

King of Kings

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, November 30, 2025, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Lamentations 3:46-57](#) and [Luke 2:1-5](#)

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I've been pondering what contemporary situation might be similar – politically, militarily, economically, emotionally, even spiritually – to the situations out of which are two scripture lessons come. In that pondering, I've come to realize how lucky I am, how privileged I am. My country has not faced in my lifetime potential conquest by an overwhelmingly powerful foreign army. The closest we've come since I was born was the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, and the threat then was to the existence of the United States and the Soviet Union, rather than the conquest of one by the other.

Perhaps the conquest by European settlers of North America comes close, from an indigenous point of view. Maybe the colonization of Ireland and India (and Australia and New Zealand) by the British is similar.

Today, I wonder about Ukraine. Will it fall to Russia? Will it become an occupied land the way Judah fell to Babylon and was occupied?

I think Palestine – and more so the West Bank than Gaza – today is under an occupation similar to the Roman occupation of Israel when “the decree went out from Caesar Augustus.”

Dr. Marcia McFee writes, “The history of humanity is rife with the hunger for power and control.... As we see this tendency in recorded history, we must consider ... the effects that vast numbers of ordinary people endured every time this occurs. To bring attention to this is to help us comprehend the world into which Jesus was born. To put his teachings alongside this human narrative is to see the radical nature of what he was describing as the way to bring about the ‘Kingdom of God.’ It was through other means.”¹

Walter Wink described these “other means” to bring about the kingdom of God as “Jesus’ third way.” This third way is the way of nonviolence. And it is powerful. An example of this powerful third way involves a woman named Mary Manning, her union shop steward Karen Gearon, and the nine other employees of a local Dunnes Store in Dublin, Ireland. I’ll let comedian David Nihill explain.

<https://youtube.com/shorts/O5yK7XiYQvU>

We have seen, again and again, the power of nonviolent activism. We've seen how it is the core of Jesus’ “third way,” and still, Christians keep wanting a king.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass invites us, “If you consider the inquisitions, crusades, heresy hunts, persecutions, and wars conducted by a religion claiming the Prince of Peace as its savior, the problem of human kings seems obvious. For about 1,600 years – ever since

¹ Marcia McFee, in her “Sermon Fodder” document that is part of the “What Child Is This?” worship series resources she created and made available at the Worship Design Studio.

Christians hailed the Emperor Constantine as the 'Thirteenth Apostle' – the church founded by and for the poor has constantly given in to the temptations of worldly wealth and power."²

There have been plenty of sermons preached about the kingship of Jesus. For instance, "Jesus, the crucified King, Jesus, the King of a Kingdom within. Jesus, the King of love. Many of those sermons ... relocate, redefine, or reconstruct the idea of kings and kingdoms."³ Some of them have been thoughtful and helpful. But trying to relocate, redefine, or reconstruct the idea of kings and kingdoms will fail against the archetype of "king" we human beings carry.

"The problem," Dr. Bass says, "is kings. Period. Kings are the problem."⁴ I agree with her, and not simply because I grew up in Lexington, Massachusetts, the "birthplace of American liberty."⁵ I say that because kings stand and have always stood in opposition to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the Bible, King David is looked to as the prototype of the ideal king. A guy who either seduced or raped (depending on your interpretation of the story) a married woman, getting her pregnant, and then murdered her husband – that's our role model for kings? No thank you!

According to John's gospel, after Jesus was arrested, he ends up at Pilate's headquarters where Pilate questions him. "Are you the King of the Jews?" Pilate asks him. Jesus gives him a typical Jesus non-answer, and Pilate questions him again. "So you are a king?" Jesus' response is obtuse: "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."⁶

In Luke's gospel, when Jesus is crucified, the soldiers mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." "In effect," Dr. Bass says, "that sign was Pilate – and the empire for which he stood – trolling Jesus."⁷

Jesus may have refused to say if he was king of the Jews, but that didn't matter to Pilate – or to Rome. Rome did what Rome does to every king – especially Jewish pretenders. Rome murders you.

Dr. Bass suggests that we should not think of Jesus' kingship separate from the story of Jewish kings. Back when Israel was first becoming a full-fledged nation, the people wanted a king. They thought that would make them powerful and legitimate. The Prophet

² Diana Butler Bass, "Christ the (No) Kings Sunday," *The Cottage*, <https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/christ-the-no-kings-sunday> (posted 22 November 2025; accessed 29 November 2025).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ This is the town motto of Lexington, Mass.

⁶ John 18:33-27, NRSV.

⁷ Bass, *op. cit.*

Samuel thought it was a bad idea and double checked with God. God agreed: it's a bad idea. Samuel tells the people what God told him:

He said, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots, and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves and the best of your cattle and donkeys and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And on that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you on that day."

But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, "No! We are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles."⁸

God said, "No kings." The people insisted on kings. "Give us a king. We like kings. We want to be like the other nations."

Originally, "God had proposed to Israel to be a different kind of community, to be organized with principles unlike those of other nations. To be a revolutionary sort of society based upon sabbath and Jubilee, where each person lived in peace and safety under their own vine and fig tree.

"But nope. Revolution was too hard. 'We want to be like other nations.'

"And therein is the problem," Bass writes. "Make us [- and that 'us' can just as easily be our nation or our religion -] like the other empires. Make us wealthy, powerful, admired, and envied. Make us great – and even greater than we've ever been. Give us a king."⁹

Jesus spent his entire ministry preaching about the "Kingdom of God," or the "Reign of the Age to Come." He taught "that the poor, the mournful, the infirm, the hungry, and the persecuted were the 'big shots' (the 'blessed') of the Kingdom. He'd say that serving 'the king' was serving all these people, those whom the world discarded as 'the least of these.' On the night before he was executed, Jesus got on his knees and washed the filthy feet of his itinerant band, insisting that God no longer saw them as servants but as friends. And, throughout his teaching, ... he said, 'the first shall be last; and the last, first.' ...

"If Jesus is a King, this is the weirdest 'kingship' ever not-known to human history. Humans believe that kings are better than everyone else – divinely appointed, whatever. They are 'above' us for our [own] good, to rule over us. Kings are part of a hierarchy of creation; and hierarchy needs kings.

"But Jesus undid hierarchy, invited everyone to a shared table, and proclaimed liberation from debt and forgiveness from sins. The kingdom he envisioned was one of

⁸ 1 Samuel 8:11-20, NRSVue.

⁹ Bass, *op. cit.*

human solidarity, non-violence, and shared goods. As the oldest creed in Christianity most likely said, 'In Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ.'

"After his death [and resurrection], Christians tried it – for a little while at least. This revolutionary vision proved popular with outcasts and slaves and women and the poor. They made their ironic (and even trolling) slogan, 'Jesus is Lord,' which was another way of saying, 'Jesus is our Emperor [and Caesar isn't]!' They refused to worship false kings – and, of course, that meant they refused to worship any human king at all."¹⁰

If we must say that "Jesus is king," or even "the king of kings," let's make sure we're not making him into an emperor. Let our "Jesus is Lord" and "Jesus is King" be a loud and proud demand that the Caesars of this world – be they corporate or political – are not our lord or king!

Amen.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*