

## *God Reigns*

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Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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*Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. - Matthew 1:18-25*

The 2016 presidential campaign and its aftermath continue to generate divisive questions about power, authority and legitimacy: *What do we mean by law, and how is a leader accountable, or not, under the law? When is a leader's legitimacy undermined by his or her alliances or conflicts of interest? Who has the power to validate or terminate a leader's rule?* Conflicting answers to questions like these finally boiled over into the spectacle of President Trump's impeachment this past week.

In case you are already worried – or hopeful – I'm not warming up here to either condemn or defend either the president or those who impeached him. But let's not pretend that politics and religion are not complicit in the present drama. Just this week some of us may have learned the name of Mark Galli and the magazine, *Christianity Today*, founded by Billy Graham, of which Galli is editor-in-chief. On Thursday, Galli broke ranks with fellow evangelicals by condemning the president and urging his removal from office. The backlash from the president's stalwart evangelical supporters has been swift and furious. I'm imagining many sermons from evangelical pulpits this morning that will both revile Mark Galli for his political recklessness and also label him as theologically apostate. Politics and religion are forever inseparable in their shared language of and claims about sovereignty and its basis, its aims and its legitimacy.

This present high stakes imbroglio may timely prepare us to consider the gospel writer known as Matthew and how he introduces Jesus in the first chapter of his gospel, and why he introduces Jesus as he does. Matthew's first aim is to convey the legitimate sovereignty of Jesus, and to do so from his very first verse, where, he calls Jesus 'the Messiah' and then 'son of David [and] son of Abraham.' The next sixteen verses are solely comprised of a lineage of forty-two generations. Many who know this genealogy complain that the names are hard to pronounce and the whole thing is boring. For Matthew, this lineage lays a foundation for his entire gospel. He is arguing the rightful place of Jesus the Messiah in the salvation history of Israel and in the sovereign reign of God.

After this genealogy, we come to today's appointed passage. The tone abruptly changes, becomes intensely personal. Here is Matthew's Nativity story, nothing like the more familiar and beloved account in Luke. There is no awe-inspiring Annunciation to Mary, no reassuring visit to Elizabeth her kinswoman, no heavenly host overhead singing the Hallelujah Chorus to

awestruck shepherds. Here in Matthew the story is told from the point of view of Joseph. We see his confusion and moral anguish, and then his faithfulness and courage.

But Joseph is not mainly included here because of his character or because he had a miraculous and life-changing dream. Joseph is featured because he lends credibility to Matthew's case for the sovereignty of Jesus. Notice that the actual birth of Jesus is only mentioned in passing here, after the fact. More important for Matthew is the last line in today's text: "... he named him Jesus." He - Joseph - named him Jesus. What you and I may not know from the text itself is that, according to the custom of the time, a man claimed a child as his own through the act of naming. So Matthew is emphasizing to his original audience that Joseph is the one who named Jesus. And Joseph thereby bestowed on Jesus his own royal lineage.

These arcane facts may seem completely removed from the problems or questions that any of us brought here to worship this morning. They may seem far removed from the machinations of current politics. But in theory, you and I share the conviction of Matthew and the other gospel writers and those from one generation to another through whom you and I have come to believe. In theory, we Christians share the belief that Christ's sovereignty is the only sure foundation on which we can rely, the only reliable compass point by which we seek to navigate every moment and circumstance of our lives, the only reliable standard by which we interpret the world.

An underlying premise of Mark Galli's *Christianity Today* editorial this past week seems to have been that Christians should aspire to see and support in our sovereign earthly leaders an approximation, at least, of the nature of God that is, of course, intrinsic to our proclamation of Christ's sovereignty. Addressing President Trump's evangelical base in particular, he wrote, "*no matter how many hands we win in this political poker game, we are playing with a stacked deck of gross immorality and ethical incompetence.*"

Whether or not you or I think of ourselves as evangelical, whether or not agree with Mark Galli's views, and whatever our politics, I gather we can all see the same or some other sorrowful discrepancies at work, or at war, in our own lives. We say that we believe in and follow Jesus, the Messiah, son of Joseph, son of David, son of Abraham. But our impulses and our fears and our pride or expediency often cause us to bow down to other sovereigns. Before God - before God's sovereign, just and righteous Messiah - we are all impeachable.

In all of this we may find some sanctuary and reassurance in words widely attributed to William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury during some of the most troubling years of World War II. "*When we choose wisely, God reigns,*" Temple said, and "*When we choose foolishly, God reigns.*" Perhaps we can amplify Temple's conviction by saying that when Republicans come to power, God reigns. And when Democrats take control, God reigns. When society rises to the occasion, and people demonstrate the best qualities of civic participation, compassion and justice, God reigns. And when we sink to new lows of deception and revenge - even when we are overwhelmed by the worst manifestations of evil and sin - God still reigns. When we are in robust health, God reigns. And at the hour of our death, God still reigns.

Matthew begins his gospel by naming Jesus as the Messiah, the one who embodies and reveals the very sovereignty of God. Matthew shows the coming of Jesus in the context of a genealogy of forty-two generations. I wonder if Matthew was hoping that his first readers, and eventually you and me, would contemplate how the genealogy of faith continues, where we fit into it, how we have come to know the sovereignty of God in the Messiah, and how we legitimately make it known in our own time and lives. *Amen.*