

"Over All Things"
Ephesian 1:15-23; Ezekiel 34:11-16, 2024
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November 26, 2017

For a people who fought to rid ourselves of monarchy,
Americans remain enthralled by the idea,
at least when it comes to entertainment.

Last Monday Rob and I went to the Lyric
for the wonderful movie about Queen Victoria's last years
and her affection for a servant from the Indian subcontinent.
Victoria was played by Dame Judy Dench,
so you knew it had to be good, and it was.

Two seasons ago I watched the gripping series *Wolf Hall*
about Thomas Cromwell and Henry the VIII on PBS,
then bought and devoured the books,
then binge-watched the whole thing again.

Last year came the PBS series *the Crown*,
about the young Elizabeth II, and this year a series
on Victoria at the start of her reign.

If that weren't enough, I have a book that's fun to browse
called the *Oxford Book of Royal Anecdotes*, written of course by a countess.
On any given page one finds a moment of English royal life
someone thought worthy of writing down.

Open to the section on King Charles I, and you'll find
that despite being ousted and beheaded by his people,
he was given a royal burial, his head re-stitched to his body by a surgeon
and the body placed in the same vault
that held Henry VIII and Jane Seymour.

Flip backward to 1135 and discover Henry I
died after eating an enormous dinner of lampreys,
those unappetizing fish with suckers instead of jaws.
despite his doctor having expressly told him not to
because they'd given him trouble past.

There are samplings of royal wit,
such as James I saying of the poetry of John Donne:
Dr. Donne's verses are like the peace of God;
they pass all understanding."

And examples of royal stupidity, such as the monarch who, upon seeing the series of
Monet's paintings of Parliament in the rain,
remarked what a shame he'd had such bad luck with the weather.

Did you know that King Edward the VIII's last act
before the broadcast in which he abdicated the throne in 1936
was to drink a whisky soda in his bedroom

while having his toenails clipped?
Edward's valet, Crisp, upon being told by the ex-king
to pack and come with him, refused.

The only explanation Crisp offered later was
"He gave up his job; I gave up mine."ⁱⁱ

Our ideas of kings and Queens have been shaped
by these English monarchs and a few romantic or monstrous rulers
from other times and places: Cleopatra, Herod,
Ivan the Terrible, Emperor Nero, Catherine the Great,
whose name as you might guess, I've always loved.
They seem on the one hand to have had unlimited power,
yet on the other we know full well,
they were only men and women, no better than ourselves.
That's also why we tend to love stories of monarch's in disguise:
princesses alone and helpless,
or nowadays, praise God, not so helpless.
Princes pretending to be peasants,
disinherited royals who come back to win the throne.
In the same manner people tend to like the David stories in the bible,
because David was a simple shepherd boy
whom God raised up from obscurity to be anointed king.

Today's Christ the King readings in Ezekiel and Ephesians
both present pictures of kingship
that are like and yet unlike the ones we know.
Ezekiel is prophesying among people in exile in Babylon
long after the time of King David.
They are captive and vulnerable and without help.
The Shepherd King portrayed by Ezekiel,
is like the princely heroes of fairy tales,
will come and care for the people,
punishing the wicked collaborators, who are referred to
in a somewhat confusing way as "fat sheep."
In our time we might call them "fat cats,"
but we don't have to worry about getting the names right.
Everyone knows who the fat sheep are, then and now.
They are bloated predators who lounge and lodge their money
in off-shore accounts so they don't have to pay taxes
for things like education, police protection,
highways, healthcare or safety-nets for people they don't care about.
Or as the text puts it, they are the ones who feed on the weak,
clothe themselves with other people's wool,
push people around and run them off
into places where the things that make for life
—healthy food, clean air, safe rest, family—are hard to come by.

The redeeming shepherd is pictured in one moment as God
and in another as a king of the Davidic line,
all in stunning, sweeping Hebrew poetry:

*I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep,
Seek the lost, bring back the strayed
Bind up the injured strengthen the weak....
I will save my flock and they shall no longer be ravaged.
I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David.
He shall be prince among them; I, Yahweh, have spoken.”*

Who doesn't long for a leader who has the power
to right the wrongs we see around us,
who can prevent acts of terrible injustice?

Two recent events have set me longing for the One
who has the power to right the wrongs of this world.

First it has been grim to read the climbing number of fatalities
in Egypt where fanatic Islamists attacked a Sufi Mosque.

Sufi Islam is based on closeness to God, tolerance and peace,
and other humane and inclusive ideas that terrify fundamentalists.

The 13th century Persian poet Jalal ad-Din Muhammed Rumi
is perhaps the most famous Sufi Muslim.

And in case you feel that an attack on Sufi Islam is somehow
far away from you, did you know that Rumi is the most popular poet
in the US todayⁱⁱⁱ

His ecstatic, mystical poetry grapples with divine Love
and such things as silence, gentleness and tenderness of heart.

