

# Citizens of a Different Kingdom

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The Feast of the Reign of Christ, Year C  
November 23, 2025 | Grace UMC, Denver, CO

*Watch out, you shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture, declares the Lord. This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, proclaims about the shepherds who "tend to" my people: You are the ones who have scattered my flock and driven them away. You haven't attended to their needs, so I will take revenge on you for the terrible things you have done to them, declares the Lord. I myself will gather the few remaining sheep from all the countries where I have driven them. I will bring them back to their pasture, and they will be fruitful and multiply. I will place over them shepherds who care for them. Then they will no longer be afraid or dread harm, nor will any be missing, declares the Lord. The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up a righteous descendant from David's line, and he will rule as a wise king. He will do what is just and right in the land. During his lifetime, Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And his name will be The Lord Is Our Righteousness. Jeremiah 23:1-6*

*Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who has come to set the chosen people free. The Lord has raised up for us a mighty Savior from the house of David. Through the holy prophets, God promised of old to save us from our enemies, from the hands of all who hate us; to show mercy to our forebears and to remember the holy covenant. This was the oath God swore to our father, Abraham: to set us free from the hands of our enemies, free to worship without fear, holy and righteous in the Lord's sight, all the days of our life. And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way, to give God's people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins. In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace. Cantic of Zechariah*

*Peter responded, "Lord, I'm ready to go with you, both to prison and to death!" Jesus replied, "I tell you, Peter, the rooster won't crow today before you have denied three times that you know me." Jesus said to them, "When I sent you out without a wallet, bag, or sandals, you didn't lack anything, did you?" They said, "Nothing." Then he said to them, "But now, whoever has a wallet must take it, and likewise a bag. And those who don't own a sword must sell their clothes and buy one. I tell you that this scripture must be fulfilled in relation to me: And he was counted among criminals. Indeed, what's written about me is nearing completion." They said to him, "Lord, look, here are two swords." He replied, "Enough of that!" Jesus left and made his way to the Mount of Olives, as was his custom, and the disciples followed him. When he arrived, he said to them, "Pray that you won't give in to temptation." He withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed. He said, "Father, if it's your will, take this cup of suffering away from me. However, not my will but your will must be done." Luke 22:33-42*

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now, as we begin I want to talk a little about today's message. Today's sermon carries a little more weight than usual. Not bad heaviness, but depth. We will explore themes that touch on our identity, our civic life, and our faith, and I want to approach them with care, humility, and love. This is not a political sermon, this is not a sermon against anyone. It is a sermon that invites us to remember where our hope lives and the One whose reign gives us freedom rather than fear. My prayer is that you will hear this as an invitation to trust Christ more deeply and to live with a steadier, more grounded faith.

Today is the feast of the Reign of Christ and it is the final Sunday of the Christian calendar, where the church pauses before Advent and asks a simple but searching question: who rules our lives. What gives shape to our hope. Whose voice holds our deepest allegiance. This year, that question becomes even more important because this feast day turns one hundred years old. This is a centennial moment.

The Feast of Christ the King was created in 1925 by Pope Pius XI in an encyclical called *Quas Primas* (Latin for ‘what is first’). It was not born in a peaceful or settled world. It emerged just seven years after the First World War, when the old empires and kingdoms had collapsed, economies had shattered, and entire nations were trying to rebuild their identity. Europe was filled with political anxiety. Secular ideologies were gaining strength. Nationalist movements were rising in Italy, Germany, Eastern Europe, and even in the United States. Many people felt unmoored. Something needed to give shape to their fear and their hope, and often it was the nation-state that stepped in to claim that role.

Into that moment, the church did something bold. It introduced a new feast day that proclaimed, publicly and liturgically, that no human institution can bear the weight of ultimate trust. No nation, no party, no queen or president, and no system can secure the salvation of the world. The encyclical says plainly that peace cannot come from human authority alone, because the human heart was created for a different allegiance. So the feast was established to re-center the Christian imagination. It reminded believers that Christ’s reign is not abstract. It is real, and it is meant to guide every corner of human life, including our political loyalties and our civic hopes.

One hundred years later, I think this feast feels just as timely. We live in our own anxious era. We see a dangerous rising nationalism in many countries. We feel division and uncertainty, even in our own. People long for stability and meaning, and often nations or political movements promise exactly that. They offer belonging, direction, and identity. Yet the church once again gathers at the end of the year to say what it said a century ago. Only Christ reigns with justice and mercy. Only Christ holds the authority that reshapes the human heart. Only Christ can gather scattered people and bind up the wounds of the world.

So the guiding question of this feast day and this sermon is simple. **How do we love our own countries without worshiping them?** How do we honor our civic life without putting our hope in it. How do we live as citizens of the places we call home while remembering we belong first to the Kingdom of God. On this feast day, in this centennial year, the church invites us to step back and remember where our loyalty lies, and why that loyalty gives us freedom rather than fear.

If we want to understand why the Church proclaims the reign of Christ as boldly as it does, we need to begin in a place of possibly uncomfortable honesty. Human leadership, even at its best, is fragile. Institutions falter. Nations rise and fall. People in power sometimes protect themselves rather than the ones they serve. The Prophet Jeremiah knew this well. He lived through the unraveling of Judah's political and social life. Kings failed. Corruption spread. The people were scattered and frightened. Their world was shaking.

Into that reality God speaks this startling word: "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture." In the ancient Near East, the word "shepherd" was a royal title. A shepherd was supposed to guide with wisdom, defend with courage, and nurture with care. Yet Jeremiah declares that the shepherds of his day have done the opposite. They have scattered rather than gathered. They have harmed rather than protected. They have forgotten whom they serve.

