

“King. Kingdom. Why?”
Isaiah 9:2-7; Revelation 1:1-8;
Luke 1:26-38

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I feel like a number of times recently I've given you a set of scriptures that are a little hard to make sense of. Why this set? Why a couple of Christmas readings and a reading from Revelation? It's partly because when we read those Christmas readings we pay attention to them in a particular way. Perhaps we can look at them a little differently in September. But also it's because I think there is a thread that runs through scripture and that really what I'm trying to do today with these particular readings is to notice that thread that starts from the prophets and moves into Revelation—the beginning and the end. It's about God's kingdom. We notice that there are some things about kingdom in all of this.

So what I'm wondering is, if we talk about king and kingdom, what do you think about? What's the first thing that comes to your mind when you think of the word “king”? What's the first thing that comes to your mind when you think of the word “kingdom”? It would be interesting to hear what some of those might be. If I had been talking about music and I said “the king,” somebody might think “Elvis”. Or if I had been talking about “the kings,” somebody might think of the Sacramento Kings basketball team. If we had been talking about cards, somebody would have thought of a king of a particular suit.

We have all these derivative ways of thinking about kings and kingdoms. I want to get back to what it's really about. It's more than using it to sell hamburgers and being a Burger King. What is it about?

The next thing to think about is what concepts you put together with king and kingdom? What are some of the concepts that come to mind when you think about a king or a kingdom? Why does Burger King use the word “King”? There's a concept they are trying to get across. How does that concept come across to you? What's the concept there? Does anyone want to offer a concept that they think is associated with king or kingdom? Power. Wealth. Control. The best. I thought of some of these, but I didn't think of all of them. But that's the kind of thing I'm thinking about—the realm of kingdoms. It's power, wealth, status, authority, governance. Do we have any struggles around any of those terms? Do those sometimes become something we struggle with and about? We may even think of kings as dumb—they do some pretty dumb things sometimes. We'll come back to that.

Let me talk just a minute about why we use the metaphor for king at all? Why don't we use the metaphor of president or premier or CEO? Because the term “king” was known. Those other terms weren't around, were they? So when we're reading scripture, the context does matter. They can't simply begin to talk about things that the people who are hearing won't understand. So we have to look back a little bit and understand a little bit about the context. There was a king in their context. The ancient

near East was the context for this writing, and in that context they had a sense that there should be a king. A king was a divinely appointed position. The king was associated with doing their religion correctly. This was a basic part of their social fabric.

As I was looking at the New Interpreter's Bible, it defines the king in the ancient near East as "one who is recognized as a shepherd appointed by God to help the society to function in a harmonious fashion." Did anyone have that definition come up when they thought of the word "king"? The king was not only divinely sanctioned or thought to be a divine position, it was thought of as one who was supposed to enable the society to be the best it could be, and that unrest occurred when that didn't happen. Also, the king was the military leader, the one who was supposed to protect and care for the domain. That is part of the context that this king idea comes out of.

The king also has a kingdom. When we think of a kingdom, I often think of a castle and a place where that king is, a realm. Oftentimes the idea of a kingdom is not just a place. It is more where the authority of that king is. I don't think it had definitive edges. It's more who was under the authority, who accepted the power, who accepted the governance of that king. If you had bandits within a kingdom, they weren't really part of the kingdom, for example.

The other thing about the ancient near East is that there were lots of kings because the word king applied to what we today might call a mayor. There were a lot of city-states, so the king was head of a particular city and the people associated with it. That's why sometimes we think of something we call the high king. We saw it in one of the readings today. God is King over kings. God is the one that's on top; the one that is over all of them.

So that's some of the context that comes out of the ancient near East. It still associates with those ideas of power, authority, governance, status, wealth. One that I think I forgot to come up with is responsibility. Out of the ancient near East, there was really a sense of responsibility. So as we begin to think about God as king, God's kingdom, there's a sense of responsibility. When the Bible uses that metaphor, I think it does so on purpose to suggest that God is taking on that responsibility to be the shepherd that brings about the harmonious nature of the society. In fact, if you read Isaiah, what does he say? The kingdom that is being brought is a kingdom of peace, shalom, supported by righteousness and justice.

As we think about the kingdom of God this fall, I'm going to continue to think about the nature of the kingdom the Bible gives us in the prophecies, and in Revelation, and throughout Jesus' teachings. What is the importance of the kingdom of God? What's it about? Here we begin to get a taste of what it's about. It's about the hope that God is bringing into our lives, the hope that we have when we recognize God's responsibility, and our ability to be citizens of God's kingdom, a hope that righteousness and justice will come and uphold the kingdom of peace.

When we read about the king/kingdom in scripture, there is a hope—a hope that goes beyond my vision of a dumb king, because the American narrative is just that. A dumb king—the king who taxes his people without representation. But when I begin to think about a God that takes responsibility, that the kingship is one about caring for the people, bringing justice and righteousness upon which we can build so that we have peace, then the kingship of Jesus makes more sense and there is a sense of hope.

Not only is there a sense of God's kingship bringing about a kingdom, it goes on in Revelation to say we are made into a kingdom, a righteous and just people. Somehow we become that justice and righteousness that enables peace. Somehow we are God's kingdom, and the hope we have is that God continues to bring that. That's what we pray for: "God's kingdom come and God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven." That's how we can pray for that, because in God's kingdom there is a hope of real righteousness and real justice that enables real peace. Amen.