

In which Bob Dylan takes second billing

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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So I moonlight as a church musician at [Holy Covenant UMC](#) in Chicago. I've been working on a special service we're doing this Sunday night: what we're pretty sure is the city's first-ever Sunday service with all Bob Dylan music.

I've been stubbornly insisting that we refer to the night as "Reign of Christ Sunday featuring the music of Bob Dylan" or some such mouthful, because I'm not sure I can live with the irony of letting Jesus be upstaged on this of all liturgical days. But call it a Dylancharist or a Bobcharist if you must. (Just don't call it "A Hard Reign's Gonna Fall.")

Anyway, below is what I wrote for the church newsletter this week. I'm hoping that if I link to a papal encyclical every time they ask me to write for the newsletter, at some point they'll stop asking.

If by any chance you'll be in Chicago this Sunday night, come visit us at the 7 p.m. service. And wherever you are, have a great Thanksgiving.

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I don't remember the first time I attended a service that emphasized Christ's reign. I would've been quite young, because in my home church this was a regular theme. "All hail, King Jesus!" we sang, and "King of kings and Lord of lords, glory!" The message: our God's authority is absolute, so we should rejoice and sing praises.

Only years later did I encounter the liturgical church's observance of Reign of Christ Sunday. Pope Pius XI instituted the day in 1925, in [an encyclical](#) that shimmers with something more than triumphant praise: political fervor. For Pius, Christ reigns specifically over and above the earth's rulers. So their authority isn't final; nor is their power to oppress and do violence. Justice will be done, and it will be Christ who does it.

I do remember the first time I heard a Bob Dylan song. I was in grade school. At a dinner in another church's basement, a family friend played "[Blowin' In the Wind](#)". Two things etched this in my memory: the song's evocative imagery and the fact that I wasn't sure why he was playing it at church.

I don't know that anyone else in the room knew why, either. But it began to make more sense over the years, as I dug deep into Dylan's music. Along with his tunefulness, I came to admire his [purposeful use of biblical imagery](#) and [the moral weightiness of his words](#). What's more, Dylan writes with a strong sense of the apocalyptic: that the beginning of something is also the end of something else, that good news for one person is bad news for another person (or institution), that power rises and rises [but eventually falls](#) .

While my home church sang praises to King Jesus and also ran a food pantry, the Feast of the Reign of Christ boldly proclaims that the hungry won't be hungry forever. While others in the '60s juxtaposed sweet harmonies with earnestly social lyrics, Dylan conjured a complex vision of social upheaval—a vision [both threatening and profoundly hopeful](#).

That's this Sunday's message: change is coming, and Christ is its author and presider. The Hebrew prophets proclaim upheaval in the cause of justice; so does Dylan, the most prophetic voice of American popular music. This Sunday, so will we—and we'll do so in the name of Jesus, whose reign of justice and peace comes ever nearer.

The music will be fun, too. Come join us.