in soul and fragile in spirit.

It made them capable of unimaginable evil.

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But let's be honest.

We see a similar kind of thing at work in ourselves,  
on a much smaller and tamer scale, of course.

We *all* have tremendous power in our hands.

Today more than ever,  
we have possibilities and choices beyond our imagination.

Technology is power.

Money is power.

Information is power.

But power comes at a price.

Our lives get reshaped by having to manage and control everything.

Technology is not only our servant; it is our master.

Time moves faster and we get swept along by it.

Money controls us more than we like to admit.

Impersonal human systems of power drive our lives in this world—  
the military-industrial complex,

an economy built on consumption, and human greed.

And the majority of people in the world

who don't *have* access to these power systems,

and who get on the bad side of those who do,

get used, abused, and discarded.

And we are complicit in these systems,

by the way we choose to invest our money,

and spend our time and resources.

This is, I believe, something we *have* to come to terms with.

Every Christian who confesses Christ as Lord of all,

every church that dares to claim it is the body of the risen Christ,

must come to terms with the issue of power—

the power that we have, and the power that has us.

The systems of power in the world

are often rooted in our own legitimate

human energies and ambitions,

but they soon supercede, and start to dominate us human beings.

We both participate in, and are manipulated by,

the powers we create.

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But the Good News of God is that, because of the resurrection,

the powers of death have been conquered and broken.

The powers of this world are set free

from their anxious, self-preserving, and violent ways

of exerting their will through domination.

Set free, even if they don't *realize* it,

even if they don't make use of that freedom.

And sadly, they usually *don't*.

The powers of this world are not content

to serve God and God's purposes.

But they are invited to do so.

And *we* invite them.  
We who are stewards of the Good News of God.  
Who else *will*?

We are morally and biblically on solid ground,  
when we live out these convictions in Colossians 1,  
that Christ is first in all things, first above the powers,  
above all thrones or dominions or rulers or powers.

We just finished our series on “what’s the gospel word?”  
Well, *we have a gospel word* to share with the world,  
to share with the powers.  
In the name of Jesus, in the name of the gospel of God,  
we invite the powers to realign themselves  
with the way of God in the world,  
to fulfill their purposes  
within God’s plan for cosmic peace and salvation.  
And we need not be shy doing so.

No, these powers may not *ever* come around  
to sacrifice self-interest  
and serve God’s purposes in the world.

Until Christ comes to establish the Reign of God  
in its fullness and completeness  
these powers will *continue* to live under the illusion,  
that their power is ultimate,  
that their power is their own.

But we don’t need to sit by in silence and in complicity.  
Out of our identity as God’s people,  
and out of our understanding of the gospel of God,  
we can *at least*,  
critically reflect on what the powers are up to.  
We can *at least*,  
pray for our governments.  
Theologian Karl Barth called intercession  
a priestly ministry that all Christians are called to perform  
in relation to the powers that govern us.  
We can *at least*,

exercise a prophetic witness and ministry,  
being careful not to get caught in the powers *themselves*  
when we do so.

When we read texts like Colossians 1,  
we *need not despair* that things don’t look like that right *now*.  
And we need not be silent.  
We *can*, because of the resurrection,  
proclaim in hope and in confidence that  
Christ *is*, in fact, the beginning, the firstborn,  
who has first place in everything.  
We can publicly and without fear,  
bow before the Lamb who is on the throne.  
We can crown him with many crowns.  
We can “crown Him the Lord of peace,  
whose power a scepter sways  
From pole to pole, that wars may cease,  
and all be prayer and praise.”  
And we can sing all of this with a strong voice,  
#116 in the blue hymnal.  
Let’s stand and sing!

—Phil Kniss, November 21, 2010