

November 23, 2025  
Colossians 1:11-20

Christ the King  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## **“And He Shall Reign Forever”**

“He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.”

During my university years, I worshiped at Jerusalem Lutheran Church in Schwenksville, Pennsylvania. This congregation played a critical role in my process of entering seminary and serving as a pastor; even though it was a six-mile drive from campus, I would get up every Sunday and travel to the church where from the beginning I was warmly welcomed and made to feel included in its worship life and ministry. During my four years at Jerusalem I sang in the church choir, served as a lector in worship, and taught Sunday school for three years. I also found one of my most important mentors in Pastor Ken Ensminger, who became one of my role models in ministry and helped guide me through the process of applying the seminary and becoming a candidate for ordination in my home synod. I have many fond memories of my years at Jerusalem, including one Sunday when I was looking at their portraits of pastors who served the congregation. As I was perusing the photos and looking at how long they had served, I came upon the portrait of Pastor Karl Schmidt and noticed that he had served as pastor of Jerusalem for fifty years, a tenure of which I had never heard before. When I commented on how extraordinary this was to one of the members of the congregation, they agreed that he had been a faithful pastor for many decades; but then they noted “but like all people, even Pastor Schmidt had to leave us one day. Nobody can serve as pastor forever.”

It is indeed true that no one can serve as a pastor or in any capacity forever, although when someone’s tenure is as long as Pastor Schmidt’s we may assume that they will be with us forever. This is true of many people with whom we have shared life or who have served in important capacities for us; it may be a doctor who has served the community for decades, or a high school teacher who had generations of the same family in their classroom. It might be a long-standing public official, or a coach who has guided their team to numerous championships. The seventy-year reign of the late Queen Elizabeth II led to many of her subjects believing that she would reign on the throne forever, and the news of her death came as a shock. When someone has been in our lives for a long time, the end of their time of service can be an unsettling moment that causes us to question what will come next or how might

we live without them in our lives. As hard as it may be for us to accept, it is true that while “*changes aren’t permanent, change is.*” (Neil Peart).

The people of Israel had experienced numerous changes throughout their generations, including changes in those who served them as kings. After the reigns of the great kings David and Solomon, each of whom served the nation for many years, the people were plunged into a period of division and uncertainty. Not only was the united kingdom divided into two separate realms, but the kings who served both were often incompetent and their reigns short-lived. The people who were used to stability in those who served them were beginning to wonder if there would be a time when they would have a ruler on whom they could depend, one who would serve as a faithful guide for his people and provide them with the resources and protection they needed to both survive and thrive. This is the message that the prophet Jeremiah brings to a people yearning for one who would reign among them – if not forever, then for a period that would bring back the confidence they enjoyed under the great kings of the united Israel. The prophet makes clear that the words he is proclaiming to the people of Judah are not his own but are the words of God that he has been called to share with them: “*Therefore, thus says the LORD, the God of Israel ...*” (Jeremiah 23:2). The message of God that the prophets share is directed at the kings, who were often referred to as the “*shepherds who shepherd my people,*” using a common image of one who is charged to care for a flock that belongs to someone else, in this case the people who are God’s. The message that Jeremiah shares with these shepherd/kings is one of harsh judgment: “*Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture, says the LORD ... It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them.*” (23:1-2). God’s message to them is that because they have not been faithful stewards of what God has entrusted to them, they will be judged and relieved of this trust: “*So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD.*” But instead of appointing other human shepherd/kings, the Lord declares that there will be a new way in which his people shall be led:

- “Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD.” – 23:3-4.

The prophet proclaims the good news that is at the heart of the most beloved of psalms, that “*the LORD is my shepherd,*” and unlike human shepherd/kings whose reigns are temporal and unreliable, the Lord will shepherd God’s people forever and

can always be trusted to lead them, guide them, accompany them through life's darkest valleys, and assure them that *"surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."* (Psalm 23:5-6).

- "As little as a natural sheep can help itself in even the slightest degree but must simply depend on its shepherd for all benefits, just so little – and much less – can a man govern himself and find comfort, help, and counsel in himself in all things that pertain to his salvation. He must depend on God, his Shepherd, for all of that. And God is a thousand times more willing and ready to do everything that is to be done for His sheep that is any faithful human shepherd." – Martin Luther.

The prophet declares that not only is the Lord taking on the role of a shepherd who is absolutely trustworthy and reliable but goes on to proclaim the coming of another shepherd who will be unlike any that the people have experienced. Being with the confident proclamation that *"the days are surely coming, says the LORD,"* the prophet speaks of the coming of a new leader who will guide his people not only in their daily lives but will lead them in justice and righteousness:

- "The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel shall live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'" – 23:5-6.

The prophetic promise of a righteous shepherd/king who would be unlike any of the previous rulers of God's people is fulfilled in the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, who was proclaimed as *"the Messiah, the Son of the living God."* (Matthew 16:16). "Messiah" means "anointed one," the manner in which the kings of Israel were set apart as rulers (anointing is still an important part of the coronation of the monarchs of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth, including the recent coronation of King Charles III). As the anointed one of God ("Christ" is the Greek equivalent of "Messiah"), Jesus is identified as the one who comes to reign over God's people and to inaugurate the Kingdom of God that shall endure forever. Jesus Christ also identifies himself as a shepherd in the same way that the Lord declares that God will reign as the people's good and faithful ruler:

- "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep ... I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the

Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.” – John 10:11-15.

