

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church  
Davidson, North Carolina  
Lib McGregor Simmons  
John 13:33-37; Revelation 1: 4b-8  
“Power Investment”  
Christ the King  
November 22, 2015**

Do some of you remember that before there was Google there was the World Book Encyclopedia? I loved that set of burgundy-bound volumes in our home that I am supposing that my parents sacrificed quite a lot to purchase. In our family, the answer to the questions we asked was often, “Look it up in the World Book.” Whatever we needed to know, World Book could tell us.

In particular, whatever one needed to know about the anatomy of the human body, you could find in an enthralling set of detailed transparencies. Over the outline of the human body, you could overlay the skeletal system, the muscular system, the circulatory system, the neurological system, the digestive system, and so forth. It could keep a kid mesmerized for hours, and I know that I never tired of coming back to those transparencies again and again. I’m guessing that I am not the only one who noticed something new nearly every time I opened the volume.

I bring this up not because this is a sermon about human anatomy, but because it has occurred to me that this may be one way to view the Christian liturgical year. Advent is the first page which is overlaid with Christmas which is overlaid with Epiphany which is overlaid with Lent which is overlaid with Easter which is overlaid with Pentecost which is overlaid with the long green season of Ordinary Time. The final transparency, the last Sunday of the Christian liturgical year, is Christ the King Sunday, and that is today before we start all over again with Advent next Sunday.

You will notice that we will sing two seasonal hymns in today’s worship service: Joy to the World which we usually sing on Christmas and Jesus Christ is Risen Today which we usually sing on Easter. Like returning to the World Book transparencies and seeing something new every time, perhaps by singing these hymns in the context of looking back over the past year and looking forward toward next year, you will hear and learn something that you have never seen or heard or known before. I hope so.

The two passages of Scripture, one from Revelation and one from the gospel according to John, are designated by the lectionary for this Christ the King Sunday. They become transparencies themselves. It is through Jesus’s identity as King that we deepen our understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ as we lean into the future that God intends for each of us, for Christ’s church, and for the world.

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Power.

The word conjured up an impressive panoply of images.

Guns.

A stage full of presidential candidates.

A boxing match.

Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, Jeff Bezos.

A nuclear explosion.

A category 5 hurricane.

And, of course, this week, the power of radical religionists to inflict suffering and death on innocent people.

We come to Christ the King Sunday in the year of the Lord 2015 with political power at the forefront of our minds.

And indeed, when Pope Pius XI instituted the Feast of Christ the King in 1925 in his encyclical *Quas Primas*, it was political power which was at the forefront of his mind. The world was witnessing the rise of dictatorships in Europe which were asserting control over the Christian Church in order to twist and distort Christianity for their own political agendas. Pope Pius instituted the Feast of Christ the King to raise a fist of protest and to remind Christians everywhere the Christ's power is given as grace and peace to our hearts, minds, and wills.

The two passages of Scripture which we have read today are bold in setting up contrasts between political power and Christ's power.

In the passage from John, Jesus with his hands bound behind him, his lips split and cheek puffy from getting whacked by the temple police, would seem to be powerless in the face of a Pontius Pilate with soldiers and weapons at his disposal to protect what Rome already had and sought to expand.

But John gives readers to see that even in the injustice of Jesus's trial, God's power is upending the world's power.

Whereas Pilate hoards power and lords it over people even to the point of destroying them by nailing them to a cross, Jesus empowers others to wash the feet of those he leads.

Whereas Pilate's rule brings terror, even in the midst of the so-called peace of Pax Romana, Jesus's rule brings peace, even in the midst of terror.

Whereas Pilate's power originates from the will of Caesar and thus is always tenuous, Jesus's authority originates from doing the will of God and is eternal. (1)

The passage from Revelation streams from the quill of John of Patmos, in exile on the isle of Patmos, writing to Christians under persecution by the state. The entire communication is intended to convey the power of two gifts to these suffering Christians. The two gifts? Grace and peace.

That these Christians were suffering is clear from verse 9 which follows the verses that have been read: "I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus..."

When one is suffering and struggling to survive in difficult circumstances, what is it that one needs the most?