This is not just ancient history. It is a pattern as old as humanity itself. Whenever leaders seek to secure their own power at the expense of their people, the flock is wounded.

Whenever institutions are treated as saviors, they eventually disappoint the ones who trusted them. Whenever nations ask for devotion that belongs to God, people end up scattered in spirit and in community.

Yet the beauty of Jeremiah's message is that it does not end with critique. It turns toward a promise. "I myself will gather the few of my flock who are left," God says, "and I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them. They will no longer be afraid, and no one will terrorize them." God promises not despair, but restoration. God pledges to raise up a new kind of leader, a "righteous branch" from David's line, who will rule with justice and wisdom, who will bring safety rather than fear, and who will reveal God's heart rather than human ambition.

This promise points directly to the kinds of questions we wrestle with today. We live in a world where political systems ask us for more trust than they can hold, where national identity is sometimes treated as a sacred truth, and where leaders often promise salvation in exchange for loyalty. Jeremiah helps us name the limits of these appeals. There is a difference between healthy civic responsibility and placing our hope in human authority.

The Christian theologian William Cavanaugh (Roman Catholic) calls nationalism a kind of modern idol. Not because nations are inherently bad, but because they sometimes claim the loyalty that belongs to God alone. Jeremiah seems to warn the same thing. Human shepherds cannot bear divine weight. When we expect them to, we end up scattered, anxious, or disappointed.

Jeremiah invites us instead to look to the shepherd God provides. A leader whose authority is rooted in justice and mercy. A ruler whose purpose is to gather the flock and calm their fear. A king whose reign is marked not by domination but by righteousness. Christians hear this promise fulfilled in Christ, the one who gathers the lost, heals the wounded, and embodies God's justice in human form.

The Feast of the Reign of Christ places this truth at the center of our imagination. Before we turn to the other texts, Jeremiah teaches us something essential. No human institution can be our shepherd...full stop. No political movement can secure our hope. Only God gathers. Only God restores. Only God leads us into peace.

If Jeremiah shows us why we cannot place our hope in human rulers, the Cantic of Zechariah shows us the kind of kingdom we are invited into instead. Zechariah sings his prophecy at a turning point in Israel's story. Rome occupies the land. People long for deliverance. Many expect a Messiah who will restore national strength through force or political victory. Yet Zechariah's vision moves in a different direction.

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel," he says, "because he has visited and redeemed his people." This redemption does not come through military triumph. It comes through mercy. It comes through God remembering the covenant. It comes through light breaking in on those who sit in darkness.

One line in this cantic speaks directly to today's theme. Zechariah declares that God is freeing the people "so that we can serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness all our days." Service without fear is the heart of God's kingdom. Not service shaped by anxiety, not loyalty shaped by pressure, but a life grounded in God's steady compassion.

This is where we see a sharp contrast with nationalism. Researchers in moral psychology, including Jonathan Haidt, have shown that in seasons of fear, we often cling more tightly to the communities that feel familiar and protective. Sociologists who study Christian nationalism, such as Kerby Goff and John Iceland, note that this instinct can lead people to locate safety and identity in the nation itself. Nationalism begins to promise that if we hold tightly enough to our national story, we will not lose ourselves. That is a human impulse, but it is not the story the gospel tells. Zechariah offers a different story. Our identity is rooted in God's mercy, not fear. Our belonging flows from covenant love, not cultural sameness. Our calling is to walk "in the way of peace," not to grasp for control.

The Feast of the Reign of Christ places this vision in front of us as an alternative to the stories our world tells. We are not called to fear losing our place in society. We are called to serve with freedom. We are not shaped by anxiety about the future. We are shaped by the light of God's compassion. We do not belong to a kingdom built on fear, but to a kingdom built on mercy.

As we come to the Gospel, the shape of Christ's reign comes fully into focus. In the Gospel according to Luke, St. Peter boldly promises that he will follow Jesus to prison and to death, but Jesus knows how fragile that promise is. The authorities are closing in. Anxiety is thick in the air. The disciples still assume that loyalty means fighting, resisting, or holding their ground in some heroic way.

But Jesus reveals a different kind of authority. He steps away and prays, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me. Yet, not my will but yours be done." This is not resignation. It is the deepest act of trust. Here is the King, at the center of the universe, kneeling in the dark, choosing faithfulness over force. He does not grasp for dominance. He does not rally the disciples into violence. His reign is defined by surrender to the will of God and by love that refuses to harm.

This moment stands in stark contrast to every form of power that demands unquestioned loyalty. Nationalism often suggests that safety comes through holding tight to control or through elevating a nation, any nation, as the source of identity. But Jesus shows us that true life is found not in clinging, but in yielding, in trusting God. His kingship is expressed through compassion, humility, and a love strong enough to bear suffering rather than inflict it.

And this is where all the pieces of this day gather into one clear truth. Jeremiah teaches us that human rulers cannot hold the weight of our hope. Zechariah shows us that God frees us to serve without fear. Jesus embodies that freedom in the garden and carries it all the way to the cross. On this centennial Reign of Christ Sunday, the Church proclaims again that our first and foremost citizenship is in the kingdom of God. This does not pull us away from the world, but it anchors us within it. It steadies our hearts. It frees us to love our neighbors with courage and mercy. And as we turn toward Advent next week, we look for the light of the One whose reign is peace, whose power is love, and whose kingdom has no end. Amen.