

Sermon: A Juxtaposition of Hope

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Scriptures: Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

We have arrived at the final Sunday in our liturgical year. Next week we venture into the season of waiting and of hope as Advent begins. In that time, we try, at least here in the church, to hold off on those big pronouncements of Christmastime – choosing, intentionally, to journey together in the tension of anticipating the birth of the Christ child. We bring out the darker hued purple paraments to drape the pulpit, lectern, and altar. We do this in the Lenten season, too, which might tempt us to associate these two seasons as being similar, but whereas Lent calls upon us to wait in penitence and forgiveness as we anticipate Jesus's great sacrifice for us so that Easter morning can come, Advent is a period of hopeful expectation. If Lent is primarily about penance, Advent is about primarily preparation. Lent has a tearing down sort of element—we engage in spiritual practices to empty ourselves of excess and draw nearer to God. Advent, on the other hand, has an element of building up—we light a new candle each week and meditate on the God's gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love. We open our Advent calendars and bring out decorations in anticipation of the joyous day of celebration of the birth of our Savior. So, while both seasons require patience and waiting, Advent waits in hopeful expectation of Christmas to come. When we choose to approach Christmas in this way, the jubilant celebration of Christmas Eve feels that much more festive and special. It takes on new meaning.

And so, as we gather to worship on Advent Eve with the celebration of Christ's kingship over all, we might be tempted to let this day be like any other Sunday in the long slog through the season after Pentecost. After worship today, we are going to hang the greens, put up the Advent wreath, bring out the Christmas decorations (minus the baby Jesus), and begin really building up toward one of the most momentous days of the year. But this day, too, is a special one on the church calendar. It's a Feast day, and we celebrate it with hearts full of gratitude for the teachings and ministry of Christ, which we have followed the entire year in the gospel of Luke, and, at the same time, we look

forward to the day in which the peaceful, jubilant kingdom of God will rule over all and there will be no more war or suffering, conflict or tension, death or pain. But even as we enter this Christ the King Sunday, we run into a bit of a paradox, because, of course, kingship is a tricky thing to celebrate in a church that has been defiantly standing against empire for over 2,000 years and a country which explicitly set itself apart from the idea of kings well over 200 years ago.

In the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Colossians, we get a Messianic poem that reads, "He is the image of the invisible God, the *firstborn* of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers" (1:15-16). Calling Jesus, *the firstborn* calls us back to Old Testament phrases that point to kingship—in other words, Paul is saying Jesus is king of all creation. Jesus, the visible image of an invisible God, is the author and king of all that is and was and ever shall be. Paul's letter goes on to remind us that Jesus is the one through whom a new creation will come about. His death and resurrection is the means through which God will reconcile himself to all things. Jesus is the one in whom we are to take refuge and place our trust. He is the one who walks with us in the midst of violence, oppression, and despair. This is a God who, as the letter reads, is before all things and who holds all things together. This is a big, powerful God worthy of celebration and exultation. Despite our reservations over the idea of kingship, which I wholeheartedly resonate with, Jesus is a fitting king to celebrate as we await a better world.

And yet, as we turn to our gospel reading for this Feast of Christ the King, we're given a slightly different image of this God of which Paul writes. The juxtaposition between Paul's powerful king of all things and this poor man being crucified between two criminals is jarring, when you think about it. It's jarring because, in the first place, although the afore mentioned poem in Paul's letter will end with mention of Christ's sacrifice, it is said in a way as to extoll Christ's virtues and Godliness. So, we read that and we think, well, this *is* a fitting text for the Feast of Christ the King but then as we read on in the lectionary, we're confronted with the 23rd chapter of Luke's gospel, which

takes us right into the brutal image of what that Christ's sacrifice looked like. Paul has us up high thinking of Christ's reign, while Luke takes us down low, to the ground where history's vicious truths are being lived.

