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## *How is Christ Our King In 2012?*

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**A sermon by the Rev. Theophus "Thee" Smith**  
**Last Sunday of Pentecost**

*May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer (Ps. 9.14). Amen!*

In today's gospel Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, gives Jesus a hard time. He really wants to find out if Jesus is some kind of a King. "Are you the King of the Jews?" he asks (John 18.33). But later in John's gospel his question gets even more intense, because he hears Jews in the crowd outside say,

"We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God."

Now that takes the interrogation to a whole new level! The scripture says that

when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. Pilate therefore said to him, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" (John 19.7-10)

That silence of Jesus has become legendary. The earliest Christians even considered that it was foreseen by the prophet Isaiah, in that famous chapter 53 where it says:

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,  
yet he did not open his mouth;  
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,  
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth (Isaiah 53.7)

But we all know that this silence of the divine is not peculiar to prophesy or to gospel. We are all too familiar with it, so much so that it is our familiar complaint or plaint. There is even a classical phrase to pinpoint it; in Latin it's *deus absconditus*: the "absconded god," or the hidden god who refuses to be seen. In exasperation or disgust the atheists among us charge that God is not just hidden but altogether non-existent! Yet many Jews have been more insistent than that, holding God to account for not being more available.

This insistence on accountability begins in the Book of Job, of course. How we all can relate to passages like these:

"O that I knew where I might find him  
that I might come even to his dwelling!  
If I go forward, he is not there;  
or backward, I cannot perceive him;  
on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him;  
I turn to the right, but I cannot see him." (Job 23.3-5, 8-9)

But not only in ancient literature, in Job and the gospel for today, is God on trial for being silent. More recent is the play by the well-known Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel, called *The Trial of God* (1979). However putting God on trial has become a modern theme, one that is criticized by the popular Christian writer, C.S. Lewis. Instead of God judging us, Lewis criticizes, we prefer to put God in the defendant's box, or put "God in the dock," which is the title of one his collected essays (1970).

In fact, believe it or not there have been actual lawsuits against God, or against God's representatives""the Church, filed in court in the 20th century. Most notable was the 2008 suit of Nebraska State Senator, Ernie Chambers, who sought "a permanent injunction against God's harmful activities." This was actually "an effort to publicize the issue of public access to the court system." But, "the suit was dismissed because God could not be properly notified, not having an address."

The Judge stated, "Given that this court finds that there can never be service effectuated on the named defendant this action will be dismissed with prejudice." The senator, believing God to be singular and all-knowing, responded "The court itself acknowledges the existence of God. A consequence of that acknowledgement is a recognition of God's omniscience . . . Since God knows everything, God has notice of this lawsuit." Chambers filed the lawsuit in response to another lawsuit that he [himself] considers to be frivolous and inappropriate. [[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawsuits\\_against\\_God](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawsuits_against_God)]

In that connection it is interesting that Elie Wiesel directed that his play, *The Trial of God*, "should be performed as a tragic farce" [[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Trial\\_of\\_God](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Trial_of_God)]. And farce is consistent with a certain Jewish temperament in complaining about God's absence. Indeed, one commentator has acknowledged that Jewish jokes about God "tend to be the gentlest in the Jewish tradition," more ironic than aggressive.

My personal favorites are the jokes told by Jewish comedian Woody Allen. You may recall humor like this from one of his films (*Love and Death*),

"If I could just see a miracle. Just one miracle. If I could see a burning bush, or the seas part, or my Uncle Sasha pick up a [pay]check."  
[[www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/2/Humor/What\\_is\\_Jewish\\_Humor/Divine\\_Humor.shtml](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/2/Humor/What_is_Jewish_Humor/Divine_Humor.shtml)]

But I particularly enjoy this comment on the divine silence by Woody Allen:

God is silent. Now if we can only get man to shut up.

Well, here we could wish that, that kind of levity and irony could have been more available to Pontius Pilate in that court scene on that day in today's gospel. At one point in his interrogation Pilate exclaims to Jesus in exasperation, "I am not a Jew, am I?" (John 18.35). Right! How should he know whether or not Jesus could properly be considered a king? But it is in that interval, between Pilate wondering if Jesus is a king, and a little later fearing that he is a "'Son of God,' that a Jewish""or Roman sense of irony might have saved him.

One dictionary describes irony as "a strange, funny, or [else] sad situation in which things happen in the opposite way to what you would expect" (Macmillan Dictionary). And if Pilate, the governor of Judea, had appreciated that aspect of reality he might have been able to anticipate the truth that he otherwise denied. This is the truth that we celebrate today on the Sunday of Christ the King: the truth that God comes to us in unexpected ways as both lordly and lowly, both majestic and accessible, both present and hidden.

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Just a month ago our dean hosted a great talk here by Joyce Rupp. Sister Rupp is a Catholic nun who writes popular books on faith and spirituality. Some of us spent that Saturday with her, organized by our Cathedral Committee on Spiritual Formation""and with thanks to Canon Knowlton, we enjoyed her visit among us. The next day on Sunday morning she spoke at the Dean's Forum where she told the following story.

It's a story about Clark Strand, who actually attended the Lovett School here in Atlanta. Strand went on to study philosophy and religion in Sewanee at the University of the South. He eventually became a teacher of Zen Buddhism and the first senior editor of the most influential Buddhist magazine in the U.S., called *Tricycle*.

But on that Sunday here at the Cathedral, Joyce Rupp introduced him to us simply as a man who grew up here in the South with strong Christian influences. [This talk on October 28, 2012, is also available [here](#).] Then he left the Christianity of his background because, in her words, it no longer "fit for him, and his idea of God didn't work anymore." Later, after becoming a self-described "Zen master," he had the following experience coming home on a plane one day with his wife and two children. He writes about it in an article that you can find on the internet, called "A Zen Master's Guide to the Bible." It is after this experience that he returned to Christianity, and even now teaches on Buddhism and Christianity.

