

Luke 23:33-43

“The King of Compassion”

Today is Christ the King Sunday. Not only is it the end of the liturgical year before we begin Advent next week, but it is day that we intentionally give thanks and praise for the sovereignty of Christ. It is a day to celebrate our belief that Jesus will come again and reign in glory.

So it might be a little perplexing to understand why the lectionary reading for today, that is the suggested text to be preached on, is the story of Jesus’ death. However, these verses from Luke remind us what KIND of King Jesus is. Jesus is a king of humility, forgiveness and compassion. These are words that were not often associated with kings then, nor are they used to describe our modern leaders. Yet, this is the example that Jesus gives us, even in dying. And it is *what* we celebrate today. Indeed, it is even what we are called to aspire to if we are to identify ourselves subject to the King of Kings.

This scene also echoes the words that Jesus began his ministry with, as recorded by Luke. Therefore, it seems logical that his life and earthly ministry would end with him demonstrating his self-proclaimed mission. So, let’s take a trip back to that day and see how Jesus began it all. Let’s look at the first bookend of Jesus ministry.

At some time, the Holy Spirit let Jesus know it was time to hang up the carpenter’s apron of his earthly father’s vocation and follow the mission of his Heavenly Father. Given the first opportunity to preach in the Temple, Jesus spoke what is often referred to as his “Programmatic Sermon.” In other words, this is the day when he told people what he was all about.

Luke records this event by saying, “When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’” This lays out for everyone there what kind of kingdom Jesus will have.

The other bookend of Jesus’ ministry can be seen in the words we just heard. Here on the cross, the Messiah of the world suffers the public humiliation and physical torture of crucifixion on trumped charges of blasphemy and treason. Yet, he stays true to the kind of Kingship he proclaims. He remains the humble, forgiving, compassionate king!

Early in our reading this morning, we hear Jesus declare his identity. While all throughout his ministry people, including his own disciples, often seemed to be in the dark about who he is, Jesus erases all doubts from our minds and declares in verse 34, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

Not only is he demonstrating a forgiveness that is truly impossible to understand from a human standpoint, but his words have several other meanings. Everyone listening immediately notices two other things. First, by using the word “Father”, Jesus is declaring his Sonship to the Almighty. Second, it is apparent that Jesus remains humble, even in his suffering. Jesus and the people listening knew that it is only the Divine who has the prerogative to offer forgiveness. Rather than proclaiming that all is forgiven, Jesus gives up that right and continues to point the way to Heaven. Jesus remains the humble king, even on the cross.

Luke goes on to show Jesus' ministry is also consistent with what he set out to accomplish, even to the very end of his life. This is shown especially in Luke's gospel, because only this evangelist goes out of his way to portray Jesus consistently reaching out to the foreigner, the woman, the child, and the marginalized. His is a portrait of the Savior for all the world.

Only in Luke does Jesus make a hated Samaritan the hero of his best-known story. Only Luke tells us that Jesus invited himself to dinner at the home of a despised tax collector and crook named Zacchaeus. Only Luke offers the grace of a forgiving father in the story of the Prodigal son and features women so prominently in Jesus' ministry.

So, it should not really surprise any of us to find that even in his dying, Luke shows that Jesus is still creating relationships, revealing God's grace, bringing hope even to a place of suffering and sharing the compassion of God. Here on the cross, Jesus still anticipates the widened mission of the church to include the forgiveness of ALL people, as the church in the book of Acts would be called to do. He persists in creating status, if you will, even for those whom society has rejected. And in doing so, he continues to reorient those who are listening at the foot of the cross as to what it means to be human. Or perhaps I should say what it means to be Christian.

Now let me remind you that Jesus' disciples are nowhere to be found! They have fled to safer places, more concerned about their own skins than they are about the truth. So, they are not there to offer verbal support or confirmation that Jesus is Lord. In fact, there are only two people who will go against the tide who is mocking Jesus with, "If you are really the savior then surely you will save yourself." And those two are Jesus himself and the criminal.

Of course, the first criminal insists that all hope is lost. *He* goes along with the crowd. Jesus should show his power by saving himself! But the second criminal comes to God in just the way God asks us to – with confession, repentance and trust. He confesses publicly – “we are getting what WE deserve” – as a way of repentance. And then he asks for grace.

His statement of faith is unusual because the others that we have read up to this point are offered in very different circumstances. The disciples only uttered the words, “You are the Christ” when they were alone with Jesus. Not in front of others, we can only suppose, out of their uncertainty. And others who proclaimed, “Surely this man is the Son of God” did so after they had witnessed a miracle. So when the thief on the cross makes his confession of faith in the circumstances that he finds himself in, the systems of the world collide.

