

**Title: A Different Kind of King****Text: Ezekiel 34:11-16**

**A Sermon preached by The Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.  
Sunday, November 23, 2008 (Christ the King Sunday)  
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

I love the notes I receive throughout the week about our worship services. It confirms for me that I am, indeed, the pastor of 1100 opinions, and most of you are not shy in sharing those opinions. However, you are not shy about sharing stories which help our staff to know that we are serving people who love Christ but don't take themselves too seriously. This week one of you shared a moment you had with one of your children. It had nothing to do with last week's sermon, but it did remind me that there is more going on in church each week than I am aware of.

One of our moms wrote me to tell me of an experience she had with her son. She said, "On Sunday my young son asked me if I knew what the highest number was that I had ever reached in counting. I didn't know, but I asked about his highest number. He told me it was 5,372. "Oh," I said. "Why did you stop there?" My son replied, "Church was over."

Today is the final Sunday of the church's liturgical calendar: Christ the King Sunday. Fifty-one weeks ago we began a journey of faith in which we have remembered his birth. We have watched him grow as a boy and become a man. We were there when he accepted his baptism and heard the confirmation from above that "*This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.*"

We witnessed his temptation in the wilderness. We watched him as he went about teaching and preaching. We entered into his suffering and death. With the other followers, we were overjoyed at his resurrection. We witnessed his ascension, and we

received the power of the Holy Spirit to become the church. Since the middle of May we have spent our time considering what it means for us to be that church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And today we honor Christ as King: Lord of all and creator of the universe.

It is no small thing that we do here today. We live in a world which honors authority and worships power. When we claim that Jesus Christ is more powerful than the leaders of this world and commands the ultimate authority in our lives is no small thing.

The common lectionary directs us to the prophecy of Ezekiel who was both a prophet and a priest. It was written about 600 years before the birth of Jesus to a people who were in despair. His prophecy began before the Babylonian conquest of Judah in 587 BC. It continues after the conquest, and so it is divided into two parts.

The first 25 chapters speak words of warning to Israel that unless they were faithful, God would allow them to be captured by the Babylonians. The next 23 chapters speak words of comfort to a people who are feeling as though there has been a change in their favored status. His message is clear: he assures his hearers of God's abiding presence among them, and he emphasizes God's involvement in the events of the day, so that Israel and all nations "will know that I am the Lord." For the first time, we see the importance of the individual in his relationship to God. To a dispersed and discouraged people, he brings a message of hope: hope that God will restore them to their homeland and the temple.

Chapter 34 is one of those comfort passages. Rulers in the Near East had long seen themselves as shepherds of their subjects. Ezekiel was sent by God to prophesy against Israel's kings, who had misused their people and were responsible for scattering

them. The kings had taken plenty of the land for themselves, rather than sharing it with their subjects. Written in a time of despondency (Judah had been invaded by Babylon in 587 BC), vv. [1-10](#) blame the people's sorry state on the kings: some had dispersed around the Mediterranean; others were deported to Babylon; those left at home were no better off. In foreign lands, they have fallen prey to pagan beliefs. Rulers, too, are subject to God's law: they are individually responsible for the mess.

However, the promise of the prophet is that by God's providence there will be a different kind of king. God will reverse the evil done by the bad human shepherds. This new shepherd will seek out the sheep, and "rescue" (v. [12](#)) them from wherever they have been scattered. God will "gather them" (v. [13](#)) and bring them back, restore them, to Palestine; he will care for them (v. [14](#)). He will aid the "lost" (v. [16](#)), "strayed", "injured" and "weak" – but he will destroy the "fat and the strong."

If you will allow me, I would like to suggest two contemporary messages from our text for this morning in our understanding of the King we are called to follow on this Christ the King Sunday: 1) The Tenacity of God; and 2) The Compassion of God.

### **The Tenacity of God**

Our text suggests that God is tenacious in pursuing those whom he wants to be His own. He is the good shepherd who goes after the lost sheep. He is the one who rescues them, feeds them, and brings them home safely. God never gives up.

In his book *Passed Through Fire*, pastor Rick Bundschuh tells the story of Hawaiian surfer Eddie Aikau: If you ever visit Hawaii, you may notice bumper stickers, most affixed to rusting, surfboard-laden cars, proclaiming, "Eddie would go!"

This curious saying is a tribute to the courage of Hawaiian waterman Eddie Aikau. Aikau was a lifeguard and big-wave surfer on Oahu's treacherous North Shore. Strong and confident in the water, Eddie wouldn't pull back on any wave...regardless of how big or how dangerous.

During the spring of 1978, Eddie was a crewman on the Hokule'a, a replica of an ancient Hawaiian sailing vessel that was making its way toward Tahiti. Somewhere in the Hawaiian channel, in stormy seas and gale-force winds, the boat overturned, casting all on board into the water.

After a night of the crew members futilely trying to attract passing boats and planes with flares, Eddie Aikau volunteered to paddle his surfboard, which he kept on the Hokule'a, to get help. He had assessed the situation and realized that options were running out. Soon the prevailing currents would take them far out to sea and beyond the reasonable hope of rescue.

There was no restraining Eddie. He was determined to go, and if anyone could make the arduous paddle, it was this outstanding waterman. He set off with a strobe light and a ring of oranges around his neck for what he estimated would be a twelve-mile paddle to the tiny island of Lana'i. He was never seen again.

A passing boat later rescued the crew of the Hokule'a. Eddie's willingness to risk—even to sacrifice his life—has made him a legend to other watermen around the world. Men push other men to go farther, to risk more, with three simple words: "Eddie would go!" (Source: Rick Bundschuh, *Passed Through Fire* (Tyndale, 2003), pp. 37-38)

It is the same with God. The bumper sticker would read, “*God would go!*” His desire to rescue us and save us from our own self-destruction is strong. It is his sacrificial love which makes him worthy to follow him.

### **The Compassion of God**

Our text also speaks of the compassion of a shepherd. Isn't it interesting that later Jesus says of himself, “*I am the good shepherd.*” And what does the good shepherd do? He cares for his flock. He will not allow them to be lost, and if one is lost, he will leave the 99 and pursue the 1.

Frederick Buechner has written: “*The Bible [New Testament] proclaims that at some unforeseeable time in the future, God will ring down the final curtain on history, and there will come a Day on which all our days and all the judgments upon us and all our judgments upon each other will themselves be judged. The judge will be Christ. In other words, the one who judges us most finally will be the one who loves us most fully.*” (Source: Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (Harper Collins, 1993), p. 58)

### **Conclusion**

Today is Christ the King Sunday. We believe that Christ is the good shepherd, tenacious and compassionate, who commands our attention and our allegiance. So it is that we honor Christ as King.