

When You Can't Do It Yourself
Jeremiah 23:1-6, Luke 23:33-43
First Presbyterian Church
November 24, 2019: The Reign of Christ

Bible Readings

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD.
²Therefore 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.
³Then 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.
⁴I 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.
⁵The 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.
⁶In 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."

Luke 23:33-43

³³When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals— one on his right, the other on his left.
³⁴Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."^[5] And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.
³⁵The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One."
³⁶The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar ³⁷and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."
³⁸There was a written notice above him, which read: | THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.
³⁹One of the criminals who hung their hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"
⁴⁰But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence?"
⁴¹We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."
⁴²Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."^[6]
⁴³Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

Sermon¹

The beginnings of the self-help industry have often been traced back to a book written in 1859 by a man named Samuel Smiles. Published the same year as Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* and John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, Smiles' book was simply titled *Self-Help*. As you know, it was a time of great change and upheaval, and Smiles' image of the "self-made man" captured the imaginations of his readers... as did his belief (often mistakenly thought to be from the Bible), that "heaven helps those who help themselves." Today the self-help industry is worth about \$10 billion according to market researchers. And it has expanded from books to television shows, blogs, workshops, retreats, and TEDtalks. All in an effort to help us improve our productivity... our leadership... our love lives... our parenting... our body image... you name it. And now, with social media revealing hourly how far short we fall of the beauty and success and happiness of those around us, no wonder we seem willing to give just about anything to find ten easy steps or five new habits that would save us.²

How interesting it is, then, that three times in our scripture for today Jesus is told to save himself. "If you are the Messiah," the leaders scoff, "then save yourself!" "If you are the King of the Jews," the soldiers mock, "then save yourself!" Even one of the criminals, hanging on a cross next to Jesus, says derisively, "If you are the Messiah... then save yourself! And us!"

Of course, we have to admit they have a point.

Today is Christ the King Sunday... yet we search this morning's text for some sign of his reign... some proof of his great sovereignty. A sovereign has unquestioned power... but Jesus is impaled on a cross, he can't even move. A king has domain... Jesus is suspended – he can't even touch the ground. A ruler has loyal subjects... Jesus has only hecklers and torturers. A royal speaks and others obey; but Jesus is mute. In THIS story the words KING and JESUS clearly are not meant for each other. Why is it, then... on such a pivotal day in the church year... celebrating Christ as King of the universe... why is it that we find ourselves standing at a place called "the Skull" ... at the very hour when the most-ghastly evil and the most gorgeous good converge upon cross?³

Now, to be sure, the WORD "king" buzzes all around him. There's even a nameplate above his head that reads: "This is the King of the Jews" – but it's no more than a cartoon caption... the punchline of a joke at which everybody can laugh. The politicians and priests and Roman guards all laugh. Even one of the criminals joins in the joke: All of them are laughing at this Sovereign so impotent... so powerless... he cannot even save himself. All, except for one. There is one who does not laugh... and ironically, this one Luke calls an "evildoer."

¹ This sermon draws heavily on Paul Duke's insightful treatment of this text in the article "Calling Forth the Kingdom," *Christian Century*, November 8, 1995, p.1043.

² Introduction thanks to Kristin Atkins Whitesides in her sermon this week, "When You Can't Do It Yourself," found at A Sermon for Every Sunday.

³ Duke

Here's a fun fact to impress your friends with at lunch today (unless, of course, they are here this morning). In all of Luke's Gospel, only three characters actually speak the word "kingdom". The angel Gabriel said it first, when he said to Mary, "Do not be afraid... for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus... and the Lord God will give to him the **throne** of his ancestor David. He will **reign** over the house of Jacob forever, and of his **kingdom** there will be no end."⁴

Gabriel speaks first... and then Jesus himself says it a lot. In fact, it's his main message – the sermon he preached everywhere he went: "The Kingdom of God is at hand." But how strange that must've sounded coming from the son of a carpenter from Nazareth... who had no PALACE in which to live... no BASE of political support... no ARMY to summon to battle... and who in the end gets himself crucified.

