

33 When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. 34 Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. 35 And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" 36 The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, 37 and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" 38 There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

39 One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" 40 But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41 And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." 42 Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." 43 He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Jeremiah 23:1-6

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Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. 2 Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. 3 Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. 4 I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord.

5 The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. 6 In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."

This is word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

“Christ is King”

Today, in addition to being the final Sunday of the church year and the Sunday before Thanksgiving, is also Christ the King Sunday, sometimes called the Reign of Christ Sunday. This day is intended to be the day Christians around the world make special celebration of Jesus being our Lord and King! WE come before his throne, humbly offering our complete praise and adulation. And this is well and good, except that the lectionary text which is assigned for us to read on this high holy day is Luke 23, which describes Jesus’ crucifixion. It does not seem to be the proper choice for Christ the King Sunday. In it, we are given anything but the image of a high, magnificent, glorious & powerful king, above whom there is no other.

No, we are given an image that makes our minds and hearts ache. We wince as we see Jesus there, so deeply humiliated on a Roman cross, bleeding and half-naked, dying like an outcast, like one of the lowly persons he often kept company with...no, even worse, like a criminal among criminals, receiving derisive attacks from first the leaders: *“He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!”*, then from the soldiers: *“If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”*, and then one of the criminals: *“Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”* There he is, with symbols of royal power surrounding him but each meant to mock the idea that he has any power at all.... a sarcastic title above his head, saying, *“King of the Jews”*, a sardonic crown...of thorns...on his head, and a royal court who offer him vinegar and gamble for his royal robe.¹

No, this is not the kind of king that any of us want to accept and hear about, hanging on a shameful piece of wood, a crucified king, with a handful of weeping women and frightened men standing helplessly at a distance with confusion and horror written all over their faces. The Anointed One, the Messiah, the King should have been a person of domination, of strength, of might, of power not shame! Even with all that we (you and I) know, we read this passage, we see this scene and, because we are conditioned by our world of “might makes right” and “glamour means success”, we think: *“Couldn’t Jesus have at least retaliated against*

¹Kristin Adkins Whitesides. *“A Sermon for Every Sunday: When You Can’t Do It Yourself”*. <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Kristin-Whitesides-Reign-of-Christ.pdf> (accessed 11/21/19).

the Romans, even a little bit? Couldn't he have followed the rules of logic and helped himself? Couldn't he have done something to save himself and survive?"

But then we (you and I) remind ourselves of what we know. Jesus, never played by the rules. He ate with sinners, welcomed the outcast and marginalized, touched the untouchable, forgave enemies, elevated the status of women and children, and interpreted God's Law contrary to the corrupted ideology of the day. He taught that the last shall be first and that the poor shall be raised up. He disrupted and threatened the political and religious forces in the Empire. His death...his death, in fact, was quite simply the evil response to the life he led. It was the response levied against him as he stood with solidarity and unfathomable LOVE against injustice and on behalf of others... on behalf of us.... on behalf ALL of us.

The scene in Luke 23 paints this picture. While hanging there looking out over ALL of them, his torturers, his frightened disciples, those who had abandoned him, those were just part of the morbidly curious crowd, *"feeling the full horror of the human condition,"* as Catherine Keller states, *"its helplessness before its own apparatus of violence,"*² Jesus made the supreme offer of love. *"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do,"* he asked for mercy on ALL their behalf! And finally, in his conversation with the penitent CRIMINAL, he said, *"Today, you will be with me in Paradise."* All the criminal had to cry was, "help."³ What love.

No, Jesus never played by the rules. It was never his intent to do so. It was not his intent save himself for he came to save us, to give of himself on our behalf, on all of our behaves, no matter who we are, no matter where we are, or what we've done. For this reason, our Almighty God took on our lowly flesh in the first place. Theologian John Caputo said, *"The perverse core of Christianity lies in being a weak force. It is a FORCE that is brought to its fullest realization, to its perfection and strength, by virtue of Christ's willing participation with his fellows in the flesh, in fact with the weakest of his fellows in the flesh ... the suffering, poor, the misunderstood, the marginalized....ultimately the criminals."*⁴

² Catherine Keller. *On the Mystery* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 86.

