

The Kingdom and the Cross
A Sermon for November 20, 2016
Luke 23:33-43
[Lansdowne UMC](#)

Send your Spirit, O God, on the proclamation of your Word,
that our hearts may be good soil for your word,
and our lives may bear the fruit of love, joy, and goodness,
bringing glory to your name, through Jesus Christ, the sower of the seed.
Amen.

I imagine you didn't come to church today expecting to hear about Good Friday. No it's not the Friday before Easter. It's just the last day of the year. So next week-- happy new year! No, no, I'm not confused. Odd, certainly, but not confused. I know it's not mid April or the end of December. I'm talking about the end of the *Christian* year.

Today is the the last Sunday of the Christian year, and it's called "Reign of Christ" Sunday, or "Christ the King" Sunday. Next week, begins the Christian season of Advent. We'll talk more about this next week. But I want to give you just a little sneak peak this morning!

Advent is a season of preparation for Christ's coming. Most obviously we prepare ourselves to receive once again the good news of the Christ Child, who is Emmanuel, "God with us," God in the flesh. But we're also secondarily preparing ourselves for the reality that Christ will come again, bringing the fullness of the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. But finally, Advent is a time to recognize the ways that we've allowed our hearts to get hardened-- and to adopt some practices to invite God to work to soften our hearts. We need to prepare for Christ to come here and now into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

But, I don't know about you, but sometimes I have to defibrillate my heart a little bit. Wake it up. "Awake, my soul!" the psalm says. Give it a little spiritual jolt! "Bless the Lord, O my soul!" One helpful way to jolt your heart a bit is to take up using one of the Advent devotional books that we have for you. And together we'll use this coming season of Advent to prepare for Christ to come-- past, present, and future.

But for now, on this last Sunday of the year, we consider the seemingly ridiculous claim that Christ is King. I say "seemingly ridiculous," because the world tends to think like the people that we see in this part of the crucifixion story.

You might remember a few months ago we talked about how, sadly, there tend to be two types of Christians. Important things bear repeating. We have "Social justice" Christians on the one hand, and "personal faith" Christians on the other. Or, if you will, we have "Kingdom" Christians on the one hand, and "Cross" Christians on the other. To bolster their side of the story, "Kingdom" Christians rightly recognize that the overarching story of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, is that through Jesus, God's reign is coming to earth. We remember one time in Luke chapter 4 when crowds of people try to prevent Jesus from leaving their town and he says, "I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose." (Lk 4:43) Jesus says in chapter 6, "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." Jesus sends his disciples out to proclaim the kingdom of God. He teaches his disciples to pray "your kingdom come."

The problem is that some Christians so prioritize the Kingdom of God, that in talking to them, you'd think that real point of the Gospels is that Jesus' wonderful kingdom work was cut tragically short when he

was crucified. “If only Jesus had lived a little bit longer-- then he really could have accomplished what he wanted to.”

On the other side we have Cross Christians. Usually these Christians focus on the forgiveness of sins and look to the writings of Paul to bolster their view. From our Colossians reading this morning:

he reconciled all things to himself
through him—
whether things on earth
or in the heavens.
He brought peace
through the blood of his cross.

Or 1 Peter: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.” In 1 Timothy: “The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”

Bolstering their argument even further is the Apostles Creed. Listen for how much it *doesn't* talk about Jesus' life:

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and will come again to judge the living and the dead.

At the extreme, Kingdom Christians think Jesus' death a tragedy, and Cross Christians think Jesus' life a technicality. In order to die you have to live.

And yet Luke, along with the other 3 Gospels, brings Kingdom and Cross together. Throughout his life, Jesus stands the common notions of power and kingship on their head. "He has celebrated with the wrong people, offered peace and hope to the wrong people, and warned the wrong people of God's coming judgment."¹ And now on the cross, he is hailed as king at last-- but it's in mockery. The royal cupbearer brings his wine-- but here comes his royal cupbearer, only it's a Roman soldier offering him the sour wine that poor people drank. Here's his coronation announcement, but it is in fact the criminal charge which explains his cruel death. Here is his crown: but it is a cross of thorns. You want your king high and lifted up-- we'll give you high and lifted up.

Perhaps some of his disciples had anticipated that Jesus' kingdom-plan would end with a March on Jerusalem ending in his death, but at least, they thought, they would all go down together in the glory of battle. What they get instead is humiliation. The irony here is deep: it's not just that the soldiers *mock* Jesus as King. It's a double irony: the thing that they're mocking is what is in fact happening. Jesus is King of the Jews, and this *is* when he is crowned. Kingdom and Cross come together-- two sides of the same coin.

Mark tells a story...

35 James and John, Zebedee's sons, came to Jesus and said,
"Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask."

36 "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.

¹ Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 283.

37 They said, “Allow one of us to sit on your right and the other on your left when you enter your glory.”

38 Jesus replied, “You don’t know what you’re asking! Can you drink the cup I drink or receive the baptism I receive?”

39 “We can,” they answered.

