

When you want to communicate with as much clarity as possible, this can be an effective rhetorical technique:

1. Tell your listeners what you're going to say.
2. Say the important thing.
3. Tell your listeners what you just said.

Our three scripture texts in today's worship work together like that. Through the prophet Jeremiah God says, Look, y'all, here's what I plan to do. I will send you a king who will do what's right and just, and who will save you. Paul Troy read that for us.

Then Megan read from Luke's gospel about Jesus's brutal and unkingly death. Another tortured man asked Jesus that day, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom."

And now we'll hear from Paul's letter to the church in Colossae. The writer looks back at what God has done in Jesus and tells his readers, Hey, don't forget who's the very heart of the kingdom of God. So this is from Colossians, chapter 1, and I'll start at verse 9 (CEB).

⁹ ...[S]ince the day we heard about you, we haven't stopped praying for you and asking for you to be filled with the knowledge of God's will, with all wisdom and spiritual understanding. ¹⁰ We're praying this so that you can live lives that are worthy of the Lord and pleasing to God in every way: by producing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God; ¹¹ by being strengthened through God's glorious might so that you endure everything and have patience; ¹² and by giving thanks with joy to the Father. God made it so you could take part in the inheritance, in light granted to God's holy people. ¹³ God rescued us from the control of darkness and transferred us into the *kingdom* of the Son God loves. ¹⁴ God set us free through the Son and forgave our sins.

¹⁵ The Son is the image of the invisible God,
the one who is first over all creation,

¹⁶ Because all things were created by him:
both in the heavens and on the earth,
the things that are visible and the things that are invisible.
Whether they are thrones or powers,
or rulers or authorities,
all things were created through him and for him.

¹⁷ He existed before all things,
and all things are held together in him.

¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church,
who is the beginning,

the one who is firstborn from among the dead
so that he might occupy the first place in everything.

¹⁹ Because all the fullness of God was pleased to live in him,

²⁰ and God reconciled all things to God's self through him —
whether things on earth or in the heavens.

He brought peace through the blood of his cross.

He's prickly, self-important, craves public attention, a leader convinced of his own grandeur and yet desperate to be admired. He cannot stand losing.



That's King George III of England, as portrayed indelibly by Jonathan Groff in the Broadway show *Hamilton*. King George sings to the American colonists,

When you're gone, I'll go mad
 So don't throw away this thing we had
 'Cause when push comes to shove
 I will kill your friends and family
 to remind you of my love

Whether the historical King George was as preening and manipulative as his character in *Hamilton*, his example here is an archetype of many monarchs throughout world history, preserving or expanding their kingdoms by wielding power and violence.

We see a different royal style in *The Crown*, the TV series depicting the reign of Elizabeth II, who was Queen of England for over 70 years. Her demeanor consistently stays proper, unrevealing, quiet, and steadfast. One question underlies much of the drama in *The Crown*: What is the purpose of the royal family now, when their actual power has become minimal?

Yet another kind of monarchy emanates from King T'Challa, the iconic Black Panther character in the Marvel Comic Universe. He leads the fictional, and futuristic, African nation of Wakanda. T'Challa shows incredible skills as a warrior. He also becomes a healer of relationships, and shepherd of the uniquely vibrant Wakandan culture. The *Black Panther* movies envision a Black African nation as the most advanced, powerful, and prosperous society on earth. King T'Challa must decide how much of Wakanda's knowledge and wealth should be shared with the broader world.



And Elon Musk is discovering how difficult it is to be king of Twitter. Kings and queens fascinate many of us and they show up often in our pop culture. Yet we Americans have no king, despite occasional wannabes. I don't know if that gives us an advantage or a disadvantage when we try to understand Jesus as a king. Which is exactly what we're invited to do today, on this annual Reign of Christ Sunday.

Most days and seasons of the church year are focused on biblical events: Jesus' birth at Christmas; Epiphany, when the wise travelers arrive; Jesus' resurrection on Easter morning, the Holy Spirit blowing into town at Pentecost, and so on. But Trinity Sunday, and this Reign of Christ Sunday, are different. They focus us instead on theological themes. Like what does it mean that God self-reveals as Creator, and as Christ, and as Holy Spirit? Or today's question: In the kingdom of God, who is on the throne, and what kind of king is he?

This letter seeks to build up and encourage the Colossian church. The writer does that by emphasizing that God has made them citizens of *God's* kingdom, liberating them from the "dark spiritual forces" that torment the faithful and control earthly rulers.¹ Paul says that the Colossians' faithfulness, their perseverance through suffering, their joys and their hopes — every bit of strength in their lives — all of it hangs together in Jesus the Christ, the one who shows us God.