You see, THIS confession of faith was made in the midst of the cruelty of life. As the condemned man hung next to Jesus, the two were a living picture of what society deems righteous. They embody the *human* emotions of justice. “An eye for an eye. I hope you get what you deserve!” The two dying men are a picture of what happens when we live in a world where the powerful make all the decisions and the downtrodden have no voice.

Yet THIS criminal uses his *last* breath to say what needs to be said before Jesus dies. And in doing so demonstrates an understanding of grace that is hard for many of us to grasp. He firmly states that he knows that there is more to come than what can be seen AND that he certainly doesn’t deserve to be a part of it. Still, he dares to utter his final prayer, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

And so this picture of death gives us a beautiful and lasting reminder of what kind of King we worship and celebrate today. A king of compassion. You see, the word compassion literally means to suffer with. One of the primary characteristics of our king is a commitment to

solidarity with and in our suffering. Because of this word from the cross, we know exactly what kind of King rules today and what kind of actions we are called to emulate.

This means that the salvation in which we believe because of the cross of Christ is not just about *Jesus'* death. It is this salvation that the criminal received, felt, and knew both before his own death and before Jesus' death. In that moment he realized, maybe for the first time in his life, that there was someone who *saw* his suffering, who was willing to *stand in* that suffering with him, and who *spoke up against* his suffering to those whose only solution was to kill him. That someone was Jesus. The criminal died knowing that someone was with him in his suffering.

And oh friends, what hope this offers you and me when we suffer. Because everyone in this room has suffered a loss, experienced disillusionment, felt alone, or made a bad decision and had to face the consequences. What a comfort to know that the King of Kings suffered so much that he would cry from the cross, "My God, WHY have you forsaken me?" And what hope to know that, even after experiencing such pain, Jesus found his way back to the Father, who waited with open arms. This is a reminder that, even if we do not feel God in the midst of our own suffering, God is still standing right beside us.

And while this passage is often sighted to assure us that it is never too late to accept Jesus as our savior, none of us really knows what was in that thief's heart. We do not REALLY know if he understood that Jesus was the Messiah. But perhaps that is not what really matters. What he DID know is that Jesus saw his suffering and suffered with him and that gave him comfort and hope. AND he knew that the death of Jesus spoke volumes against the powers that tried to shut down justice and shut up the cries of the oppressed and so he experienced the compassion of

knowing that another human being would offer a better way in the midst of a picture of sinfulness on the part of everyone there.

When I was in Seminary and taking Pastoral Care, I was asked to interview a widow and write a paper about what I had learned. A close friend of mine had lost her husband to a sudden illness and I asked if she would be comfortable helping me. One of the things that I have never forgotten is when she told me how it hurt her so much when people would not say Bill's name. I know they thought they were being sensitive, but she said it was as if he had never existed. Such a small thing. Yet it has helped me immensely as I have stood with parishioners mourning the loss of a loved one. I am thankful that I learned that such a small act of compassion can help someone who is grieving. I share this so you will all know that compassion can be found and felt in the smallest word or deed. We do not have to give our lives, as Jesus did, but we can still find ways to stand with our brothers and sisters who feel completely alone.

I can only imagine that if the tide somehow turned and that criminal was freed, the experience of knowing that someone else stood with him would have changed him completely. My romantic fantasy of this ending, when played out in my imagination, is that the man would not only repent in regards to his lifestyle, but that he would have gone out of his way to seek justice for the oppressed for the rest of his days. His life would have been one of sharing the compassion that had been given to him.

Which leads us all to consider what our compassionate King call us to do today, in light of his solidarity with one particular sinner. When Lutheran minister Karoline Lewis wrote about this passage, she sighted a quote by Leonard Cohen who said, "There is a crack in everything. That is how the light gets in."

Then Lewis goes on with these words: "Look for the crack and then be the light of Christ.

The light that sheds light on that which justifies and validates hatred and violence, so as to expose it for what it is. The light that sheds light on those who have been ignored, overlooked, and silenced, so as to disavow ignorance for good. The desperately needed ray of light that shines as a glimmer of hope for all”.

I believe we can look at this light as the humility, the forgiveness and the compassion that Christ our King modeled all throughout his life and even in his death. And because of his resurrection, we have been empowered to be that light until he returns again and truly reigns victorious over the brokenness and evil in the world. We can have the strength to do this because we know that Jesus has already reigned victorious over the last enemy, death, for each of us here.

So let us give thanks for the forgiveness that we have received and live by sharing the light of compassion for all who suffer until the Savior comes again. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf

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