

**New St. James Presbyterian Church  
Sunday, November 22, 2020**

**“The People of God’s Pasture”  
Psalm 95:1-7a**

**The Rev. Dr. David Clark**

The Church calls Christ King. If you were able to attend the Induction via livestream last Sunday, then you heard Rev. Mavis Currie, Moderator of Presbytery, declare Christ’s kingship to us, saying: “The Presbyterian Church in Canada is bound only to Jesus Christ, the Church’s King and Head.” And today is “Reign of Christ Sunday”: today the church rejoices in the rule of the Risen Christ, the one we recognize as King; today the church celebrates that the one we obey, the one who rules over us, is Christ the loving and merciful King of creation.

Normally, this is a celebratory Sunday, with jubilant hymns lifting up our joy that Christ is enthroned in heaven. But this year, for the first time, something gave me pause: there’s something I noticed this year that I don’t think I ever quite picked up on before. In the Scripture readings appointed for today, and in the hymns associated with this day, we find Christ’s reign described through images of height, altitude, elevation, *distance*. In our Epistle reading from Ephesians, we hear: “God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come” (1:20-21). And in the words of a famous hymn, often sung on this day: “For Christ the Saviour reigns, the God of truth and love; when Jesus purged our stains, he took his seat above” (Wesley). In Scripture and in song, Christ’s reign seems connected to Christ’s...distance.

But I wonder if—in our current conditions—if these images of Christ above and beyond are maybe less comforting, more disconcerting, than in previous years? These days, we rely on distance to safeguard one another: we distance *for* each other, but it means we are not *with* each other—at least, not in the fullest sense. We connect by phone, by videoconference, by livestream, or at a safe social distance...but our distance means we’re never quite *present*. I felt this keenly at the Induction: as members of the search committee departed, and we could only wave across the pews, that distance was palpable. In fact, I’m now in the peculiar situation of being the minister of a congregation that I really haven’t met yet! If someone were to ask me, “So what’s your congregation like?” the most honest answer I could give is: “Well, they’re a wonderful group of people—at least, so I’ve been told!”

We recognize the importance of distance: distancing is our caring duty to one another. But still, we long for a day when we will safely gather again. As the pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in the 1930s, “The believer need not feel any shame when yearning for the physical presence of other Christians,” for “[t]he physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer” (DBWE 5:29). And so, as we long for the closeness and connection of embodied community, I wonder: when we hear this language of Christ the King reigning *above*, beyond us, seemingly distant...could it be that we—as people troubled by our distance from each other—that we might find little comfort in these images of Christ’s reign? When we hear

of Christ “in the heavenly places, far above,” in the words of Ephesians, it could seem like Reign of Christ Sunday celebrates Christ the (distant) King.

That’s maybe all the more disconcerting because distance can limit compassionate action. A friend of mine was walking in Toronto when she saw someone trip over a curb, and take a nasty spill on the pavement: several passersby, including my friend, saw this person’s fall, and quickly—instinctively—rushed to help...but everyone then checked themselves, stopped at a two-metre radius, and asked, feebly, “Are you okay?” We maintain our distance to care for each other, but still it can place our compassion at a remove. So again, Christ the King, described as high and exalted and seemingly distant—could that language and imagery seem less than joyful on *this* Reign of Christ Sunday?

But in this time of distancing, something in our psalm caught my attention for the first time... At first glance, our psalm today, Psalm 95, seems to share in this imagery of God’s distance, praising God as sovereign, above, ruling over creation; however, as we’ll see, this psalm also bears witness to God who chooses to come near.

Psalm 95 is a psalm of praise, often used as a Call to Worship:

O come, let us sing to the LORD;  
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!  
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;  
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! (vv. 1-2).

As the psalmist summons us into praise, the psalmist also declares why God is worth praising: as one writer puts it, this praise is “rooted in who God is and what God has done” (Johnson). And so, the psalmist declares that God is the sovereign King and Creator:

For the LORD is a great God,  
and a great King above all gods.  
In his hand are the depths of the earth;  
the heights of the mountains are his also.  
The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land,  
which his hands have formed” (vv. 3-4).

