

Have you ever heard of the madman who on a bright morning lit a lantern and ran to the market-place calling out over and over: "Where is God? Where is God?"

There were many people standing around who did not believe in God, and they thought this madman was ridiculous. "Why, is God lost?" one person asked. "Has God wandered away like a child?" said another. "Or is God hiding? Is God afraid of us? Has God gone off in a boat? Did God emigrate to another country?" All the people were calling out jokes and laughing.

The insane man jumped into their midst and transfixed them with his eyes. "Where is God gone?" he called out. "I'll tell you! We have killed him, you and I! We are all his murderers. But how have we done it? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the whole horizon? What did we do when we loosened this earth from its sun? Where's it going now? Where are we going?...Backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an above and below? ...Do we not hear the noise of the grave-diggers who are burying God? ...God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! How shall we console ourselves, the most murderous of all murderers?"

...Here the madman was silent and looked again at the crowd; they were silent, too, and looked at him in surprise. At last he threw his lantern on the ground; the light went out, and the glass broke into pieces. "I came too early," he said. "The event is still on its way, it's coming...and yet they have done it!"¹

That story is one of the most famous passages written by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. How most philosophers understand that passage — as far as I can tell, which is honestly not very far at all; my apologies in advance to anyone who, like, actually took Intro. Philosophy at some point and knows more about this than I do — is that Nietzsche was writing metaphorically about how people were coming to think about God and religion differently in the 17- and 1800s; God was, in a sense, losing the absolute place in human thinking. Or something.

But anyway, I live a strange life, and I happened to read that story for the first time this week, as I was preparing to preach on another story that talks about the death of God:

¹ Very closely paraphrased from Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom* (also called *The Gay Science*), § 125.

today's gospel reading. Luke's story describes how humans killed God incarnate: executing him publicly, with torture and shame, between two criminals. With the madman's words still echoing in the back of my mind, the craziness and absurdity of Christ's crucifixion caught me once again: How did we kill God? "How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the whole horizon?"

So this week I've been reflecting on these two stories about the death of God and how they relate to this day on the church calendar: the Feast of Christ the King. At first it seems really out-of-place to be focusing on the death of Christ on the day where we celebrate Christ's leadership in our lives. But here's one way to make sense of it:

Luke's story reminds us of what kind of King Jesus is: the king who was an enemy of the powerful; the king who sacrificed himself, who lived and died among the outcast; the king who, in his final acts, forgave his enemies and welcomed the sinner. He was not the king the world is used to, the king that makes everything he has power over bend to his will, and he is still not. Today he still works in the world in humble ways — like through us.

The story I'm adding to the mix — the story of the madman — points to the essential role that we play in making that King real for the people around us. Whereas Luke's story tells us that humans killed God incarnate thousands of years ago, Nietzsche's story tells us how humans may continue to kill God, in a more spiritual sense. I'm definitely not representing Nietzsche's viewpoints here (the man did not like Christianity very much at all), but I'm playing around with a general idea I got from reading his story: How can we — how do we — humans kill God? And, on the positive side, how do we make God come alive?

I believe very strongly that we who state publicly that we are Christians make God come alive for the world around us — or we make God seem dead for the world around us. This is not to say that God might not be doing God's own thing, apart from us, working in people's lives and throughout creation. But I do want to acknowledge that we Christians are our God's representatives in a very powerful way. St. Paul frequently called the church "the Body of Christ," recognizing that we, together, are the presence of Christ in our world. The teachings we receive from other Christians influence how we see and understand God. The way Christians act publicly proves or disproves our God for many people. What we say, and the way we live, and the way those two things match up — that is some of the best evidence people have of God. Because as we each know from our own struggles to figure out God — God is not easily seen or understood.

So today when we say "Christ is the King," we are not stating the obvious; we are making an argument. When we look out at the world — its history and what's going on today — it does not seem like the loving God that we preach is in charge. Hunger and disease haunt so many people; violence and war still plague our planet; racism and sexism pervade entire cultures; greed and fear constantly come out on top. When we

read our history or look at today's headlines, we must understand why people ask the question: "How can you believe your God is in charge?" and "What kind of God is that?"

So when we say "Christ is the King," we are issuing a call to ourselves: Christ is our King, and we must live in a way that shows it. In the words of our baptismal promises: we must "renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God."² We have to struggle against the ways of this world in order to make God known, to make God alive for others. And this is not easy.

The world so often finds its wisdom in things like fear and self-protection and greed. But Christ's wisdom focuses on hope, sacrifice, and compassion.

The world says: "Hate your enemies; stop them with violence if you need to; take revenge." But we hear Christ say: "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44) The prophets painted visions of days of peace (cf. Isaiah 11).

The world says: "Build up your borders high and strong. Push away those who are different. Protect yourselves and your people first." But God gave laws commanding that God's people treat native and immigrant the same (cf. Numbers 15:16)³. Jesus reminded us to love our neighbor, and then he reminded us that our neighbor includes the people from the "wrong" side of town, the "wrong" religion, the "wrong" country (Luke 10:25-37). The Holy Spirit opened the church beyond the nation of Israel to the world at large (cf. Acts 10 & 11).

When we confess Christ the King, we are being called to fight against the ways of this world. We are being called to hold ourselves to the way of Christ, to keep lifting up the world-changing values we find in Christ, in scripture, and in our tradition, and to ask every day, in every situation, both political and personal: how can we better live the Christlike life?

It's not easy to figure out how to live our lives in the way of Christ. But here is what I do know:

Under the wisdom of this world many people live their lives as those who are feared, those who are mistrusted, those who are pushed away. They are graffitied, and they are scarred. They lose hope of ever feeling safe and accepted.

² *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 235.

³ Also check out Roger E. Olson's list of related verses, "Biblical Injunctions Regarding Aliens in our Midst" on his Pathos blog: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2011/06/biblical-injunctions-regarding-alien-in-our-midst/>

Under the wisdom of this world many people are treated as worthless, as tools, as expendable. They are overlooked, and they are used. They lose hope that anyone else even cares about their suffering.

These people are not far away. "They" are really part of us. Sometimes, we may be one of them. So hear the good news:

Christians, we are the representatives of a king who spent his earthly life offering hope and acceptance to exactly those kinds of people: the people the world finds useless or deplorable. We are the representatives of a king who spent his earthly life speaking up, on their behalf, to the people with power. We are the representatives of a King who spent his final breaths asking for forgiveness for his enemies and then offering acceptance and hope to a dying criminal.

Even in all our own pain and brokenness, we are gathered up into this story; we are given the good news for our own hope and healing, and then we are made part of the life of Christ in our own time and place.

We have something to offer. We have a response to the fear and the hopelessness in our world. We have work to do.

When we hear voices speak as if fear or greed were wisdom, we need to speak up loudly with the wild wisdom of Christ's love. When we hear the voices of those who suffer, we need to listen, and then to respond in compassion and hope.

We are called to live with Christ as our King, to make God come alive for the world around us. Let's get to work with boldness.

Amen and amen.