³ Phil Yancy. *"What's so Amazing about Grace."* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan; 1998),56.

⁴ John D. Caputo *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington, Indiana: University Press, 2006).43. Quoted in Catherine Keller. *On the Mystery* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008),84. 06), 43.

And so, friends, when we remind ourselves of these things, we see that this passage is actually the perfect passage for Christ the King Sunday because IT AFFIRMS THE TRUTH THAT THIS IS OUR KING! This is our King who is above all kings and has more power than all others who sit in positions of authority. It IS granted a different of power that he has, a redefined power, for sure, grounded in what is termed “incarnational vulnerability”. The King, described in the 23rd chapter of Luke, is not one who dominates, as the world knows dominance, but is one whose ultimate power lies in its contagious influence on his believers to respond. Jesus’ power lies in its contagious influence on his followers, you and I, to get up and do likewise, to love others with the abandon with which he has loved us. Consequently, it is not a power over...but an empowerment. (*repeat*)

When one considers all of the dictators and oppressive leaders over the centuries who have forced people to follow them with a stranglehold around their necks. These power mongers and their kingdoms have come and gone. But the humble sacrificial love of Jesus, so clearly demonstrated on the cross, has resulted in the empowerment of a movement of followers over the centuries numbering in the billions and billions, all who have lived and died and continue to live and die to bring his Kingdom to earth and others to know him. I will quote once again Elizabeth Johnson. Some quotes just deserve repeating. “*With moral indignation, concern for the broken creation and a sympathy calling for justice, the power of God’s compassionate love enters the pain of the world from the cross, to transform it from within.*”⁵ (*repeat*)

To transform it from within. To transform the world from within. Not too long ago I was reading Barbara Brown Taylor’s description of how she prepares for sermons and I was struck with her passion... “*I want a sermon to require something of me,*” she said, “*the same way I want it to require something of my listeners.*”⁶ I couldn’t help but think that she really is empowered and understands how it is that she is being used to bring the love of the King into the world and to transform it. From that perspective, she went on, “*Even if I don’t know everything about the congregations I am asked to preach to, I think I know the basics. I know*

⁵ Elizabeth A. Johnson. *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 253.

⁶ Barbara Brown Taylor in “*Birthing the Sermon. Women Preachers on the Creative Process,*” ed, J Childers (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 163.

that they wake up in the middle of the night and worry about things they cannot do anything about. I know that they want more love, or want to love more, and that they have longings inside them that they cannot name. I know that they wonder about God and whether other people hear or see more God than they hear or see. And I know they wonder what will happen to them when they die."⁷ I want to preach the word to THEM!

Friends, we are empowered too... we are empowered to transform the world from within. We are empowered to enter into places, into circumstances whether it be waiting with someone in the ER, standing with them at the cemetery, visiting them in jail or having conversation with them at the barber shop or beauty parlor, sharing a meal with them in a school cafeteria or are having a drink together at the local pub, or maybe just sitting next to them on a city bus or in a coffee shop. We are empowered to tell them, those who want to assign triumphalist qualities to Jesus, that he is instead a king whose power was made perfect in weakness, who, in unfathomable love, suffered the depths for them and all humanity so that no one is left out. We are empowered to proclaim to these people in their circumstances that he continues to be there with them in their suffering, in their loneliness and grief, in their fear and confusion, their guilt, to assure them that despite it all they are accompanied, they are remembered, they are forgiven, they are saved...and they are that today...when they simply ask, "Help". We are empowered to teach them that he has freely given this love with a passion that cannot be killed, a love that is stronger than death.

Yes on this day, this last Sunday of the church year, this Sunday before our national holiday of Thanksgiving, we can read Luke 23 and remember to include, when we list all our many blessings, that we have this kind of King... a king who has stood the meaning of kingship on its head. Brothers and sisters, may all praise and glory, and laud and honor be his. For he, the King of Glory reigns on high forever and ever. Amen.

Let us stand and worship the Christ, singing the response to the word, "Crown him with many crowns"

⁷ Ibid., 154-155.