

Sacred Rhythms

Sermon by Lori Erickson

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As you've probably noticed, Bob and I travel a lot. Sometimes it's for my work and sometimes it's for pleasure, but either way there are a lot of Sunday mornings when we're not at New Song. Most of the time, we attend a church service when we're out of town, often at a church in another denomination that's hosted me for a talk or workshop.

I've learned some things during these forays into other denominations. For example, the Presbyterians have really long sermons. The Unitarian-Universalists have services that are a lot like committee meetings. Catholic services are usually full of young children—and some of those families have six, seven or even eight kids. And the Lutherans are very good at greeting visitors as soon as you walk in the door.

I've been to other Episcopal services too, most recently at Bethesda-by-the-Sea Church in Palm Beach, Florida, near where our son Carl lives. I have to admit it was fun to worship in a historic sanctuary with beautiful stained glass windows and a choir with dozens of members, who processed in grand style down the aisle. (But I must say—I think our music actually sounds better, because the acoustics in this room are so good and the sound doesn't get swallowed by a high ceiling.)

One of the things these experiences have reinforced for me is that we're really part of One Church. Despite our differences, we all follow Jesus. It's good to be reminded of that these days, when conflicts in many parts of our lives can seem overwhelming.

And in all those churches this morning, there's a sense of the church year winding down. While the secular calendar doesn't begin a new year until January 1, in Christianity this is the last Sunday of the church year. Advent, which starts next Sunday, begins another liturgical cycle. That makes today Christ the King Sunday, a fitting time to reflect on what it means to be on this slowly turning wheel of the church year.

For one thing, the church year means we live in a cyclical world. That's different than in much of the rest of our lives, in which there's a progression through the years. We're born, we experience childhood, and then adolescence, and then adulthood, and eventually our story winds down into its final chapter.

The Church's sense of time is different. Instead it cycles through seasons that remind us of the central elements of the Christian story. We begin in Advent, the season of preparation for the birth of Jesus. Then there's Christmas, followed by Epiphany, the season of light, and then the 40 days of Lent, followed by Easter and then Pentecost and the long "green" season, and then in another year we come to Christ the King Sunday, our version of New Year's Eve. Over and over again, we get the chance to relive the stories.

The older I get, the more I appreciate how **forgiving** the church year is. By that I mean it gives us the chance for do-overs. We don't have to do it perfectly each year. One Lenten season, for example, maybe you just aren't into it. The rituals and mystery leave you cold. But because that larger structure is there, and because other people are walking the road to Easter with you, it carries you along like a river. Some of the power of the season sinks into you simply by osmosis. And no matter how you experience Lent, next year you can do it in a deeper and more meaningful way.

Actually, maybe a better metaphor for the church year isn't a circle, but a spiral. Think of it like the inside of a nautilus shell, or of the patterns a hawk makes as it circles around and around in the sky. That's what it's like to go through the familiar rituals again and again, each time at a different level, hopefully each time seeing new connections and gaining new insights.

Another thing I like about the church year is that it's color-coded, to use a term coined by the actor Robin Williams in his list of Top 10 Reasons to be an Episcopalian (two of the other reasons are that you can believe in dinosaurs and that there's no snake handling). Color-coded means that in Advent the liturgical colors are blue, and Lent is purple and Pentecost is red and the green season is... well, green. I like wandering through the rainbow of the year.

We have secular rhythms too, of course, with the year punctuated by holidays such as Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Labor Day, and Thanksgiving. But the church year goes much deeper, because our entire year gets structured around the work of God in history. The lectionary takes us through the familiar parts of the story—Christmas and Easter—and also reminds us of the lesser known, but still important, stories. And in doing so we can see how these smaller stories are connected to one bigger story, just as we are all connected by the Holy Spirit.

So these are some of the things that I think about, sometimes, as I sit in a Lutheran or Presbyterian or Catholic service on a Sunday morning.

And in all these churches, the ones that follow the common lectionary at least, this morning's Gospel reading is the same. It's that marvelous, disturbing, and profound story of how God meets us in the guise of the poor, the forgotten, and the outcast—and of how we will be judged by how we respond.

What a funny sort of Christ the King he is! Someone who gives up prestige and power to be with the forgotten and powerless. What's more—he expects us to join him there.

Think about it: Christ the King Sunday is our last chance of the year to figure out what kind of king Jesus is. And in doing so, we realize that his power isn't about might, but about love. Recall the sign placed above Jesus' broken body on the cross: the King of the Jews. Here is a king who is willing to suffer with us and for us.

This year we hear these words against the backdrop of many conflicts and worries, from the wars in Gaza and in Ukraine to the unrest and division in our own country. How do we live out our faith in such confusing and turbulent times?

I don't have any easy answers, but I do have a story, one told by Kristin Krantz, an Episcopal priest from Maryland. She remembers it from a skit she saw performed years ago at a church camp. Some of the references are a little old-fashioned, but I think the larger points are still true.

So a woman was sitting at home reading a book one day when the phone rang. Surprise! It was Jesus! And he was calling to say he was coming to visit today. So the woman started to get ready – she vacuumed, dusted, and baked cookies.

Only, as she attempted to get ready, she kept getting interrupted by people knocking at her door.

First it was a neighbor who smelled the cookies baking and was hungry. But the woman was impatient – the cookies weren't ready yet and she didn't want this person just hanging around until they were done. You know, in case Jesus arrived. So she told him she was expecting company and sent him on his way.

The next knock at the door was a group of neighborhood kids who had been running around and playing, and were hoping for some lemonade (which she was often known to share with the kids). But they were dirty and dusty and covered in grass stains and she didn't want them coming into her clean house before Jesus arrived, so she told them to run around to the back yard and drink from the garden hose (this was the 80's, when we still did things like that).

Just as soon as she returned to her chores, someone else was at the door. This time it was a neighbor who was sick. The last thing she wanted was to leave and take her to the doctor – she might miss Jesus! And because these were the days before 911, she told the neighbor to go see if another neighbor could take her to the hospital.

The woman closed the door, went to pull the cookies out of the oven and placed them on a cooling rack, then she sat down to wait eager with anticipation. She waited. She waited some more. There were no more knocks. But then the phone rang. It was Jesus.

She was so flustered from waiting she blurted out, "You're late! Are you still planning to visit today?" And Jesus, of course, replied that he'd already visited. Three times. And that each time instead of inviting him in, she had turned him away.

So there you go. Jesus comes to us in many ways, at many times, and usually in disguise as someone in need. You'd never guess he was a king. But that's just the kind of king he is.