

# **Incarnation: The King Is Not Elvis**

**Micah 5:2-5  
Luke 1:26-33**

*Jesus was born a king.*

A sermon preached by  
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When you're about to have a baby, sometimes choosing the baby's names is the hardest task of all. I remember before my first son was born almost 40 years ago, we bought a book of baby names to we could consider all the choices before us. Now, of course, expectant parents can find names on the internet in a few seconds. In 2023, the most popular girl names for babies born in the United States are Olivia, Emma, and Amelia, continuing a trend from 2022. But apparently there was an upset in the boys' names. Liam, which had been the most popular boy's name since 2019, was eclipsed by Noah, which had been number two. Oliver stayed in place at number 3.

Of course, the popularity of different names changes over time. In 2000, the year Abby was born, the most popular girl names were Emily, Hannah, and Madison. The boy names popular in 2000 were Jacob, Michael, and Matthew. If you go all the way back to 1960, American girls were named Mary, Susan, and Linda, and boys were named David, Michael, and James. A hundred years ago, Mary was still the most popular girl's name, but John was number one for boys.<sup>1</sup> Liam was not on the radar.

I don't think Mary and Joseph got to pick the baby names for Jesus. They were given to them by an angel. I guess that's better than consulting a website. Nevertheless, each of the names for the baby born of God was carefully chosen. Each name conveyed some aspect of the fact that this baby, born in Bethlehem of a human mother, had a divine Father. Christianity is the only world religion that makes this claim, that in Jesus, God took on flesh and lived as a human being. This is what we mean by incarnation, which is the theme word for our Advent series this year.<sup>2</sup> After 2,000 years, maybe we have become used to the idea. But in the early years of the church, the incarnation was a scandal, an outrageous assertion, a crazy idea—that God would become human. Each of the baby names of Jesus was an attempt to explain what the idea of the incarnation meant. Over the next five weeks, we will deal with four of them: King, Savior, Emmanuel, and Light of the World.

We are actually jumping the gun on Advent this year, because the fourth Sunday of Advent is Christmas Eve, and the week before that is the choir's program of Lessons and

Carols. So the only way I could get all four names in was to start a week early. Normally the last Sunday of the Christian year, just before Advent starts the cycle again, is called Christ the King Sunday. And the first name of the baby Jesus is “King.” So I took that as a sign that we could start Advent early this year.

Who is the King? A few years ago on the “Family Feud” game show, host Steve Harvey asked the contestants to guess how 100 people would respond to this question, “When someone mentions ‘the King,’ to whom might he or she be referring?” Out of 100 respondents, here the four top answers:

81 people said “Elvis Presley.”

7 people said “God or Jesus.”

3 people said “Martin Luther King, Jr.”

2 people said “The Burger King.”<sup>3</sup>

So let me clear up any confusion this morning. We are not talking about Elvis. He was the King of Rock and Roll. But the King of the world, the King of the universe, the King for all time, is Jesus Christ.

The idea of a King over God’s people goes back to the Old Testament. It was many years before the Hebrews had a king. They only really became a nation as slaves in Egypt. Then they had Moses to lead them out of slavery. Then they had a series of judges to lead them against their enemies. But the first king didn’t come along until the people demanded it of the prophet Samuel. Every surrounding nation had a king; Israel wanted one, too. So God relented, and Samuel anointed Saul as the first King of Israel.

The king was referred to as *mashiach*, or Messiah. Messiah means “anointed one,” because that’s what they did to a new king. Anointing with a mixture of oil and spices started back in the days of the tabernacle. In the wilderness, they anointed the parts of the tent of meeting—the altar, the lamps, the utensils—everything used in the worship of God was to be set apart and made holy by anointing. When they got a king who was representing God, they anointed him to set the king apart and make him holy. Later on in the Christian tradition, anointing was done in conjunction with baptism and confirmation, and also in the prayers for sick and dying people. The Letter of James says, “*Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up, and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.*”<sup>4</sup>

Some kings are still anointed today. Back in May, England got a new king, as Charles III received his crown. The world watched all the pomp and pageantry that accompanied the coronation. The one thing the world did not see was the holiest moment in the service of coronation. The Archbishop of Canterbury, the head of the Church of England, anointed Charles with holy oil on the head, chest, and hands to be the King of England. But in keeping with tradition, screens were set up around the anointing so it was done in secrecy. It was the only part of the service that was not broadcast to the world.

