

The King

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He lived long ago in a distant land and died far too young. He had a rag-tag band of followers when he was alive and many people follow him to this very day. Some were drawn to his charisma and charm and he changed the way we view the world. Some still make pilgrimages to the place of his birth and the place of his death as they are considered holy sites. And his words, considered timeless, have been so ingrained into our culture that few of us can remember a time when we did not know them.

You might think that because it is Sunday morning, because we are in a church, because I am standing in his pulpit today, that I am speaking of Jesus, the Son of God. But I am not. I am not speaking of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, but that other King, known as the King of Rock and Roll or quite simply “The King.” Elvis. Born in a strange and distant land we call The South, dead at the age of 42, he led a revolution in the world of music and his devotees remain strong and faithful and loyal to this very day.

Elvis Aaron Presley was born in Tupelo, Mississippi in 1935. His family was faithful in their worship attendance in the local Assembly of God Church and much of his early life was shaped not only by the church but by the music, the Gospel music, of the church. He went on to serve in the military, marry and become a father and I am sure you know the rest of the sordid details of his life. He made his own mark on the world of movies and music as he led a complicated life of sex and drugs and rock and roll. This past Friday marked the 30th anniversary of his death and the reports from Graceland indicated that thousands of faithful followers of the King held a candlelight vigil on the hot asphalt driveway of his estate to pay their respects and to show their continued devotion.

My own knowledge of Elvis is limited to a few movies and a few songs, and the countless novelty items that bear his likeness – items such as magnets and lunchboxes and cardboard cut-outs. Did you know that there is even a cookbook of Elvis’ favorite food called “Are You Hungry Tonight” and it includes the recipes for everything from fried peanut butter and banana sandwiches to an exact replica of the 6 tier cake served at his wedding reception?

My exposure to Elvis was limited as I grew up the eldest child of parents whose taste ran more along the lines of Andy Williams, Johnny Mathis and Perry Como. The closest we ever came to rock and roll was listening to an album of Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass. Elvis songs never made it onto the turntable of my childhood home. Perhaps my limited exposure to him is why I am fascinated by the fascination with Elvis and during this anniversary week watched as the news and television was filled with images of him – of movie marathons and interviews, clips of concerts and performances. And people, young and old and from every corner of the world were interviewed at Graceland, talking about their great love for the King, how he changed their lives, and how they could not

imagine being anywhere else to mark this 30th anniversary. There are those even in the church for whom Jesus may be Lord but Elvis will always be King.

Whether you know a great deal of trivia about Elvis or very little, whether you are fan or not, the truth of the matter is that his way of making music changed the way all music would be made forever. He was a pioneer who influenced those around him and all the generations that would follow. Type the word “Elvis” as a Google search and you will find almost 52 million entries. I nervously typed the word “Jesus” into another Google search and you may be relieved to know that our King has nearly triple that amount, with 146 million entries.

In 1993 the United States Post Office issued a commemorative stamp in honor of Elvis and a debate ensued over which image of Elvis to put on the stamp. Should the post office use the image of the young Elvis or the old Elvis on the stamp? Some were less kind and called it the choice between the skinny Elvis and the fat Elvis. It was as if, in a sense, there were 2 different Elvis’ and we were being forced to pick which one to honor. The young Elvis image won out and made its way onto the 29 cent stamp. But both images depicted Elvis. He was indeed at one time young, and not so young. He was indeed thinner and healthier, and he was at a later time heavier and more bloated from what we now know were years of drug and alcohol addiction. And yet, there was just one Elvis no matter what picture of him comes to mind when we say his name.

In many ways, we each shape Jesus into the image that suits our needs and find ourselves startled when another voice, another image of Jesus finds its way to us. I suppose that is what is so disturbing about the Gospel text today. Who among us thinks of Jesus as the great divider of families? The one who seeks not peace but division? The one who brings fire and condemnation to the earth? Is it not as if there exists for us two Jesus’? And do we not sometimes act as if we get to pick, to choose, to debate which Jesus we will get – not unlike the debate about which image of Elvis went on the stamp? Where is the Jesus who brings peace and joy and harmony? Where in today’s Gospel text is the Jesus who healed the blind, gave food to the hungry, made the lame to walk, calmed the sea and raised the dead to new life? Where is the Jesus who offered a place in paradise to the thief who repented?

The truth is that it is one and the same. The very same Jesus who brought healing and wholeness to those in need spoke these words in the Gospel of Luke. He said “Do you think that I have come to bring peace on the earth? No, I tell you but rather division.” The sense of urgency Jesus had about proclaiming that the Kingdom of God was near meant that families could and would be divided for choosing the kingdom of God was more important than allegiance to one’s own blood family. It was shocking news then. It is still shocking news to us now. And yet there is division all around us. In many of our own families, in our places of work, in our own Episcopal Church and in the nations of the world. None of us need look very far to find that division is quite commonplace. The word Jesus proclaimed, the word we hear today comes with a sense of urgency. That is what Luke reminds us of, even on these lazy summer Sundays. There is an urgency to proclaiming the Good News of God in Jesus Christ even in the midst of that which

divides us. Maybe more so because there is so much that threatens to divide us, this day as always.

The truth is there is really just one King. The King of Glory and the King of Peace. There is one Lord, one faith, one Baptism and one Jesus. One man whose life and death and rising from the dead would change the world forever. And he who welcomed little children also overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple and is the same one who longs to know each of us this day. The Jesus we are invited to know is not a one-dimensional cultural icon, stamped onto the side of a lunchbox, but a flesh and blood person whose greatest gift to us was not only in giving his life for us but for showing us how to live this one life of ours, day by day. And he wants us to be ourselves, flaws and all. He is not interested in our Sunday selves, all washed up and shining, but our everyday, ordinary, wounded and yet amazing, selves. He wants to share in our burdens and our joys. He wants to comfort us when we find ourselves brokenhearted, and to call us forth in service of the Good News we share.

Elvis may have left the building, but Jesus is in this house, and in the words we hear, and the prayers we offer and the bread and wine we will share. And he is in the hearts of those who seek to pattern their lives after his. And nothing can separate us from that love. Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor death, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, the one true King.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.