

Reign of Christ (Year C)

Luke 23:33-43

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. [[Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.']] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. 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!' The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!' There was also an inscription over him, 'This is the King of the Jews.'

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'

Well, here we are - the last stop on the liturgical calendar. After journeying through a very long period of "green" during Ordinary Time, our final destination before beginning a new liturgical year is always Christ the King Sunday (or Reign of Christ Sunday, depending on who you ask). Next week, when we gather back in this room for worship, the sanctuary will look much different. We'll switch to hues of blues and purples among the greens that will hang around us. But before we sing "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" or "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus," we have one final stop. Before we anticipate the wondrous birth of Jesus, Christ the King Sunday is an opportunity to observe the end of his life - or, more specifically, what the Romans Empire *thought* would be the end of his life. I like to see Christ the King Sunday as reminding us who it is that we are so soon to be welcoming among us as a tiny little baby, swaddled in cloth in Mary's lap. Today, we are reminded that there is only one King, only one Savior, only one person who can truly save us.

I've been thinking a lot about kings this past week while this sermon percolated in my brain. I've been thinking about King Friday XIII from Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. I've been thinking about King Richard in Disney's 1973 animated classic, "Robin Hood" (since Tricia and I have recently subscribed to Disney+ and have been feelings rather nostalgic lately). But one king that sticks out in my mind is King Henry VIII.

King Henry VIII was the King of England from 1509 until his death in 1547. You may remember him for his six wives. You may remember learning their fates in school: "divorced, beheaded, died, divorced, beheaded, survived." That first marriage to Catherine of Aragon - or, rather, Henry's attempt to annul it - was the reason for the birth of the Church of England. Since the Catholic Church would not grant him a divorce from Catherine, he just decided to go ahead and start his own church and name himself - not Jesus Christ - as the head of it.

I've also been thinking about King Henry VIII because the bible that he commissioned was in this very room a few weeks ago during Michael Morgan's historic bible presentation. Some of you may remember the intricate wood carving on one of its pages. In the middle of the page are the four gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Bordering the left and the right of the page are the 12 tribes of Israel. At the very top middle of the page is a depiction of God which is rather tiny - about the size of a dime. Then, right below God, taking up no less than a full third of the entire page, is an enormous depiction of King Henry VIII (which tells you a bit about what he thought about himself).

All this is to say that this reminds me that history has given us a long list of kings with, shall we say, overinflated egos.

But you and I don't worship a king like that. We don't worship a king that stays removed in an ivory tower. We don't worship a king who has made his power through coercive means. We don't worship a king who who is safely removed from the suffering and despair of the world around us.

We worship a very different kind of king.

We worship a wounded king. We worship a wounded God.

We have all heard the story before. The story of Jesus being placed on trial and sentenced to a criminal's death by crucifixion. The long and arduous walk carrying the cross to Golgotha, the place of the Skull. The nailing of his arms and legs to a cross where he would hang, in agony, between two criminals who deserved their punishment.

Not once, not twice, but three times as he hangs on that cross is Jesus told to save himself. In cruel mockery, the soldiers, the crowd, and even one of the condemned criminals hanging next to him shout out for him to save himself.

And you know what, I think Jesus could have done just that. Surely a God so powerful as to create the entire world had the capacity to, in an instant, escape the physical and emotional pain being inflicted upon him. But unlike any other king who would go to extreme measures to avoid appearing vulnerable or weak, our King made a different choice.

Our King decided to remain on the cross and die.

And that decision makes all the difference.

We worship a God who is not afraid to show us his wounds. Think of it, when the resurrected Jesus appeared to the disciples in that upper room in John's Gospel, he does not present himself unblemished. Instead, he displayed his wounds, even inviting Thomas to touch them to prove their realness.

We worship a wounded king. We worship a wounded God.

And we follow that God because even in the midst of God's wounded-ness, that same God assures us that we will be in God in paradise. Because when the crucified Jesus said that to the criminal hanging next to him, he speaks to every one of us.

We are wounded but God loves us just as we are. And God compels us to stand in solidarity with others around us who cry out in pain as Jesus did from the cross. We follow a King who is intimately present in other people's suffering because that same God is acutely aware of what that suffering feels like.

And that vulnerability is power.

That kind of vulnerability is a power that cannot be bought with money or acquired through the strongest army. It cannot be found in political sway or social media influence. That kind of power is reserved for one person and one person only: Jesus Christ.

I'll end this sermon with the following words from Brené Brown on the power of vulnerability:

*"Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path."*¹

So let us follow the path of our wounded God, share in God's vulnerability, and care for others in theirs.

Friends, all praise and glory to our King who reigns eternal, our one foundation.

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

¹<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/746519-vulnerability-is-the-birthplace-of-love-belonging-joy-courage-empathy>