If you ask a Jew who he or she thought of when you said “the King,” the response probably wouldn’t be Elvis. It would be David. The first king of Israel, Saul, was a disaster. But David was the second, and he did what a Messiah was supposed to do. He expanded the territory and made the nation rich and powerful. He also had some spectacular failures. But God was pleased with David, elsewhere described as “a man after God’s own heart,”<sup>5</sup> and so God made a covenant with David to establish a Davidic dynasty

forever: *“Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.”*<sup>6</sup> Israel and Judah split into two kingdoms after David’s son Solomon, but both kingdoms continued to have kings for centuries, until they were conquered and destroyed by foreign powers. But the idea of a king like David, a Messiah, was never extinguished. He was the one they hoped for.

When the Jews were in exile in Babylon after the last king was destroyed, they began to hope for a new king to rule over God’s people. They began to hope for a new Messiah. They prophets looked for the day when the king would come. Micah said, *“But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.”*<sup>7</sup> Isaiah expressed the messianic hope in the familiar words we read every Christmas: *“For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders, and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”*<sup>8</sup>

By the time of Jesus, the hope for the coming of a new Messiah, a new King of Israel, was at fever pitch. The Romans were in oppressive control of Palestine; the Herods were puppet kings of Rome; the religious leaders were corrupt collaborators with the oppressors. It was time. So God sent his angel to a young girl in Galilee and made this announcement: *“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”*<sup>9</sup>

When the baby was born, Magi came from the east to Jerusalem, asking, *“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage.”*<sup>10</sup> When they found the baby, they offered him gifts befitting a king, and they worshipped him.

So Jesus fulfilled four centuries of longing and hoping and praying for a king like David who would come and establish his kingdom. Or did he? By David’s standards, Jesus wasn’t much of a king. He had no army. He did not claim any political territory. He certainly didn’t have a palace and a court and wives and servants. What kind of a king was this?

From the very beginning, Jesus was a different kind of king. He was not born into wealth or luxury or power. He came down from heaven into a stable in a family of peasants. The kingdom he talked about had little to do with politics. He told people that they should love the Lord their God and their neighbor as themselves. He taught that they should do unto others as they would have done to them. His kingdom did not focus on the powerful in the center of society. He reached out to the margins, to include those who had been ignored and left out—the poor, the sick, the women, the foreigners.

The anointing of Jesus was different, too. In the four Gospels, it is told in three slightly different ways.<sup>11</sup> But in all three, Jesus is anointed not by the high priest as the kings of old were. He was anointed by a woman, and not on his head, but on his feet. It raised concerns among the disciples because this expensive ointment was wasted. Jesus compared it to the anointing that was done before burial, because he knew what was coming.

The coronation of Jesus didn’t come until the end of his life. He was arrested, interrogated, and beaten. Then the Roman soldiers, whom he had told his followers to

love, made him a crown of thorns and pressed it into the flesh of his head. As he hung on the cross, dying from crucifixion, they put a sign on his cross that said, “The King of the Jews.”

That was the end of his life, but that was not the end of his Kingdom. Three days later, the tomb that held Jesus was thrown open, and Jesus was resurrected from the dead. He appeared to the women who loved him, the disciples who had betrayed him, to many other people over the course of 40 days. He commissioned his disciples to continue his teaching and his work. They began on the day of Pentecost, filled with the Holy Spirit, to take the good news about Jesus to the ends of the earth. And for two thousand years, every time a new disciple is baptized into the faith, the Kingdom of Jesus is expanded even more.

