

I will tell you a story. It is a story of your childhood—of three brothers goats gruff and a troll and in the end perhaps it will be a story about our world and our lives, a story about kings and kingdoms too. And so it begins with a troll who lives beneath a bridge. As children, we never ask how the troll came to live there or why trolls are mean. We simply presume it is where trolls live, how trolls are. Maybe there is more to this story; about a world that pushes difference into hiding places; that tells us that to stand up for ourselves means we need to take by force bridges and green pastures.

But never mind that now, for trip-trapping, trip-trapping, here comes a billy-goat gruff, the smallest of the brothers; unsuspecting that a bridge that leads to the pasture and to life would be a bridge unpassable to the other side. The troll hoarding for himself the bridge, the pasture—a bully who pretends himself to be king over a bridge and a pasture; a king who will not let the young goat pass, but threatens to devour him right where he stands. The young goat, though, has been taught his own stories of the world and self-survival. Without thought for the life of his older brother he now offers him up for the sake of his own survival. “My brother is larger and tastier,” he says, and thereby escapes with his own life. The story continues, the second brother also offers up yet another brother larger and tastier; neither one the least bit concerned, it seems, they have bartered the life of their brother to save their own ram’s flesh and curly horn.

But never mind that now, for isn’t that the way of the world to quickly offer up others in order to preserve ourselves; and besides, here comes the third brother, the largest billy goat gruff—tromp-tromping, tromp-tromping across the bridge. And once

again the troll stands to block the way, to say this is my bridge and my green pasture in a world where there are not enough pastures for everyone. But he has met his match. And the big billy goat gruff has learned the story well, that if you want to get to the green pasture on the other side, then you just have to take it by force; even if that means knocking off the guy who stands in your way. And so that is exactly what he does. Head down and charging, he lunges at the troll, ramming him headlong and plummeting into the raging waters below. And now, trip-trapping, trip-trapping, tromp-tromping; three brothers goats gruff take the bridge, the green pasture, the life deemed rightfully theirs at the expense of one mean and nasty little troll. One troll who once was king over green pasture and bridge, but now is king no more.

But never mind that now, because it is the way of the world. And kings, if they are not careful will always be knocked off by stronger and larger kings to replace them; bullies and kings who come to take by force and to occupy the bridges and green pastures of a world in which we are told there are never enough green pastures to share. And these—these are the stories with which we rock our children to sleep; the stories that shape the generations of the kings and queens and princesses to come.

But there is another story to tell. Another that has been told. An ancient story from long before there ever were kings. Of God and God's people. A shepherding God who journeyed with them; who fed them day by day both in times of wilderness and in times of lush green pastures. In times of flood and in times of drought. In times of hunger and times of thirst. A God whose promise was that there would always be

enough, that everyone would find place; that there would always be green pastures for all on the other side. And there was. But the people began to look outward. They saw other nations with their kings. Kings like hoarding trolls amassing lands and bridges, riches and power. Strong kings with large horns like battering rams; knocking off whoever stood in their way; fearful kings threatening to devour the small and weak and unsuspecting. And God's people said, "We want kings just like that, God."

But God said, "No! The kings will take your bridges and block the way to the green pastures I have given you. And you will know hunger and thirst as you have never known it. They will take your lands, and your children. They will make you slaves. You will be devoured. But I am the Lord your shepherding God. I will lead you to green pastures; give you everything you need. But the people insist. So God gives them kings. And generation after generation there are wars and famine. King after king; bullies and kings take by force, occupy and hoard, bridges and green pastures of a world in which we are told there are never enough green pastures to share.

Yet in a world of stories full of devouring trolls and battering rams and kings and queens raised on fairy tales and nursery rhymes of a world of hoarding, and taking by force, and never enough—a world of everyday kings and queens that often look a lot like you and me—into this world God still promised. God promised, "I will give you a King after my own heart, a Messiah, a Shepherd, my Son—who will feed you and heal you, and lead you to green pastures and there will be room and green grass and still waters for all." And the people waited. And looked and hoped and watched. And on a

hillside, and in the streets, and with the poor, and the hungry, and the sick, and with the ones sometimes named the trolls of society; there he was—the promised king.

