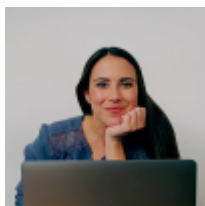


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On Feb. 19, the official White House Instagram account posted a picture reminiscent of a Time magazine cover, with "Trump" across the top of a stylized image of a smiling Donald Trump wearing a crown. The bottom left reads, "Long live the king." (NCR screengrab/Instagram)



by Kat Armas

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There is something haunting in the way the people ask for a king. It is not a simple request, not a passing desire. It is a demand, a grasping toward empire, an ache for hierarchy, for false protection, as a balm — and a scapegoat — for their insecurity.

In 1 Samuel 8:4-22, the elders of Israel come to Samuel, restless, eyes turned toward the nations around them. "Give us a king to rule over us," they say, seeing how other kingdoms operate — their rulers draped in wealth and power, their borders clear and well-defended. And something in them stirs. They want to be like the others.

Samuel, old and grieved, warns them about what a king does: he will take your sons for war, your daughters for service; he will tax your fields, take your vineyards, claim your labor for his own. A king will make you servants in your own land (Verses 11-17). Samuel is not offering theory here. He is speaking the way history always speaks — through the wounds of those who have lived under power's grasp.

Still, they insist. *We want a king to fight our battles.*

And God, in a voice full of sorrow, tells Samuel: *Give them what they ask for. They are not rejecting you. They are rejecting me.*

On Feb. 19, the official White House Instagram account [posted a picture](#) reminiscent of a Time magazine cover. But instead of "TIME," it reads "TRUMP" across the top of a stylized (AI?) image which features a dramatically lit, smiling Donald Trump — wearing a gold and bejeweled crown. In the bottom left corner in all caps, it reads, "LONG LIVE THE KING," a reference to a quote from the president given more fully as the post's caption: "CONGESTION PRICING IS DEAD. Manhattan, and all of New York, is SAVED. LONG LIVE THE KING!" As of Feb. 26, the post had been "liked" more than 116,000 times.

There is a way we learn power. It is generational, written into the ways we are taught to measure safety, success, worth. A king is a kind of security. He holds the sword, the land, the law. A king gives the illusion of order, the promise of protection — even as he builds his own name with the bodies of his people. It is not new. Empire has always promised salvation through power. It is the nature of kings and conquerors to offer belonging and purpose in exchange for obedience. It is the nature of a people to believe them.

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But here is a truth that empire does not want us to remember: Evil kings are fragile. Beneath their thrones of steel and stone, they are weak men — so afraid of losing power that they will burn the world before relinquishing it. They know this, even if they will never say it. So instead, they shout. They pound their fists. They issue decrees and drop bombs, trying to convince us that might is the same as strength, that destruction is the same as dominion. They believe that if they take enough, control enough, silence enough, they will finally be secure.

But power built on fear is always desperate. It spins lies, tricking us into believing its leaders are gods when they are only men. They tell us they are defending when they are stealing. They tell us they are righteous when their hands drip with the blood of the innocent. And if we are not careful, we will believe them.

What is jarring is not simply that Israel asks for a king — it is that they do so despite already belonging to a kingdom. Their God is not an absentee ruler. In fact, he is not absent at all. This is the God who has delivered them, who has fed them in the wilderness, who has called them a people before they had land to stand on. They are already protected, already held. And yet, it is not enough.

The Scriptures are about creating a people, not a leader. But over and over again, the people return to a single figure, a proxy for their values, someone to embody their hopes so they do not have to live them. They do not want to be ruled by love, by justice, by the presence of God moving among them. They want something visible, predictable. They want power, and they want it concentrated in a single, tangible hand.

This is why Jesus is so bewildering. If the story of kings has always been about the consolidation of power — if kings rise by conquest and hold their thrones by force — then what do we do with a messiah who refuses to grasp at control?

The expectation of a king is that he will wield power for his people. That he will build a kingdom by military strength, political cunning and economic strategy. That he will conquer. That he will protect. That he will defend. But Jesus is none of these things. He does not take a throne. He does not call an army. He does not secure land, tax the people or declare war on Rome. He is a king who does not rule like a king. And for many, that makes him unrecognizable.

A king will rule through might, through policy, through law. But Jesus ushers in something that is not a rule but a reality. He does not build an empire. He shows us what it means to be free of one.

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The messianic hope was never supposed to be about a single leader fixing the world, about an individual holding power while the people wait for change. The Torah and the prophets do not speak of a ruler who will save his people by sheer will. They speak of a world reordered. A way of being that is entirely different. The question is not "*Who will save us?*" but "*What will life under this messiah look like?*" What will it mean for the land? For the animals? For our neighbors and our enemies?

A king will rule through might, through policy, through law. But Jesus ushers in something that is not a rule but a reality. He does not build an empire. He shows us what it means to be free of one.

Israel asked for a king because they did not trust they could be a people without one. Maybe we still struggle to believe it, too. But what if the story has never been about a leader? What if it has always been about *us*? About a people becoming a people. About community that is not held together by force but by love, by justice, by a belonging that is not dictated by borders or policies or military strength. What if the kingdom is not a throne but a table, where all are fed, where all are known, where no one's body is taken for war, where no one is made a servant in their own land?

Jesus did not come to build another kingdom like the ones before. He came to end the need for kings altogether.