

“Christ the King is Not Fake News”

Luke 23: 33-43, by Marshall Ziemann, preached 11-24-2019 at PCOC, Christ the King Sunday

As you know, ever since last summer our lectionary schedule has had us going through the gospel of Luke together. We have marched through Luke’s gospel in a chronological fashion, almost chapter by chapter, and today we complete this long series through Luke.

Last week with Christine we stopped right before the events of Holy Week begin. We will come back, obviously, to all those events, next Spring, before Easter. For today’s lesson, on this Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday in the church calendar, to prepare us to begin Advent next week, and to remind us of the true nature and identity of the baby who will be born in the manger, our Bible reading schedule takes us this morning, to none other place than Calvary, to Golgotha, the skull-shaped hill in Jerusalem, the site of Jesus’ Crucifixion. (Yes, we’re going there this morning.)

We’ve all got Thanksgiving on our minds and lips, and things like turkey and baking and company or a trip to Grandma’s to cram in before we’re swept up into the busy Christmas Season, but before we start to hear again about his birth, we are led today to hear about his death. Who was this man they crucified? We are in Luke 23, beginning in verse 33.

^{23:33}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.”

Friends, *The Word of the Lord*. **Thanks be to God.**

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He is a king, and when he returns, he will come, next time, as a conquering king, to reign. Christians say that now, Christ reigns in our hearts, as king. When he returns one day, it is for far more than that.

We sing about his return, oddly enough, every year at Christmastime when we sing: "He rules the world, with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness and wonders of his love." Joy to the World is actually a Christmas song about Christ's 2nd Advent. We need to keep this in mind as we enter into Advent next Sunday and begin our annual process of remembering all the events of his first Advent - Mary and Joseph and the manger. The baby in the manger is born a King.

In my family, my grandmother, I think, was the last person to be born at home; she was born at home in a small town in Kansas in 1918. In our country, most babies are not born at home anymore. Perhaps you can remember someone who was; our kids probably cannot.

But Jesus wasn't born at home, either, and he wasn't even born in his home town. Miles and miles away in Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph had to find an inn to take them in. Jesus doesn't get to be born in the people-part of the inn, he gets to be born out in the stable, with the animals. Not how you would picture a Royal Birth.

His first visitors aren't royalty, either, they're shepherds. Not high class, and not a great PR endorsement. He does get an angelic proclamation, though, and everyone who has ever visited Bethlehem and stood in that Shepherd's Field must have gazed up into the sky and wondered what that night would have been like, when the Angelic Host lit things up royally.

The humble beginning of Jesus' life didn't seem much like royalty, and neither did the end of it, on the hill at Calvary, outside of Jerusalem. When Jesus said to the thief, "Today, you'll be with me in Paradise," I'm not sure there were many there who believed it, as Jesus and the two thieves died a criminals' death.

Did you catch the three verbs that Luke used when describing the scene at the crucifixion? Jesus was scoffed at, mocked, and derided. They even hung a sign to further ridicule him: *The King of the Jews*. He didn't seem like much of a king that day.

And what about today? Would most people call Jesus a king today? Or is this an outdated concept that some would now call *Fake News*?

You might be interested to know that Christ the King Sunday is not an ancient high holy day. It hasn't been around forever. Back in the 1920's, about 100 years ago, it was the Pope who thought we needed a special Sunday devoted to the kingship of Christ. Out of a concern for a growing secularism and rising fascism in Europe, Pope Pius XI was prompted to write an encyclical in 1925 instituting a new feast day and stating, in the language of his day:

"When once men recognize, both in private and in public life, that Christ is King,
society will at last
receive the great blessings of real liberty, well-ordered discipline, peace and
harmony."

Unfortunately, the War to End All Wars was followed by a steady stream of wars and conflicts, and society is still awaiting these great blessings.

One hundred years later, we still find ourselves praying for the same thing - for liberty, peace and harmony. We're still facing increased secularism and another rise of fascism. We're still proclaiming that Jesus is Lord not only in our hearts, but over all that there is - seen and unseen, regardless of how things look. Pastors are still preaching that amid all our consumerism and politics, among income inequality and division, amidst this week's food-laden tables and tent cities, Jesus still reigns.

What about in the halls of power? Does he reign there? In places of civil unrest, in Lebanon and Bolivia and Hong Kong? In the Impeachment Process this week? In the election year ahead? Or around your family dinner table this Thursday, you know, with *those relatives* you don't exactly see eye to eye with?

Christ the King Sunday is meant to remind us that no matter how dire or crazy the situation is, things are not out of control or random or unknown to God.

Our Christian theology tells us that God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-loving. If God were any two of those three, then we'd have an excuse for when things go bad - "Oh, it's because either God didn't know about it, or couldn't stop it, or didn't care." And yet, Scripture tells us that God clearly is all three of these. And yet, things are never like we wish they were, and more and more, it seems, there are more and more things to disagree about, or be anxious about, or argue about, or get upset about, and be in turmoil about.

Here's what Presbyterian pastor Jill Duffield writes,

"No matter if you are anxious about the state of the world or worried deeply about a loved one, Jesus is present and offering grace. No matter if you are going to be surrounded by family and friends this Thursday, or working or eating alone, Jesus is present and offering the bread of life. No matter if you struggle with things you have done or things you have left undone, Jesus is present, extending forgiveness and empowering you to repent and try again. No matter what holds you captive - resentments, addiction, guilt, fear, or anything else in all creation - Jesus is present, will never leave you orphaned. Jesus understands your suffering and promises the gift of peace that passes understanding, because Christ the King is like no other."

Here's what this King does offer - it is no small thing, and it is something major that we all need to cultivate in our lives: He promises us his presence - in thick and thin, in good times and in bad, in times of plenty and in times of want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health...

His presence is meant to make all the difference, and I hope you have experienced this.

Here is another major thing - Christ often shows up in the guise of other people, and oftentimes you and I are those very people. He makes his presence known through

you and me. That's why when I tell you that we are Christ's ambassadors, sent by God to represent him and make him known, that you have to believe me.

As we reach out to be his ambassadors, he is going along with us. When he's with us, he empowers us, he works through us, causing our words, our actions, our good deeds, our acts of service to hold a deep and lasting influence, even after we're gone.

It's not fake, it's real, and we get to be a part of Christ's mission to a hurting world. If Christ is the King, or Lord of your life, you can expect him to lead you to places he wants to go, and you can expect him to use you in ways you've never imagined but he has imagined. He's the King of Kings after all, and he's not fake; in fact, he's with you more than you know. Amen.