

Sermon for Christ the King

The Rev. Brooks Cato

This year in particular, it's been hard to get in the spirit to celebrate. Which is not to say there haven't been things to celebrate, but when our holidays roll around and the general wisdom is to resist the urge to do those fun things we do, well, it's just hard to get to feeling festive. The Fourth of July was strange. My heart wanted to set up shop on the sidewalk of the Village Green and soak in some healthy patriotism while chomping down a blooming onion and suffering from a poorly planned sunburn. Halloween was equally strange. My heart wanted to post up in front of the rectory with a couple of bowls of Costco candy and make cheesy jokes about kids' costumes from a group dressed as matching M&Ms to a reference to a new movie I'll probably never see. And now, Thanksgiving's coming up, and while my heart is filling with memories of grandma dressed up as a belt-buckle shoe wearing pilgrim, my head is in a similar place as it was in October and July and even May. I can't say I feel like I did back in March; that was a more frantic time, a more fearful time. Now's more hurry up and wait, a hand-sanitizing, mask-wearing routine.

It's not that there aren't things to be thankful for. God knows there are. It's just that so many of the things we'd do to mark the passage of the year with little and big celebrations feel a little empty this time around. How much do I really want to break out the hand-made wooden turkey my friend from Chattanooga made when I can't visit him? Or worse, how much do I want to try and fail at grandma's biscuit recipe again when I can't go back to her hills? Much to my own surprise, though, despondence isn't the only option when the world shuts down around us. It's been hard, damn hard to feel much of anything else, I'll own that. But there's still light. There's still our story.

Do y'all remember where we started with all this? I don't mean that last Sunday we worshipped in the same room together, I mean way back, *way* back where our story started. As we come to the end of another liturgical year, it's important to remember where we've been. In the beginning -- I did say we were going *way* back! -- in the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth and the skies and the trees and breathed life into dust to bring us here, in that beginning, everything was formless and darkness covered all that was and all that was not yet. We started there, in the cold dark, with nothing to celebrate, with nothing at all. Nothing, that is, but God and darkness. Our light in the darkness, and the darkness could not overcome it. (I gotta say, I like the way the King James says this better: the darkness comprehended it not.) In the beginning, it was God and darkness, and the darkness could not make sense of what God was about. But with love and care and grace and hope, God created. Even out of that, life came forth. Y'all. I mean, my God. There is hope yet.

But it's not like that's the only time hope arrived in our story in spite of every reason not to. Abraam and Sarai lived with great love mixed with disappointment, older than they ever thought they'd live to be and without the joy of children to brighten their days. It was night, surrounded by the enveloping darkness of desert, when God came to them and promised unimaginable, nonsensical hope. And the sign of that hope was light, descendants numbering the stars, points of light far away and incomprehensible but real and true. Even in that night, even so late in life, there was light in the darkness. But let's not stop there. The story keeps going. Jacob, who wasn't always a moral exemplar, had his famous wrestling match at night, changed his life and his name and the fate of his people with an unnamed point of light in the darkness. Joseph was abandoned by his family in the darkness of a pit and pulled into the light all the way to the right hand of the throne. The enslaved Hebrews fled their captors on that first Passover night and followed a pillar of fire through the darkness. Even in all those places, God's light shone. Through the treachery of kings and the betrayal of queens, through exile and defeat and incomprehensible darkness, through all that, the story kept going. Celebrations marked each year, sometimes flowing into the streets behind a dancing king, sometimes hidden away in perilous secret. But still there was hope because even in the darkness, still there was God.

But don't you for a moment think the darkness stopped there. When God comes to live among us, high praise and broken prayers fall day and night. With his disciples asleep among olive trees, Jesus prays his most bittersweet prayers in the darkness. His captors come in the darkness. His trial lays down its verdict in the darkness. His disciples hide in the darkness, deny knowing him in the darkness, even give their life in the darkness. He will die come midday, but as he breathes his last, the day itself goes dark. But even there, even come Calgary, even there, there is still God. And it's out of a dark tomb in the middle of a dark night that Christ returns, new life born out of darkness, new witness to God present no matter what the encompassing dark holds. New hope, that no darkness comprehends, new light.

That's where our story picked up just a few weeks after we retreated from our common life together to our common life apart. That's the story we've told year after year, chocolate bunny-filled Easter basket after chocolate bunny-filled Easter basket. That's the story we say we live, a story of darkness everywhere, consuming darkness with the stubborn light of God shining anyway. We've spent months since then reminding ourselves what happened to get us here, what happened between the darkneses, the miracles, the parables, the quiet moments and the famous lines. We've celebrated, we've mourned, we've even married. Because that's our story, and it's not just a story set some time in the past. It's a story we're still living. And y'all, it's a story full of cycle. We've all had our darkness, we've all had our light. This year, though, it seems we've had a whole lot more darkness. Incomprehensible deaths, stubborn leaders, a fear of the truth, a fear of lies, and, perhaps most troubling, a failure of altruism. This year it's been mighty dark. It's little wonder that fireworks and roasted turkey have lost their appeal. But even here, even in the midst of everything our newsfeeds fill with, even here, there is God.

And thank God. Today we celebrate -- yes, celebrate -- the Feast of Christ the King. Instituted in the aftermath of the darkness of the First World War, we celebrate the final Sunday of the church calendar with the culmination of our story, from darkness to light, from creation to coronation, from death to life: Christ our King. Above all else, it's a reminder that, while we live in this world and absolutely must invest in making this world a little better, a little more just, a little more bright, it's a reminder that always there is God. Christ enthroned is the one we serve, ultimately, and all our cares here are misplaced if we hold them above that one truth. And, and y'all this is important, it is only through Christ that we can do those things that must be done.

This year has been dark, yes. But it is out of darkness our hope has come time and time again. So maybe it's no wonder that now, when the world seems darker than I've ever known it, maybe it's no wonder that now the light of Christ shines so brightly. In that is our hope. Not in the ways of this world. Not in Georgia or a two-party system or a bible-thumping preacher. Not in social security or Christmas break or a fine new documentary. Our hope is in God. Our hope is in Christ the King. Our hope is, that in the darkness, especially in the darkness, always there is light.