Strand and his family had just taken off from Memphis when their plane filled with smoke. As the passengers and crew prepared for emergency landing, he had this conversation with his six year-old daughter.

"Daddy," she asked, reaching across the aisle to hold his hand,

"Daddy, are we going to die?"

Telling this story later, Strand says he suddenly remembered that young children can actually pray to their parents at times like that. Perhaps anticipating her need, and wanting to prepare himself, he turned inward to find a response. "I closed my eyes," he writes, "took a deep breath, and asked the same question myself, listening to see if anyone would reply. And, indeed, I did hear a voice. Speaking in a whisper, with imperturbable calmness, it said four simple words directly into my ear.

"I don't think so."

Well, Christian friends, I don't know about you; but when I first heard those words my immediate impulse was to laugh"" or to snort! What do you mean, I wanted to respond, ""You don't think so! What kind of a God-answer is that? Or I might as easily have shouted, ""What kind of a farce is that!"

Even now it reminds me of more Jewish humor you get from Woody Allen. "If only God would give me some sign," he begins one of his jokes with that typical, all-too-human complaint:

If only God would give me some sign. If He would just speak to me once, anything, one sentence, two words. If He would just cough.

Well, ""there he goes again!""going from the sublime to the ridiculous; that's often what makes us laugh. Another variation is when he says:

If only God would give me some clear sign . . . Like making a large deposit in my name at a Swiss bank.

But my favorite is this slightly sacrilegious one. He says:

If it turns out that there is a God, I don't think that he's evil. The worst you can say about him is that basically he's an under-achiever.

Well I warned you, it's a little sacrilegious, yes, but that's often our attitude, isn't it? ""God is our under-achiever,' if we're expecting reality to operate the way we want it to! But in Clark Strand's experience on that airplane that day something shifted for him. The miracle was that he was able to hear in those words a divine reality that is both lordly and lowly, both majestic and accessible, both hidden and present. "Bizarre as those words were," he writes,

Bizarre as those words were, coming from the one Being in all the universe who ought to have been able to answer that question with yes or no, they calmed me down a bit, and I was actually able to relax. So I repeated them to my daughter, who passed them along to my wife . . . who reached over to hold hands with my son, Jonah, who, like his biblical namesake in the bottom of the ship . . . remained blissfully asleep throughout the whole ordeal.

And ten minutes later, we were safely back on the ground.

Then Strand goes on to reflect further:

"I don't think so" wasn't an answer you'd have gotten from the God I grew up with down South "" the one with an opinion on everything political and a punishment for every liberal act. That God was certain about everything, especially when it came to homosexuals, feminists, Hindus, and the Jews.

And then he said, somewhat harshly:

He'd have killed a planeload of ordinary sinners to get one certified Christ-killer, or saved us all to his greater glory on a whim.

And then he admits,

I'd run as far away from that God as I could get, which turned out to be a Buddhist monastery, and even that sometimes felt too close. But a God who admitted calmly "" serenely, even "" that he didn't know for certain whether my family and I were going to die? That was another matter entirely. It gave me the feeling that we would be taken care of either way; that, in fact, we couldn't lose as long as we surrendered fully to whatever came next. If God could relax enough to stay open to what the next moment would bring "" whether it brought the softest of airplane touchdowns or a ball of fiery shrapnel and oily smoke "" then, God-willing, so could I.

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Christian friends, today is Christ the King Sunday. It's also the last Sunday of Pentecost""the last Sunday of this church year, 2012, and the last Sunday before Advent; the beginning of a new year in our Christian calendar. Once again, next Sunday will bring us to ""Advent,' a new season to prepare us for the arrival of the Christ child at Christmas time. But notice: the back-to-front alignment of these two events: ending one church year with Christ-the-King, and beginning the next in preparation for the coming Christ-child.

That alignment puts a check on the kind of celebration we may observe on this festival day of Christ the King. Although our scriptures are appropriately exalting and magnifying, nonetheless the One they exalt and magnify is a person who entered the world as a small and vulnerable infant, and who learned what it means to be needy and dependent; just like the rest of us.

In Clark Strand's testimony, he is ""that one Being in all the universe who ought to be able to answer our questions with "yes" or "no,"" but who instead seems to be not urgent, or compulsive about doing so. Christ the "King of the Universe""that's the name our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers are celebrating this Sunday. And to that I say, "Yes!" But also Christ the humble peasant child, who grows up to endure the worst kinds of treatment that can happen to any of us, and who therefore becomes for us a different kind of King.

This is a king, who does ""not count equality with God as something to be exploited,' as St. Paul quotes that ancient Christ hymn in Philippians chapter 2: "Not counting equality with God as something to exploited,"

[He] emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death""  
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him . . . (Philippians 2.7-9)

But therefore, we might also say on this Christ the King Sunday, that he became for us a King who does not ""lord it over' us, or dominate us, but who draws us into his kingdom by coaching and coaxing us""even if that coaching involves learning how to suffer and travail as he learned in order to attain his kingship.

"So you are a king?" Pilate asked Jesus on that day in court.

And Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." (John 18.36-37)

May we here today also listen for that voice, that voice that testifies to the truth of a kingdom that is both lordly and lowly, both majestic and accessible, both hidden and present. And may we be worthy citizens of such a kingdom; a kingdom where, as we pray in our Collect: [all] "peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule""most *gracious* rule!

And now:

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom . . . serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (Revelation 1:5-6)