

Reign of Christ Sunday

Jeremiah 23:1-6 ~ Luke 23:33-43

Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
Saint Paul, Minnesota
November 20, 2016

We know this scene well. We've been here many times before ... each and every Lenten season of our lives we have wrapped up, in one form or another, with a telling of Jesus' crucifixion. Some eight months ago, back on Palm Sunday, we read this very same passage from Luke's gospel. At that time, the reading was structured in such a way that all of us –except those of you who had specific roles – read the jeers and the taunts that are attributed to collections of people, whether soldiers or leaders or just spectators. The purpose for that is so that we experience ourselves as having brought about Jesus' crucifixion. While there are theological and liturgical reasons for doing this, what if that's really not our part?

What if our voice is not heard in this scene? A number of voices are heard, but there are also voices that are missing in our reading: those of the disciples, Jesus's followers, both the men and the women. A bit later, it is revealed that the women are there at the cross, watching. They can be present because the gift of social invisibility is that no one pays attention to where you go or what you do. If the men had been there, that would be regarded as a political action, an act of solidarity with Jesus that could have quickly put them on crosses as well. The fear we attribute to the male disciples has real causes; it's not cowardice. Although their understanding of what Jesus has been trying to tell them may be incomplete, they aren't entirely clueless. What happened to Jesus could happen to them next, so they scatter and hide ... thinking, saying ... what? No one knows. But the women are there at the cross because no one cares what they do. We don't know what they're saying in this scene because the curse of social invisibility is that no one listens to anything you have to say. No one noted or recorded what these women were saying and thinking, but it's safe to guess that they were not joining in the mockery.

How could this have happened? I suspect the disciples had to be thinking, wondering, asking something like this, female or male, alone or clumped in small clusters. How could this have happened? They call to mind the things Jesus did, the kind deeds of love and mercy. They call to mind the things he taught. What was so wrong in any of this? True, he did also warn them these events were coming. True, anyone with a fair amount of awareness regarding the winds of politics and the tides of power could have, even should have, seen this coming. But now it has come and here they are, scattered and confused like the sheep Jeremiah speaks of in our readings today, needing a good and wise shepherd to gather them and care for them.

That feeling we know. The confusion from being blindsided when something unexpected and unforeseen happens ... the destabilizing sense of if that could happen, then what next? ... the uncertainty arising in the place of what we thought had been true. Many of us have been living with some level of those feelings for much of the past two weeks. The world as we thought it to be has been shaken to an almost foundational level. Now what? Where can we go

to find some direction as to where to go, some pointers on how to live, some stable place to rebuild our sense of the world and our place in it?

And here today, we are proclaiming Jesus as king, which is not a real helpful concept in a land where we once fought a war to get away from kings and just had an election to choose our leaders and were reminded that Jesus is never on the ballot. On top of these barriers, the picture of this king or sovereign leader we're given is Jesus hanging on a cross between two criminals with a sign above his head proclaiming him to be King of Judaea even though the other leaders and the people gathered around prefer to jeer and taunt rather than acknowledge him as king. But here, our tradition tells us, is the promised shepherd-leader-ruler to the scattered flock. This is how God's promised king comes to rule: with a thorns for his crown and a cross for his throne. This is how the Reign of God comes: Jesus on the cross. What does this tell us? Or in Lutheran catechetical terms, what does this mean?

It means, as one of the pastors at text study pointed out, God doesn't work the way we think God should; God doesn't play by our rules. We have our ideas of what leadership and governance and power look like. We know how to acquire points and add up a score under zero sum rules in which winners take all. Winners get their way and losers should just shut up about it. But if, as we say we believe, the Reign of God comes through Jesus dying on the cross, executed by the Roman government with the compliance and approval of his religious leaders, then the Reign of God is not a victory to be won but something that comes crashing into our world from the outside into our midst.

As this Reign of God is breaking in, Jesus asks forgiveness for those who don't know what they're doing – and it isn't clear whom he has in mind ... the soldiers doing the awful work of execution? ... the Roman government officials who ordered it? ... the leaders among his own people who sought his death? ... the people in the crowd who are jeering? ... the disciples who are fleeing? It isn't clear. But this much is: forgiveness – letting go of the desire to pay back those who wronged you— this is an aspect of the Reign of God, or at least its coming. Suffering has a role in this to be sure. However, suffering for the sake of suffering is never redemptive and never part of the coming of the Reign of God. Jesus embraces his suffering for the sake of a radical love that is out to change the world. Forgiveness is part of how that change comes about. The response of the forgiven is to be surprise, maybe even shock, that the party wronged is not seeking retribution. Forgiveness is an action to call forth some rethinking of things by the forgiven, a change in attitude and behavior into the future. This is what is meant by the word we read as *repentance*.