Listen to one of Rumi's short poems:

*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.*

*When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase each other
doesn't make any sense.*

You can see how fundamentalists of any stripe
can't possibly tolerate such open notions, and so the attacks come.

Then last week something else took place I can't get out of my heart.

My sister Julie and her partner Mardee were married
in a sweet ceremony in their living room.

What my sister did not know was that arrangements has been made
for two sopranos to sing a duet in their honor at church the next morning.

One of the sopranos was Meg, Mardee's niece,

When Meg stood up in church to sing
she was holding a little two-year-old boy in her arms.

Meg and her husband of six months had signed up
to give short-term shelter to children on an emergency basis.

On Saturday night after the wedding they got a call.
A tiny boy who spoke no English has been swept up
during a raid by immigration agents at an Atlanta apartment complex.
Immigration has been aggressively leading raids in Atlanta for months
and in the chaos this child was found alone and crying in a room.
Not knowing who his family was, the agents brought the terrified boy
to Meg and her husband for emergency care.
He was so afraid, he would not leave Meg's arms all night
or in the morning, so as she stood to sing in church
she held him in her arms.

Friends, we live in a world where open-ended thinkers
and those who admire them are attacked and destroyed,
and in a nation that conducts raids so inhumane
that a child could be separated from his parents
as this boy had been from his.
So, yes, I long for a leader, now,
like the one in promised in Ezekiel,
who will not allow those obsessed with the rightness
of their views alone to crush other people at will.

In Ephesians, Christ is named as a the one
who has the power that is above all powers
but with a wonderful exception to the patterns of the world.
Ephesians is a letter written to a church
by a pastor or a writer who has never met them.
The writer is not giving thanks to God for them
from the experience of shared ministry together.
Writer and readers have not taught each other,
they haven't loved each other, they haven't hurt each other's' feelings,
or raised up children, or sent young adults off into the world
or buried beloved friends together.
There has been no sitting in hospital waiting rooms,
no tears over bad news or relief over good,
no coffee spills on each other's furniture,
no lunches, no parties, no dents in each other's cars.
The writer has, however, heard about the church,
about their reputation for faith in the Lord
and about their ability to love other church members.
Most scholars agree that Paul didn't write this letter.
It is full of words he didn't use and ideas that are new to him.
His letters to his own church folk were always deeply personal.
Ephesians is a general essay in the Pauline tradition.
So this writer is most likely a stranger,
but perhaps that makes what he has to say even more powerful.
They don't know each other, but they share the title of saints.

They don't know each other but he is confident
that Jesus is their head.
They don't know each other, but the Ephesian church
has done things that matter so much to the church at large
that this distant writer knows about them
and never ceases to give thanks for them in his prayers.
Then he reminds them and us that the source
of the energy, power and spirit at work in the church
is God's power revealed in Jesus' resurrection.
The language about God power in Jesus' resurrection
is so over the top, scholars find it difficult to translate into English.
But it's worth remembering, especially when the ways of world
are weighing us down, that the power we need
to do whatever we have to do in life
comes from the same source,
even the power to face things that seemingly can't be faced.
The king who is above all and through all and in all,
the king who defines what true kingship is,
the healing Shepherd I long for whenever I read the news
or ponder the chaos in my own life
is the resurrected Lord, and his power came from beyond himself.
He was dead. He was no more.
It was God who raised him.
We say he "was raised";
we never say Christ rose from the dead.
His power comes from something even he could not do.

The writer is sure that the power that raised Jesus from the dead,
that seated him at the right hand of God,
is also fueling life in Christ today
as a power that dwells right now in the hearts of the faithful.
The writer was moved from thanksgiving
over the reputation of these church folks,
to talking about his prayers for them,
to wildly hopeful words about the power of God
to overcome every obstacle or counter power,
not just then, but for all time to come.

On this day that has to do with the reign of God
talk about small good things done in a church
led to talk about limitless things done by God now and forever.
And in the middle is Christ, who is their head
but also the one whose power fills the church even as he rules over it.

The claims don't sound wild to me at all.
Everything I know about God and the power of God
I have learned with and from church folk

in sanctuaries and parking lots,
 Sunday school discussion and potluck chatter;
 in liturgy, sermons, hymns and anthems and afterthoughts
 spoken by people who worship and serve together.
Friends the longed for Shepherd, the king who will heal the world's woes
has come and is coming and is here right now
because this is where we, the church, are gathered. AMEN.

ⁱ Based on the book *Wolf Hall* by Hilary Mantle, winner of the 2009 Mann Booker Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction. The second book in the series is *Bring Up the Bodies*, also great.

ⁱⁱ This and all the previous items noted come from Elizabeth Longford, ed., *The Oxford Book of Royal Anecdotes*, Oxford, England, 1989.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20140414-americas-best-selling-poet>