But even that was not the end. With the ancient church, we continue to believe in the return and reign of Jesus over all the earth. In the poetic imagery of the Book of Revelation, we see the coming of the Son of Man: “*Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. So it is to be. Amen.*”<sup>12</sup> Handel used the words of Revelation for the “Hallelujah Chorus”: “*The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever. King of kings and Lord of lords.*”<sup>13</sup>

United Methodists believe in the Second Coming of Christ, when Jesus will return to establish his kingdom forever. This belief is part of the historic creeds of the church. It’s in our Articles of Religion. John Wesley preached about it. But like John Wesley, we don’t dwell on it. We don’t try to figure out the timetable of the end times, because Jesus himself didn’t. As our United Methodist website says, “Our focus is less on the second coming of Christ, and more on living out the teachings of his first coming.”<sup>14</sup> It’s a big enough job to love God and love our neighbor, to treat others as we would be treated, and to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Still, we can live faithfully today with the firm assurance that Jesus is our King, and Jesus will be King forever.

Jesus is a different kind of king—different in his teaching, his anointing, his coronation, and his kingdom. He is different because he wants a different sort of relationship with us. Most kings want subjects, servants, and slaves. Jesus said, “*I come not to be served, but to serve.*”<sup>15</sup> Jesus said, “*I do not call you servants any longer, ... I have called you friends.*”<sup>16</sup> Our king wants to know us personally.

John Kass, a columnist for the Chicago Tribune, wrote about a waiter named Bouch who works at a tavern in Chicago. Bouch is from Morocco, and he decided to write to the King of his homeland. The King, Mohammed VI, is immensely popular because he often interacts with his subjects in public. He has freed political prisoners; he helps the poor and disabled. When Bouch wrote to him from Chicago, King Mohammed VI, true to nature, wrote back. Bouch proudly displayed multiple personal letters from his King.

John Kass, the columnist, wrote, “How many guys hauling beer and burgers in a Chicago tavern have a correspondence going with a royal monarch?” The columnist talked to a Moroccan diplomat in Chicago and was told that it isn’t unusual for the King to write personal letters to his subjects abroad. “It happens a lot,” the official said. “He loves his [people].”<sup>17</sup>

That’s the bottom line on our King, too. He loves us. He wants to be in touch with us. He showed us how to live and serve and die. He will be our King forever and ever. He will never be elected to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, but he is the best King we could hope for—better than Elvis, this baby Jesus.

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- <sup>1</sup> <https://www.babycenter.com/baby-names/most-popular/top-baby-names-2023>. Searchable by year.
- <sup>2</sup> For this series, I will be following the book by Adam Hamilton, *Incarnation: Rediscovering the Significance of Christmas* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2020).
- <sup>3</sup> James Gilmore, "We Have No King but Elvis," White Horse Inn blog, September 14, 2012.
- <sup>4</sup> James 5:14-15.
- <sup>5</sup> I Samuel 13:14, Acts 13:22.
- <sup>6</sup> 2 Samuel 7:16.
- <sup>7</sup> Micah 5:2.
- <sup>8</sup> Isaiah 9:6.
- <sup>9</sup> Luke 1:30-33.
- <sup>10</sup> Matthew 2:2.
- <sup>11</sup> Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, Luke 8:36-48. John 12:1-8.
- <sup>12</sup> Revelation 1:7.
- <sup>13</sup> Revelation 11:15, 19:16.
- <sup>14</sup> <https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-what-does-the-united-methodist-church-teach-about-the-second-coming>.
- <sup>15</sup> Mark 10:45.
- <sup>16</sup> John 15:15.
- <sup>17</sup> John Kass, "Waiter's Pen Pal Just a Cool Guy Who Runs a Country," *Chicago Tribune*, July 23, 2001.