But still Jesus says it a lot... and when he will say it no more - there is still one more who will say it – and this one is an evildoer. An evildoer, who despite all evidence to the contrary, sees what others cannot see... sees what you and I don't always see: "Jesus," he says, "remember me when you come into your kingdom." And when he utters that word, he speaks the profound and essential truth – that though Jesus' kingdom is very real, it is HIDDEN. At least for now, his kingdom is hidden in the most unlikely places...

- in the womb of an unwed peasant girl...
- in the son of a working-class carpenter...
- it is hidden beneath the mocking of a crowd...
- hidden in the agony of a cross.

It's just so like the God we come to know in the Bible that the kingdom is hidden in a place that bears such an unlikely name: Golgotha, "Place of the Skull." Yet, somehow this "evildoer" saw what was hidden to others... "Jesus," he says, "remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Now, I'm going to use a little imagination here... because the story doesn't actually tell us this... but I imagine that when the criminal speaks those words... something begins to stir inside this dying king. Though he is hanging exhausted on the cross, Paul Duke writes that when the criminal speaks of his kingdom, "It's as if the air around the naked Jesus trembles, revealing him wrapped in brilliant, regal light. The fire re-enters his eyes... he regains his speech... and like one of the kings in one of his parables, he lavishes a staggering gift on a stunned, improbable recipient: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."⁵

I know it's asking a lot of you to believe in (or even to imagine) a whole new realm called the Kingdom of God... and that it is here among us even now... a whole new reality in which everything is the same, but nothing is the same.

⁴ Luke 1:32f

⁵ Paul Duke.

Everything is the same – I mean, we still live in Hickory, NC... impeachment hearings dominate Washington, DC... we have to get up and go to work tomorrow... we had an argument with our husband this morning and we're not speaking right now... Thanksgiving is this coming Thursday and we're not even close to being ready... we're worried about what we might hear at our doctor's appointment this week. Everything is the same... and yet I am asking you to imagine (and even believe) that nothing is the same.⁶

Of course, Jesus knew how hard it is for us to see it... which is why he used parables to describe it. To what can I compare the kingdom of God? he says. It is like a mustard seed that grew and became a tree... it is like yeast that a woman mixed in flour... it is like the joy of a woman who had ten coins... lost one... and then found it. And to what can we compare this king? he asks. He is like an unbelievably generous employer who at the end of the day pays everyone the same wage... he is like a shepherd who loses one of his 100 sheep and leaves the 99 to find the one... he is like a man who had two sons. The kingdom is here... and it is real... but it is hidden within the kingdom of his world.

It has been almost 20 years SINCE 9/11, but many of us still remember what it was like in those days and weeks after those attacks. Though the intensity of those feelings have faded with time... as has the unity we experienced as a nation... I do still remember what it was like to try to preach to my congregation in those weeks. I especially remember preaching September 16th, the Sunday after... and then on Christ the King Sunday, just ten weeks later. I looked back in my files this week and I found a story that I had seen in a newspaper. The cleanup was continuing at Ground Zero... and a worker was sifting through the rubble – the concrete and twisted steel and the remains of nearly 3,000 lives... and suddenly, a cross! In the midst of all that darkness and chaos – HIDDEN right there where destruction and death seemed to have won the day – a cross.

My friends in Christ, be assured that the hiddenness of Christ's reign is no cause for us to be cynical or despairing. When all is revealed, every knee will bow, and every tongue confess who is Lord. And even now, there are moments when the majesty of the hidden King shines through like a sudden light. Breakthroughs of joy and gladness... epiphanies of the power of love... glimpses of the hidden reign of Christ. And get this... what the story seems to suggest is that these glimpses will be more likely to happen when someone dares to speak it... when someone, like the criminal that day, dares to call forth the king... dares to point to the King. Can you think of a better picture of the church?⁷ The church... speaking and acting as if he is among us... and in so doing offering glimpses of his Royal Face to the world... you and I... speaking and acting as if he is among us... pointing to the cross... and to the unlikely King who reigns from there.

⁶ David Lose in a reflection piece for which I cannot find the reference.

⁷ Duke.