Jesus said, “You will drink the cup I drink and receive the baptism I receive, 40 but to sit at my right or left hand isn’t mine to give. It belongs to those for whom it has been prepared.”

James and John want to sit at Jesus’s right and left when he enters into his glory-- in other words, when he becomes king. They’re willing to endure the cup of suffering and the baptism of death. Yet Jesus says, “but to sit at my right or left hand isn’t mine to give. It belongs to those for whom it has been prepared.”

Luke tells us, “When they arrived at the place called The Skull, they crucified him, along with the criminals, one on his right and the other on his left.” When Jesus becomes King, the places at this right and left could not go to James and John-- they were taken by these criminals.

But scripture tells us even more than this. When a new kingdom comes, that means the old ruler has to be thrown out. Jesus has been doing this throughout his ministry as he casts out demons. He’s evicting them from God’s territory-- humanity itself. Even more, Colossians goes on in chapter 2 to say, “He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.” The rulers and authorities do their worst to Jesus, but through this, God brings victory.

This is what it looks like when God becomes king. The two criminals see all this and they both respond. “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” the first one says, mockingly. He doesn’t believe in Jesus Christ the King, so Jesus does not save him on the cross.

The second criminal sees the justice of his own punishment and the injustice of Jesus'. Despite the humiliation that his own sin has brought about, and of Jesus', he recognizes the saving power of Christ the King. He understands that Jesus has the power and authority in his Kingdom to forgive sins. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

"I will," Jesus effectively says. "And that day is today."

Where are we in this story?² There aren't many of us who would dare to throw insults at someone as they sat ready to receive their lethal injection. So if we're not among the mockers, where are we?

Where do you see *us* in this story? "But we weren't there," we want to say. I'm not asking if we knew then what we know now where would we locate ourselves. No, I'm asking where do we see "us," the disciples of Jesus, in the scene described?

This is where the sobering truth should slay us. We were not there. Well, the charitable way to put it is what Luke says later, that "everyone who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance observing these things." Even the crowds of people who watched the crucifixion were closer.

Jesus' disciples would not be identified with him in that place. Were they afraid, disappointed, embarrassed? They weren't ready to admit that following Jesus led them to the possibility of their own cross.

But let's make it more personal. It always has to get personal. *I* was not there that day. *I* am not at the scene of the Cross. And if I wasn't there then, am I there now? Maybe not. As a disciple of Jesus, I simply must ask myself the piercing question: Am I identifying with Jesus' suffering? Am I becoming like him in his death? Why not?

² I am indebted here to J. D. Walt's reflection at <http://www.seedbed.com/why-you-werent-there-when-they-crucified-my-lord-and-why-i-wasnt-either/>

Ask yourselves, could this be why I don't know the power of his resurrection? Sure, I believe in it-- the history and the joy of the resurrection. I understand it as a true principle. But am I standing at too much of a distance to know the King? Am I too far away from him to actually *know* his power myself. To know his saving grace not just in the emotions of my heart but in the depth of my bones? Or do I just believe in it like another doctrine?

Could it be that in order to enter his kingdom, I must die alongside him?

Self-preservation is the enemy of the power of the gospel. Jesus didn't teach that in order to save our lives we had to save them-- but in order to save your life, you must lose it. There is no other way. The way to the kingdom is to deny yourself, pick up your cross, and follow Jesus. The Kingdom and the Cross are never separate.

Sometimes the cross leads to an actual death. Many Christians abroad understand this very well. Yet usually it means that we need to be people who live out the paradox of the kingdom. A manner of life that the world sees as upside down but that Christ teaches us is really rightside up. We must be a people who live only to serve our God, Christ our King. This is what faith is. It's deeply aligning ourselves with the death of Christ-- becoming living sacrifices. Christ gave himself for us on the cross-- he bought our citizenship in the Kingdom by his death. In Christ, Colossians says, "[God] rescued us from the control of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son he loves."

The only response is to give ourselves for Christ's kingdom. As one ancient writer said, "Jesus always has many who love His heavenly kingdom, but few who bear His cross."

But in the great paradox of faith, we find that as we submit ourselves to the cross, we find new life-- Eternal life. Not the nebulous

hope of going to heaven when we die but the power of the Kingdom of God in our own lives today. Salvation from the guilt and the power of sin today. The love of God poured into your heart by the Holy Spirit today.

You know, the bible really knows nothing of the safe, gentlemanly and lady-like prayers that we pray so frequently. The prayers of scripture are desperate. They're risky. In closing, I want to share with you one of the riskiest prayers I know. Jesus says that we should count the cost before becoming his disciple. This is it.

You might not be ready to pray this prayer-- so take a look at it for a second. I don't want this to be about show, so in a moment, I'll pray the prayer aloud, and if you want to join in, do so silently. Whether you pray it or not, as we sing How Great Thou Art, you're welcome to come forward to pray this or your own prayer.

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I am no longer my own, but thine.

Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee.

Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine.

So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.