Only he didn't look much like a king. No crown. No royal robes. No palace. No throne. But just like the shepherding God of old, he began to feed them day by day, with the miracle of bread broken and shared. And he healed the sick. And touched the leper. And blessed the poor. And preached Good News. And taught them about a kingdom where trolls are not forced to live under bridges because they are different, but are welcome at God's table. Taught them about a kingdom where green grass and clear water are for everyone and are abundant. Where no one needs to take by force, because God continues to give more than enough for all. And they said, "This sounds amazing!" and, "This is a kingdom that we want!" and, "You are the one we want to be our King. You must be the promised one of God!" And they shouted aloud that day when he rode into the city, "Hosanna, Lord save us!" And the heavens echoed with the ancient words, "Look! Your King comes, humble and riding on a donkey!"

But never mind that now, because kings ride in on stallions, not donkeys. And kings ride in to conquer, not to be humble. And the king they were looking for was not the shepherd king, not a meek and humble Lamb of God after all, but just one more strong, proud, battering ram, with curly horns and head down who would charge in and take by force anyone who stood in their way, until at last they could hoard and grab all the green pastures for themselves; that now they might be the ones to stand atop the bridge and block the way to life; that others may not enter there. But this King, this

Shepherd King, this Promised One of God, would not be the king they ask for, would not be the king of their bedtime fairy tales or of ours.

And because he would not, because this King will not seek to rule by oppression, and greed, and corruption, and hoarding, self-seeking, self-preserving power—but only rules to serve others; to serve life; to serve in humility and love for the life and love of all—this King now stands on trial, accused before another; before a battering ram king who is about to knock him off. But Pilate is unsure. “Are you a king?” he asks. “Because you don’t look like one to me. No crown. No throne. No palace. No horns.” Pilate sees no threat in this pathetic king before him. “My kingdom is not of this world,” he replies. “Not a kingdom of thrones, and fear. Not a kingdom that rules by oppressive power and takes by force; kingdoms of scarcity and never enough. Kingdoms that will always topple and fall. My kingdom is not like these. But I have come to testify, as a witness to the truth.” We wait to hear what that truth is. But the words are not spoken. Maybe they need not be. Because the witness has already been spoken in the healing, feeding God with us on the hillside and in the streets.

But never mind that now. Because as Pilate is confronted with the Truth of Jesus, confronted with the Truth who is Jesus; as Pilate is confronted with God’s kingdom breaking in in healing and justice and love; in the end, he too, becomes a battering ram. Afraid for his own stronghold on the bridges and pastures and wealth of his kingdom; Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified; while nailing over his head the prophetic sign, “King of the Jews.” Pilate names Jesus King, one whose kingship will

forever be defined and known by his death on a cross.<sup>i</sup> And while we want to lay blame on Pilate, we know what it is to grapple and try to understand the struggle with the world outside our door—a world of flood and devastation and destruction where roadways and railways and food supply chains are cut off. A world that quickly makes trolls of us all; a world that says there is not enough; where the story of hoarding haunts and writes our reality, and echoes in our dreams.

Yet into our world of scarcity, our stories of taking by force and never enough; to everyday kings and queens that look a lot like you and me—into this world God still promises, “I will give you a King after my own heart, a Messiah, a Shepherd, my Son—who will feed and heal you, and lead you to green pastures and there will be room and green grass and still waters for all.” And while we still say, “Never mind that, God,” God does mind. In Jesus, God is the King who aches with this world’s hunger, the King who knows this world’s hunger; who with outstretched nail-scarred hands; touches this world’s pain. And while we yet grapple to understand this King who dies; on our hillsides and in our streets; in our floodplains and washed-out bridges; in our washed-out lives and devastated kingdoms; with the poor, the hungry, the sick, the anxious; the homeless, the displaced—with us all—there Jesus is, the promised King. A King and a kingdom breaking in, rising to life not by fear and taking by force; but a kingdom rising by laying down in humility and death, in the giving of life, of welcome and healing and green pastures for all. “Look! Your King comes!” Thanks be to God!

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<sup>i</sup>Susan Hylan, [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org) November 2015