John's message is this: You need grace, God's unmerited, unearned, undeserved love. If you know that God loves you with an unconditional love, that, as Paul writes in Romans 8, nothing, not even the powers and political principalities, can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, and so gift, "we are more than conquerors through Christ who loves us." And from our reception of God's grace, we are given peace, that the God who loves us can and will set things right "soon and very soon" as the choir has sung.(2)

There are two things which are striking about these two passages when they are read in tandem on Christ the King Sunday. First, what is striking in both of the passages is how non-anxious both Jesus and John are in the face of the suffering that is being meted out upon them by political power. They are not afraid. Indeed, had we read the entirety of the section of John's gospel in which Pilate is an actor, we would have seen that it is Pilate who is trapped by his fear, not Jesus.

Jesus, and his disciple John after him, have laid hold of the grace and peace of God with the entirety of their beings, and **THEY ARE NOT AFRAID.**

And this is instructive for all of us in these days when fear and terror seem to be the noxious gases in the air that we are breathing these days. Grace and peace are ours, my friends, and thus we are not to give in to fear.

The second thing that is striking is that both passages of Scripture are future-oriented and full of hope. John's bracing benediction, in particular, is immediately followed by a dramatic doxology to Christ the King. John uses phrases to build up his readers' faith and hope through the one who is and who was and who is to come.

One of the things that has been brought home yet again during these turbulent days of terror is the future orientation of radical religionists and their willingness to invest in young people in order to further their despotic, destructive vision.

What would it look like if we were as passionate as they about the future of God's reign in the world?

This past week, I have been on study leave at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond attending a class on leadership in times of transition. Transition marks life in the world and in the church everywhere these days, we were reminded, and thus it won't surprise you that every seat was filled by church leaders of various ages, denominations, and races, and there was a long waiting list to boot.

Ken McFayden, academic dean at Union, was one of the presenter/leaders. He shared with us a conversation that he had in a church where he was leading an officer retreat. The subject of adding an additional worship service was being discussed, and one older gentleman, a long-time member, said to Ken at a break during the retreat, "it will be over my dead body that a service like that will happen here." Ken simply asked him a question, "Do you have grandchildren?" "Yes, I do." "Do you love them?" "I love them more than anything." "Would you be willing to invest your support, your energy, your money to help create a worshiping community where your grandchildren would be able to worship God in a manner that fits with who they are?"

Ken reports that it was if a lightbulb had been lit in this gentleman, and when the group reconvened he spoke of how he had come prepared to oppose the proposal for a new worship service, but that he now believed that it was worthy of his total support.

Ken said that when churches talk about money, they most often speak in terms of how much they need to meet a budget. They talk about spending money. And, he told us, there is not a church in all of North America which ever has enough.

But he posed the question, what if churches looked up their budgets as *investing* in the future of tomorrow's church, rather than simply spending money to do what needs to be done? Put another way, what if we who are DCPC, what if all churches were to become passionate about investing in our children and youth in order that they are equipped to be passionate disciples of Christ the King who do not quail in the face of challenge and suffering?

I mention this because your Session has a vision for children and youth. We have adopted a staffing plan which strengthens ministry to children and youth through the calling of an associate pastor for faith formation, a full-time staff associate for youth, and a 2/3 time staff associate for children's ministry. Let me hasten to say that they will not be called to do ministry but to support the congregation's, that is, your, ministry to children, youth, and adults.

You who are members of the church have received an email which indicated that while we are about where we were in pledges at this time last year, we are looking at a budget which will require \$282,000 more in pledges. I want to be gentle in making this request because I know that many, even most, of you have been prayerful in determining what the Spirit is calling upon you to give to DCPC in this coming year. But I want to ask us all to pray about how we can be passionate about ministry to youth and children. If you have not yet pledged, I invite you to do so. And if you have, then I ask that you join me and my husband in praying about the possibility of increasing the pledge that you have already made.

To the One who is Alpha and Omega, whose power is and was and is to come, be glory and honor now and forever. Amen.

1. Jaime Clark-Soles, "Commentary on John 18: 33-37," [www.workingpreacher.com](http://www.workingpreacher.com), November 25, 2012.
2. Stan Mast, "Revelation 1: 4-8," The Center for Excellence in Preaching, [www.cep.calvinseminary.edu](http://www.cep.calvinseminary.edu), November 16, 2015.