Jesus speaks some other words to one of the criminals being crucified with him, the one who requests: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." We don't know what this criminal believes about Jesus aside from that, while he and his other companion do deserve their fates, Jesus does not and that Jesus has some sort of kingdom with kingly authority. Jesus promises him: "Today you will be with me in paradise." *Today* – that means now, not three days later in the resurrection, not a month or so later in the ascension, not whenever of the second coming – today. *Paradise* – that means here on earth. *Paradise* is a word we picked up in English straight from the Greek. It is not a synonym for *heaven*. The word *paradise* refers to a park or a garden kept primarily for pleasure, a place like the Garden of Eden, an image of what

God dreamed at the beginning of creation. Somehow, in Jesus' dying, that dream of God's is coming to be on the earth then and there; heaven is coming to earth; the Reign of God is crashing into time and space.

If we say that Christ is our King, our Ruler, our Lord or Master, we are committing ourselves to live here and now by the ways of Christ's kingdom, this new way, the ways of the Reign of God, the way of life Jesus acted out in his life, the way of life that he suffered and died and rose again in order to breathe it into his followers. To say Christ is King is to make Christ and ways of the Reign of God the ultimate and primary focus of your loyalty, your identity, your way of living. So what do you do?

Well, what do you see Jesus doing in the Gospels? Bringing healing and restoration ... Feeding people ... Telling people to love one another ... Forgiving ... Raising the dead ... Welcoming all kinds of people. Jesus talked with the rich and the poor, the virtuous and the sinners. He engaged them all. So who is beyond the reach of God's kingdom, beyond God's care and concern? No one. Living as people of the Reign of God means working for and doing these kinds of things for all people here and now.

However, saying yes to Christ as King, saying yes to the Reign of God does mean that certain options are excluded. You no longer get to pick and choose who counts and who doesn't; in the Reign of God everyone is welcome in and no one is put out. Choices have to be made along the lines of what fits with the Reign of God, what helps me live into it and out of it, what helps others see that Reign of God as a reality today – not what benefits me most. Saying yes to the Reign of God and Christ as King means accepting that Jesus meant what he said and that your task is to follow those teachings, to let them shape how you live in this world ... which is not easy, but you are not left on your own to do them. You have the Holy Spirit, the breath of God, living in you. We have one another for help and support. We are not left alone to figure all this out. However, we are expected to live into the Reign of God and do whatever little bits are given to us to make that Reign visible in our world.

The community around us, the nation we live in ... and maybe even we ourselves need to see what the Reign of God looks like, need the light of God shining in our lives and on our way perhaps more than before. Or maybe we've just become more aware of it in recent weeks. One of the sad facts from the election is that a majority of Christians, people who attend church nearly every week, voted for the president-elect. They did so believing they were honoring the ways of God. But what was actually being honored is some really bad theology. We're not immune from this in here; our culture swims in it ... or maybe it's drowning in it. Religious messages abound to not worry over what happens in this life because the whole point is getting into heaven ... this earth doesn't matter because the chosen will be whisked away to heaven in the rapture before things really get bad ... if you pray right or have enough faith or do right before God, God will reward you with good things you want for yourself (and if not, then clearly you're displeasing God somehow) ... God is in complete control; everything that happens is exactly what God wants ... God established America as the new chosen nation, a Christian version of ancient Israel, which leads to a nationalized version of do right and get the goodies (in which *right* is usually defined in terms of behaviors having something to do with sexuality – that and going to church regularly).

Brothers and sisters, little in these messages is faithful to the good news of God and God's reign revealed to us in Jesus Christ. In service to Christ our King and the Reign of God, we are called to be bold to say so. God's Kingdom, the Reign of Christ, does indeed come without our work or even our prayers. However, when we pray, as we do in the Lord's Prayer, "Your kingdom come," we are praying to be part of that Kingdom coming as the Spirit gives us faith and enables us to live godly lives here and now. It does no honor to Christ our King when ways that are not of God's Reign are presented as though they were. The gospel does not need us to defend it; however, it does need our witness in order to be heard and seen and known.

Scattered, confused, and badly shaken little flock, God is faithful and has raised up a shepherd for you, a leader true to God's ways and purposes. This is Jesus, your King, whose reign breaks into our world through the mystery of the cross. Sing praise to your King whose beauty shines through even ugliness and horror. Then go on your way to walk confidently in light of the risen Christ, to live and act and speak of the Reign of God in the midst of a longing and hurting world. Christ is King and God's Reign is already begun. You are witnesses to this. Amen.