The Good Shepherd’s promise of laying down his life for his sheep is fulfilled when Jesus is crucified, the act through which he fulfills God’s redemptive promise to liberate God’s people from *“sin, death, and the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death.”* (*Small Catechism*). But Jesus’ act of fulfilling God’s Will for God’s shepherd/king did not meet the expectations of many people in his time, including those who gathered to witness his crucifixion. In his fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy of one who was *“despised and rejected by others, a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account* (Isaiah 53:3), Jesus is taunted by the crowds who scoff at him and taunt him to prove that he truly is the Messiah, the anointed king:

- “And the people stood by watching, but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!’ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, ‘if you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’” – Luke 23:35-37.

Jesus could have used his divine power to save himself from death and come down from the Cross; but then he would not have fulfilled God’s Will to be the Messiah who truly saves God’s people from all enemies, including death. But because he chooses to be faithful to God’s calling, he is the one who *“humbled himself and became to the point of death – even death on a cross”* (Philippians 2:8). It is through this act of humility that Christ becomes the true shepherd/king who is exalted by God, so that *“at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”* (2:10-11). He is the true King who redeems God’s people through his death and resurrection *“in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true.”* (*Small Catechism*). Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the true shepherd/king who leads his people to the springs of the water of life, is the fulfillment of the Word of the Lord spoken through Isaiah that *“I am God, and there is no other ... To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.”* (Isaiah 45:22-23).

- “Christ is now, in his human nature, exalted to divine glory and enthroned as Lord of the universe. The reversal from humiliation to exaltation evokes the

fourth servant song, where God foretells that his suffering servant shall ‘be exalted and glorified exceedingly’ (Isaiah 52:13). The humiliated one is glorified!” – Dennis Hamm.

The church’s earliest proclamation of Jesus as Christ is that he is “*true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the virgin Mary*” (*Small Catechism*). The Gospel of John identifies him as the Incarnate Word who “*was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being*” (John 1:2-3), the one who has been revealed to us as “*the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth.*” (1:14). He is the one of whom the angel sings in Revelation: “*the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever*” (Revelation 11:15) and who the Church continues to confess as the one who “*will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end*” (Nicene Creed).

- “The Christ in whom we hope we have known among us. The God in whom we trust has the heart of the Jesus who forgave sinners who sinned repeatedly, who fed the hungry until they were full, who touched sinners and embraced enemies and listened to women. This is a God who sees the heart and knows its directions.” – Joan Chittister.

One of the ways in which early Christians celebrated the Christ who is the eternal God and who reigns among God’s people forever is through a hymn that Paul quotes in his letter to the Colossians that is sometimes known as the “Cosmic Christ Hymn,” whose lyrics put “*the personal experience of salvation into the larger, cosmic story of the eternal Son, as the firstborn of the new creation.*” (Hamm). The hymn begins by describing Christ as “*the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation*” (1:15). As the “image” (*eikon*) of the invisible God, Paul turns to focus on the Incarnate Son; this means that to look upon Jesus of Nazareth is to see the face of the eternal, invisible God. As first born, he is heir to the entire universe. Christ is the one who makes the invisible God visible, the “*manifestation of the divine in the world of humans*” (Albert T. Lincoln). Christ is both sovereign and first within creation and the divine agent of creation, “*for in him all things in heaven and on earth are created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him*” (1:16). It is the Lord Jesus Christ who is the mediator through whom God the Father created and sustains all things, including ourselves. The Son is also the one who continues to give order to the universe and uphold all things in existence: “*He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together*” (1:17). The one who helped bring

all things into being is also the one who continues to sustain the whole creation and prevent its disintegration into chaos. Unlike human leaders whose time of leadership will eventually end no matter how long they serve, because Christ is the eternal Son of God his leadership is also eternal: *“He is the head of the body, the Church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.”* (1:18). The praise of Christ’s supremacy over the church as his body matches the earlier praise of his supremacy of the realm of creation. The reference to Christ as “head” (*kephale*) denotes Christ’s rule or authority over the church as his body, a phrase often used in the Old Testament in referring to a ruler or leader:

- “So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them; and Jephthah spoke all the words before the LORD at Mizpah.” – Judges 11:11.
- “You delivered me from the strife with the peoples; you kept me as the head of the nations; people whom I had not known served me.” – 2 Samuel 22:44).

As the “firstborn from the dead,” Christ is to be ranked supreme in the new creation on account of his temporal primacy in his resurrection from the dead. Christ’s resurrection makes him the firstborn among many brothers and sisters and the first fruits of those who have died:

- “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family.” – Romans 8:29.
- “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.” – 1 Corinthians 15:20.

If Christ has supremacy in the realm of the new creation through his resurrection, then God’s undisputed purpose must be that Christ should have pre-eminence in everything, including his Church.

- “God-is-with-us is a close God, a God whom we call our refuge, our stronghold, our wisdom, and, even more intimately, our helper, our shepherd, our love. We will never really know God as a compassionate God if we do not understand with our heart and mind that God came and lived among us and with us.” – Henri Nouwen.

We give thanks for faithful leaders and servants like Queen Elizabeth, Pastor Schmidt, and others whose faithful and steadfast service has been a blessing to

countless people. While all who serve God's people will only serve for a limited time, because Christ is the head of the Church, we have the confidence that our eternal Lord and Saviour is with us always, "*and he shall reign for ever and ever. Hallelujah!*"

Amen.