

**A New Beginning**  
**Daniel 7:9-10, 13-18, Revelation 1:4b-8**  
**A Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb**  
**Stewardship Sunday**  
**Christ the King Sunday**  
**Woodbury UMC**  
**November 21, 2021**

Welcome to Christ the King Sunday, the final Sunday in the Christian calendar year. I could quibble with the language, we Americans don't really think of things in terms of kings these days, after all, but the point is a good one. Jesus is the Christ, and Christ is Lord and ruler of us all, and this is a day we claim that reality as our own.

In pulling this sermon together, I learned that Christ the King Sunday has been part of our liturgical calendar for less than a century. It was instituted by Pope Pius the 11th in 1925, in direct response to the rise of authoritarian and fascistic movements around the world. Stalin was in power, Hitler had published *Mein Kampf* and had just attempted to seize power in Germany. Closer to the Pope, Benito Mussolini's fascists had marched on Rome three years prior and seized power, and the Treaty which recognized Vatican City as an independent sovereign power had not yet been signed, putting him and the whole Roman Catholic Church in a terribly vulnerable position—and on, and on.

Amid the conditions that would lead to a world war, Pope Pius took a stand. The message of Christ the King is that while we may owe the world's secular powers some obedience, they cannot claim us to be used in accordance with their own whims, because there is Another who has a prior and greater claim on us. That makes Christ the King Sunday among the most political days in the liturgical calendar, as it directly addresses the political leaders of our world, those who would rule over others, with a reminder that Christ is sovereign. That ties in well with today's scriptures, peculiar as they are, with a message of tremendous hope. Revelation in particular has been a scripture that has brought hope for a better future to besieged and politically harmed people for millennia.

Let me pause for a moment, so I don't get ahead of myself. One thing I have talked about in the four months and change I have been here is that the Bible is not

a book, but instead it is a library in itself, a whole collection of books of very diverse kinds and purposes, written over thousands of years for different audiences, and most important for our purposes today, comprising of several very different kinds of literature. Stories, histories, poetry, construction guidelines for building an ark or a temple. Lots of stuff made it into our Bible. Lots of it looks vaguely familiar, and despite being thousands of years old, these literary forms are somewhat familiar to us. Even something hard for us moderns to recognize, like a Gospel—we have a few examples of a Gospel, and so you know it exists to tell you of Good News.

What we have read today is very, very different. These are a literary form called apocalypse. That word apocalypse has come to be used popularly in our culture today to mean something like the end of the world. That is very different from its theological meaning. “Apocalypse” comes from Greek, the original language of the Book of Revelation. It means “uncover, disclose, reveal.” In late 14th century Church Latin, it became “revelation.” That’s why the last book of the Bible is called both the Apocalypse of John, or the book of Revelation. In Middle English, its general sense was “insight” or “vision.” Religious historian Bart Ehrman describes an apocalypse as a disclosure or revelation of great knowledge. An apocalypse usually discloses something very important that was hidden or provides a “vision of heavenly secrets that can make sense of earthly realities.” We are left with a revealing, or an unveiling, or an uncovering, of knowledge from heaven that can help us make sense of what is going on here on Earth, and also an ending that has come to terrify people over the centuries, in a book that includes some terrifically bizarre, bloody and violent imagery. We know that Jesus spoke in symbolic language all the time, and that indeed the entire Bible is filled with symbolism. Well, Revelation and Daniel are both the literary form of apocalypse, and both have symbolism that is over the top.

Here’s the thing. Both Daniel and Revelation are all about the triumph of God over all that is, and all that was, and that ever will be. Revelation in particular was written in coded language to talk about the Romans, and was to give believers a reminder to stay faithful and be courageous, because they belong to Jesus. The Romans will fall and be accountable for their crimes, as will all the principalities of this world. Christ is King of this world, and all that is not of God will come to an end. If you are being crushed by this world, if you are marginalized and oppressed, this is the best news imaginable. God hears your cries, and God will grant you justice. Your oppressors will fall away, and what comes next will be better.

And here's the other thing. If you are content with how things are going, being told that it will all end, and that the social order of things is going to be undone in the process? That is bad news, to be avoided at all costs! That is terrifying!

Remember, this is scripture, not fortune telling. The point wasn't to warn about something that then happens and everyone says "how clever to have seen that coming" and that's the end of it. We know that's not how it works. We know that scripture is eternal, and we know that it is interpreted for every generation. God is not God of the dead but of the living, right?, and so we need to determine what this means for US, right now.

When I look at the world, I for sure see a world that is ending, and a world that is struggling to be born. I could talk about American politics, or world politics, or income inequality, or environmental crisis, the pandemic, or so, so many -isms here. It is clear that The United Methodist Church is approaching the end of one stage of its existence, and ready for the next stage to be revealed, and I am eager to live into that new reality.

All those would be good and appropriate on Christ the King Sunday, but that's not where I want to go. Instead of going really big, let's take our revelation a little closer to home. I believe that we in the Woodbury UMC are seeing the end of one time, and something new is ready to be revealed, even ready to be born. Letting go of things is hard, but it is a necessary step in order to grab the new thing firmly, confidently, with both hands. We do so standing on the promises of God. We do so as those belonging to Christ. And we do so working to be active co-creators of the new with our God.

That makes for a pretty apt Stewardship Sunday message. We have just ended one year and are now planning for the next one, so on this day we have the convergence of planning for the future, of recognizing that all we have comes through Christ, and honoring our savior by dedicating our lives to Christ as King and our stewardship of all that has been given to us, even every minute of our lives.