You are probably aware that it's tempting for theologians to write hundreds of pages on a single topic, making systematic arguments and connections as they try to define and understand God. But Paul doesn't have a book deal or paid sabbatical time for writing. He's just trying to get a letter in the mail. So how do you convey intricate, lifechanging ideas concisely? You can write a poem. Or a song.

¹ McCaulley, Esau. *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020. p. 60.

That's what Colossians gives us here. Verses 15-20 offer a kind of hymn about Christ's role in the cosmos, and Christ's role in saving the world. The hymn cascades phrase after poetic phrase about Jesus:

image of the invisible God
 first over all creation
 all things created through him and for him
 all things hold together in him
 head of the body, the church
 the beginning
 firstborn from among the dead
 reconciled all things
 all the fullness of God pleased to live in him
 he brought peace through the blood of his cross

We'll come back to that last one. This hymn celebrates Christ as the creative source of everything that is. He's also the bond that makes reality cohere. (My dad used to wonder if Jesus was mysteriously present in the atomic forces that keep particles joined to each other.) And Jesus is the one who makes God knowable, and through whom God makes peace with all creation.

Those are grand claims about great mysteries. For this New Testament writer, Jesus is all in all. Pastor Liz Forney writes about this poem that "It is almost as though the lawyers have gotten down to the fine print, so that we make no mistake, finding no loophole in the complete and total lordship of Christ."²

In the kingdom of God that's coming into the world, there's *one* person at the gravitational center: Christ the King. It's an expansive claim: God creates *everything* through Jesus, and God creates peace with *everything* through Jesus. So as kingship goes, Jesus's domain is...everywhere. He doesn't have borders to protect.

Putting Jesus at the center of everything also sounds unabashedly exclusive. In Paul's vision of how God works there's no allowance for other gods, other saviors, other ways to know God or be reconciled to God. If you embark on interfaith dialogue with friends from other religions, today's biblical text is probably not your best place to find common ground.

But if we Christians long for clarity and hope about how to live, the words of this Christ hymn can light up our lives. All that we are and do as Christians is based on the unique accomplishment of Jesus. Because he inaugurated the kingdom, we can live in that kingdom.³

So, again, what kind of king is he? Colossians shows Christ with unlimited creative power, infinite sustaining power. Yet this one who contains the fullness of God arrives among us as a helpless, fully human baby. Our church's children will retell that birth story for us in about a month, right here in worship. Jesus is a king who chooses to be vulnerably present.

Then he grows up and begins proclaiming God's kingdom among us. And not once in his ministry does he use power to coerce someone into worshiping him. Not once does Jesus employ

² Forney, Elizabeth Barrington. "Colossians 1:11-20: Homiletical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word — Year C, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2*. Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2010. Kindle Edition, p. 864-5.

³ Wright, N. T. *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999. p. 53.

punishment to enforce loyalty. Instead, Jesus is a king who offers love freely, and who welcomes love freely given.

After three years of preaching and living God's gracious kingdom, Jesus gets tortured to death by a conventionally coercive empire. He hangs under a sign that reads "King of the Jews." The sign is not wrong. Yet, following Colossians, a more truthful sign would say "King of Everything." And there Christ the King of Everything chooses nonviolence, forgiveness, self-sacrifice even to the point of death. A Roman centurion bearing witness says, "Surely this was God's Son."

Jesus' death makes peace not because God requires bloodshed, but because in Jesus God meets human violence with divine nonviolence. Christ the King is powerful enough to choose powerlessness for the sake of redemptive love. He reveals divine forgiveness by embodying it.

[So a] great cosmic event has taken place — the redemption of the cosmos (1:14, 20). And it exists here as we love one another.⁴

In the Christ hymn, did you catch that Jesus "is the head of the body, the church"? We the church are all those shaped by Jesus' death and resurrection. Reign of Christ Sunday reminds us that God has moved us into Christ's kingdom, a kingdom which treats its citizens far better than Rome did. Following Christ, we're equipped to protest the abusive, coercive powers in our world, and to "seek to transform those systems [until] they emulate the grace, mercy, and compassion we experience in the kingdom of God."⁵

Christ the King remakes the world. And he makes you, and me, and all of us together, agents of his reconciliation and forgiveness.

Remembering whose we are might change our life together, too. Liz Forney asks, "How many church arguments, mission statements, or personal dilemmas might be resolved by simply asking, 'Does this allow Christ to have first place?'"⁶

In the name of God the invisible,
Christ who reigns,
and the Holy Spirit of all peace.

⁴ Donelson, Lewis R. *Colossians, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996. p. 19.

⁵ Forney, Elizabeth Barrington. "Colossians 1:11-20: Homiletical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word — Year C, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2*. Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2010. Kindle Edition, p. 865.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 866.