With this, the psalmist invites us to praise God who creates and rules... And yet that distance, maybe we see it again here, too: God the King is “above,” the psalmist tells us, making mountains and ruling as sovereign. Maybe this, too, could feel like too much distance today?

Yet the psalmist offers another invitation to praise God, this time declaring that the King who made the mountains also made us:

O come, let us worship and bow down,  
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!” (v. 6).

Did you hear that: “the LORD, *our* Maker”? Here the psalmist turns from the universal to the personal, singing that the King who created the vast stretches of the cosmos also created us, that this sovereign Creator who formed the universe also deliberately and delicately formed you. This moment in the psalm shouldn’t be rushed past: it’s stunning, if we pause and linger with it, that this majestic King “above” has also lovingly shaped and formed us. Juliana Claassens, who teaches Old Testament at Stellenbosch University in South Africa, she puts it like this: “The God of all creation, the maker of the sea and the one who formed the dry land [...], is also ‘*our* Maker.’ The God who is the

great God, the king above all the gods, is also the rock of *our* salvation.” She adds: “This psalm [...] affirms that the sovereign God most high is also a deeply personal God.”

Then the psalmist describes God—this great King and Creator—in even more personal, “intimate language” (Johnson):

For he is our God,  
and we are the people of his pasture,  
and the sheep of his hand (v. 7a).

With the language of God’s “hands”—God’s protective and creative agency—with this poetic image, the psalmist wonderfully connects God as Creator and King with God as intimate Caregiver: “in his hand are the depths of the earth,” we heard, “and the dry land, which his hands have formed”...and now the psalmist sings of “the people of [God’s] pasture, and the sheep of his hand.” God’s mighty, creative hand is God’s present, caring hand.

In this way, the Psalmist celebrates God as King and Creator—and also rejoices that this King and Creator is not distant, but comes all the way down to care for God’s sheep. This sovereign, powerful, eternal God—this is also our intimate, close, and devoted Shepherd. This psalm, appointed for Reign of Christ Sunday, enables us to celebrate God who is powerful beyond our mortal limitations...and yet who also chooses to come near to us, to come near to God’s people—to come near to God’s people Israel, and also to the church—to come near with intimacy and love. Juliana Claassens, the scholar I mentioned a moment ago, she tells how this psalm—when read on Reign of Christ Sunday—invites us not to think of Christ as a tyrannical or “imperial model of kingship,” but instead to imagine Christ the King in “the intimate actions of a shepherd leading, feeding, and protecting his flock.”

In only a few verses, our psalm leads us from praising God as King of kings to marveling that this God and King is also an intimate Shepherd... And it’s a theme in Scripture that God is the Shepherd who cares unceasingly for God’s sheep. As we heard this morning from Ezekiel: “For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness” (34:11-12). And famously, in the Gospel of John, we hear Jesus’s words: “I am the good shepherd. [...] And I lay down my life for the sheep” (10:14-15).

My friend, when she saw that person fall down, she had to stand back, unable to get close enough to help them up. We are limited by our distance—we are limited in our actions and limited in our community—but no such distance limits Christ the King and Shepherd. When we tumble and fall down these days, others around us may be limited by distance, unable to come quite close...but not so for Christ, who—even in this time of distancing—still comes near, still comes close when we fall, still comes alongside to lift us up.

Today we acclaim Christ as King, and—at the same time—we discover again that God in Christ comes near to us as Shepherd. Yes, Christ reigns at God’s “right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion,” as we hear in Ephesians—and this same sovereign, majestic King is also the Shepherd who has sought us and found us and laid down his life for us. Today, in this season of distancing,

as we hear that Christ the King reigns above and beyond, we can rejoice that the King who rules over us is also the Shepherd who lovingly tends to us, and who now—right now, despite our distance from each other—draws near to us by the Spirit.

Sisters and brothers in Christ: we are distant from one another—we haven't even really met yet!—but Christ the King is not distant, promising to be with us and near us, in this sanctuary and also wherever and whenever you are right now. The King on high is also the Shepherd beside, and we are “the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.” Thank God! Amen.