This is our third of three stewardship messages. For the first one, we talked about our membership and baptismal vows, that we would support the work of the church through our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness. Financial resources are important, but please, don't let that be the extent of your stewardship. God has blessed you with spiritual gifts, and they are every bit as important to the church as your money. In January and February, we are going to take a good long look at our individual spiritual gifts, to better understand how God

has equipped each one of us for service, and in doing so given us resources for a life of joy.

For the second week, Shannon preached on seeing God show up in the relationship she and I have, again and again, not in a #blessed sense, but when things are looking grim. When we are unable to get things done under our own power, God shows up. And she suggested that even though we don't want our own struggles, maybe to God they are a chance for us to rely on him more fully.

In both of the last two weeks, I noted that we have an opportunity to fully retire the mortgage on 20 Church street, with a donor who has offered a 2 for 1 match on donations specifically marked to pay off the mortgage. We have a rare chance to pay off old obligations so that we may better focus on building the future ministries of this congregation. We need to raise \$20 thousand in order to pay off a mortgage of \$60 thousand, and in doing so will immediately start to see a surplus in interest savings. I hope you have prayerfully considered what you can give towards this valuable effort. If you aren't ready to do that yet, make your pledge by the end of the year, and let's pay it all off by the end of next year.

That's been the stewardship campaign up to now. For this week, I want us to think about stewardship of this church community, this congregation, this faith family. We are charged with caring for one another, and for witnessing to Christ's saving power here in this community. Maybe God doesn't mind a congregation having some struggles, because in those conditions, we are forced to realize that we've been in God's hands all along, and we are to rely on God more fully in this way, too.

Just so we are all on the same page, I am fully aware that this is an unusual Stewardship Sunday message. Daniel and Revelation are frightening texts, with frightening images. But we live in a time of fear and trembling, and that doesn't go away by pretending otherwise.

Last week Shannon mentioned looking at spreadsheets each month and predicting disaster. A time of revelation is a time when we may get to see God's hand in action, as one season draws to a close so that a new season may emerge in all its glory. Remember that the point of apocalyptic scripture is to give hope to God's people. For stewardship Sunday, it is appropriate to look at the state of our finances. The finances are not where we want them to be. And yet, even with that, get this:

A little under 9% of our total budget has gone to some very worthwhile mission and outreach work: Ecuadorian support—that is why we have this beautiful piece here on the altar, as a reminder of the positive impact this church has had on the lives of people we will likely never meet—and COVID special support in the community, scholarships to high school graduates, specific financial support to individuals through the pastor’s discretionary fund, supporting the Naugatuck Valley Project, and all the NYAC programs, including Africa University, Ministerial Education, the Black College fund, and on and on. That isn’t quite a tithe of our budget, but in a time of many, many challenges, I think that is pretty darn great and worthy of some celebration. Those financial resources give me a sense of the priorities of this church, and that gives me a lot of hope!

I want us to consider our financial resources, not only as individuals and families, but for what we have done as a congregation. At the end of today’s worship service, we will conclude with an opportunity for you to come forward as you are ready, to put your estimate of giving card in the plate on the altar, and then come downstairs for a time of refreshments and fellowship. This is a reminder that in being good stewards of our time and our witness, we are to care for the body of Christ, gathered together as the church at worship. Caring for one another is one of the most important things we do as a church, and honoring stewardship includes looking to how we are caring for one another during this time of so many challenges.

This is also the week of our national day of thanks giving, a perfect day to consider our own stewardship, because both are grounded in gratitude for all God has given to us. It is perhaps the least commercialized of our national holidays—well, unless you work in a grocery or kitchen supply store—but point being that there is great satisfaction in the ability to simply consider what God has done in our lives. Some of you have more than others. But all have something, and by being here, all are giving of themselves.

In preparing my sermon, I came across these words by Brother David Steindl-Rast:

*Everything is a gift. The degree to which we are awake to this truth is a measure of our gratefulness. Day and night, gifts keep pelting down on us. If we were aware of this, gratefulness would overwhelm us. But we go through life in a daze.*

*A power failure makes us aware of what a gift electricity is; a sprained ankle lets us appreciate walking as a gift, a sleepless night, sleep. How much we are missing in life by noticing gifts only when we are suddenly deprived of them.*

*Eyes see only light, ears hear only sound, but a listening heart perceives meaning. Everything is a gift. Grateful living is a celebration of the universal give-and-take of life, a limitless yes to belonging. A lifetime may not be long enough to attune ourselves fully to the harmony of the universe. But just to become aware that we can resonate with it -- that alone can be like waking up from a dream.*

Gratefulness is the key to a happy life, because if we are not grateful, then no matter how much we have we will not be happy—because we will always want to have something else or something more.

I am going to close with a prayer that is tiny but powerful. Given that I began noting that the idea of apocalypse is terrifying for those who want the world to go on just as it is, and as hope for those looking for a new heaven and a new earth, I hope to have helped you get comfortable considering that even as one thing winds down, another has been uncovered, in order that we may more fully see God's plan. On this Stewardship Sunday, we give thanks for all that God has done, because by and large we understand it and can see tangible results, that's not too hard. On this Stewardship Sunday, we also give thanks for all that God is about to do, even if we don't fully understand it. I leave you with these words from Pastor Micah Bucey, titled A Tiny Prayer (for those who are seeking a bit of hope):

*May you not simply grasp for some slippery, saccharine, theoretical concept and instead listen to the deepest parts of you, the parts that remind you why you go on, the parts where you hold images of the people whose laughter brings you uncontrollable joy, where you hold memories of those who have worked and fought so that you can live and thrive, where you hold vibrant dreams of all you have yet to do and be, and may you hear yourself loud and clear, a being who is not quite there yet, but who is paying such close attention to the beauty of it all that you can't help but look forward.*

Amen.