Luke takes us to the place of the Skull, to three assembled crosses upon which the guilty will be tortured to death. Luke takes us into the dirt and grime of life and says, here is the Messiah, the man without sin, nailed a cross between two criminals, left to perish in excruciating fashion. Here is the "King of the Jews," body broken and bleeding, helpless and in agony. Here is God's own son, horrifically put on display to suffer until there was no life left in him.

The Roman authorities mean to diminish Jesus, to make a mockery of his kind of "kingship." They want to show that no king is greater than Caesar, see? They say, we will not allow anyone to stand in as king in this world who is not the king of our empire. And if you should try? Well, this is what happens to such "kings."

As they looked upon him, the soldiers mocked him. What kind of king can't even save himself? If that weren't enough, one of the criminals condemned to suffer the same fate as Jesus, openly scoffed at him: "If you really are the Messiah, why won't you save yourself *and us*?" Some messiahs you are, Jesus. But then comes another voice from the other side, one that's unexpectedly bold, a voice that gently rebukes the scoffer and calls him to account. He can see Jesus's innocence and goodness. He can see there is something special in him. Criminal A may have sneered at Jesus, but Criminal B perceives something more in him. That's when something even more surprising happens. Criminal B, as he hangs dying on his own cross down in that lowest of valleys, asks Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom. And Jesus tells him that he will be with him in paradise. Imagine what comfort that must have been to that dying man to be shown such grace and mercy.

There is great hope in Paul's letter to the Colossians, and while the scene here takes an entirely different tone, even though it juxtaposes our vision of an almighty Christ the king

with the Christ who suffers on the cross, it's really a juxtaposition of hope, isn't it? Because, while Caesar and the Romans may not see this as much of a kingship, we who read this know differently. We read this with the eyes of people who know what comes next. We read this as people who believe in Christ's triumph over death and that Christ will come again. We read this as a people who see the suffering of Christ as a visible representation of the God who suffers alongside us, the one who doesn't abandon us no matter how hard or long the road. We read this as a people who look closely at these stories for signs of the very hope we have seen throughout Jesus's life, teachings, and ministry. And when we look closely, we see what Christ's kingship looks like. And, we find that the soldiers are right, in a way. Because It isn't like the brutal reign of Caesar; it is a reign of gentleness and mercy. It is the reign of a man who, as he is dying in agony, begins by praying to God, "Forgive them for they know now what they do." It is the reign of one who puts love before hostility and cruelty. It's the reign of that one we call the "prince of peace," one that is filled with such power that it finds no weakness in mercy. The soldiers try to mock and make a joke of Jesus, but the joke is on Caesar, really. As Matthew Myer Boulton wrote in his commentary on this passage, "If in Caesar's kingdom the gates of imperial privilege swing shut – in Christ's, the gates of salvation swing open!"

Christ comes to us in the form of a babe in a manger, born under dangerous circumstances to a poor family on the run. The prince of peace arrives in the most humble and vulnerable of positions. The circumstances of Jesus's birth set the scene for the miraculous, surprising story that is to come. It is not a story of power for the sake of power. It is not a story of abuse and reckless misuse of authority. It is not the story of oppressor wielding supremacy over oppressed.

It is the story of a king whose use of power is the antithesis of the way the world's rulers use it. It is the story of a ruler who won't even use his power to fight off those who seek to persecute him. It is the story of one who will lead with mercy, justice, and humility. It is the story of a sovereign who seeks to serve more than rule, to give more than to

receive, to forgive rather than punish. It is the story of one whose reign will be characterized by the building of bridges that connect us; not walls that divide.

It is that reign that we are privileged to be in service of today. That is reign we are blessed to celebrate on this day. Toward that reign, we must turn our faces as we begin to venture into the new church year, Advent and beyond. Christ's is a reign of mercy, justice, and humility that all our work is meant to emphasize. On this final Sunday in our liturgical year, let us be reminded that ours is a gracious God whose love is so big that he has made room to forgive even those who have inflicted upon him the worst the world has to offer. I don't know about you, but I think that's a king worthy of our trust and our hope. That's a king worthy of our praise, not just today, but every day. Let it be so. Amen.