The One Beside Him

A Meditation on Luke 23: 33 – 43

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church November 20, 2022

This is the last Sunday of another year on the Christian calendar. Next week Advent will begin, with its careful approach to the manger. Before we go there, we pause at the cross. It’s an uncomfortable place to be, and it is especially uncomfortable when the image of an infant is already beginning to float into our field of vision. That precious child, adored by his parents, worshiped by prophets, feared by rulers, would spend his days “comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable,”[[1]](#endnote-1) until the world could no longer contain him. They would find a way to get rid of him, and that is where we pause today. Not at the end of the story. Not at resurrection’s promise of a risen savior, but at the point just before his death.

At our Tuesday Talk Back conversation, we discussed the difficulties of this text, what a strange way to end the year. There are obvious reasons why the designers of the lectionary would have chosen it, with so many references to Jesus’ kingship, but we wondered about other possibilities. The whole idea of kings and kingdoms is so problematic.

*Diana Butler Bass, reflecting on the complexities of Christ the King Sunday, writes:*

*Christians haven’t done well with kingship — not in history and not now. We’ve far too often desired our own Jesus-Caesar to kick earthly kings and emperors in the teeth. We’ve wanted our Jesus, our vision of Christ, to triumph politically and execute not justice but vengeance. Too many Christians desire an ecclesiastical pyramid of power to rule over the world.*

*But “dominion” was never intended to mean domination. And our twisted views of kingship have done far more damage than good.*

*This year, rereading these texts highlighted a simple truth: God never wanted us to have kings. And any celebration of Christ the King needs always to be an invitation into the work of sacred deconstruction of one of humanity’s worst ideas.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

And that is certainly some of what we were experiencing on Tuesday as we approached this text. And so we wondered, what story could we hear instead? What story do you wish we were reading together on this last Sunday of the church year? How do you end a year and what story defines Jesus as the foundation of a realm of peace? We wondered about the events of the last supper, from Jesus washing feet as the servant of his friends to the inclusivity of the meal that they shared. There was quite a diversity of opinion around that table concerning what Jesus came to do and to be. Not unlike the differences between many churches today. We also wondered about the story of Jesus turning to his disciples, confused about Jesus’ identity, and saying to them, “Who do *you* say that I am?” Peter, with his usual boldness, saying, “You are the Christ.” The anointed, the messiah.

What story would you choose? What story defines his life? His reign as a servant savior? Would you turn to a parable? A healing? The beatitudes? I wondered about the parable of the banquet, in which the original invited guests are unable to attend the party, so the host sends the servants out to gather in anyone and everyone they can find: the homeless, the disabled, the wounded, the lost. Any who in that day and age might have been discounted, devalued. But that would probably be too easy, and we do not get off easily today.

We pause with some of his last words. We stand with the witnesses, and might we imagine ourselves among them as we listen to these conversations?

Luke gives us: the people, watching; the leaders, sneering; the soldiers, mocking. Watching, sneering, and mocking as Jesus is executed between two criminals. The watchers included those who loved him, powerless to halt his execution. The watchers also included the curious, but might there have also been family members of the criminals? Do we ever think about that? Jesus’ family and friends were not the only ones grieving that day. Other mothers lost sons, other siblings lost a brother, others lost a friend.

Watching, sneering, mocking. “Save yourself! They shout. “You saved others!”

“If you are the Christ, sent by God, save yourself!”

“If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”

Which reveals that they never understood. Saving himself would have been the last thing on Jesus’ mind. Saving himself was never part of the plan. Yes, saving others, from suffering, from isolation, from fear, from despair. Yes, to all of that life-giving salvation. But himself? He chose vulnerability over control. He chose serving over being served. He chose to speak truth to power rather than to allow power to speak falsehood to him. Those who sneered, those who mocked, could not possibly have known him. Or maybe… they were aware of his teachings, his truths, but out of fear, or loyalty to the political system chose to stand against him.

And then one of the criminals adds his voice to the others, “Save yourself if you are the Christ.” “Save us, too,” he adds. Luke tells us that he said these words as an insult, not expecting to be saved from certain death. But maybe he was wise enough to realize that this Jesus would never have saved himself alone. His desperate plea involves all three of them.

Before Jesus could answer, the convicted on the other side of Jesus responds with a very different, and troubling perspective. “We are rightly condemned; we are receiving the *appropriate* sentence for what we did.” We cannot go past this comment without acknowledging that nowhere on this earth is torture an “appropriate sentence” for anyone, even as our own state continues to attempt executions which result in torture. Appropriate in terms of what the law allowed, yes. Completely inappropriate in every other way.

“Remember me,” this criminal says. A bold statement considering his understandings of what he believes he deserves. “Remember me.” Not, “save me,” or “save us,” or “save yourself.” He doesn’t say any of those words. He must know that Jesus would have saved himself by now if that was his intention. He recognizes how the day will go and he accepts it, but he also asks to be remembered. What a humbling and universal desire. “Don’t forget me.” And then he adds, “when you come into your kingdom.”

This man, among the leaders and soldiers and watchers, recognizes Jesus. In these moments he understands that if God were going to give the people a king, it would be *this* kind of king, not of earth’s creation, but of heaven’s very heart.

Three years ago, reflecting on this text, this Reign of Christ Sunday, Debbi Thomas wrote:

*What does it mean in the time and place we live in — a time marked by greed, selfishness, and bitter partisanship — to honor Christ's kingship through his passion?  What does the cross offer us by way of example, warning, and benediction?  What version of citizenship might we live out that will begin to mirror our king's?*

*As I sit with this week's lectionary passages, what strikes me most is what I*don't*see:*

*I see no path to glory that sidesteps humility, surrender, and sacrificial love.  I see no permission to secure my prosperity at the expense of another's suffering.  I see no tolerance for the belief that holy ends justify debased means.  I see no evidence that truth-telling is optional.  I see no kingdom that favors the contemptuous over the broken-hearted.  And I see no church that thrives when it aligns itself with brute power.*

*Where does this leave us?  I think it leaves us with a king who makes us profoundly uncomfortable.[[3]](#endnote-3)*

What a way to end one year and begin the next…with discomfort. With questions. With the invitation to look at the Jesus who is in the very midst of everything we could ever experience or endure. Never leaving us, but always present, especially in the midst of pain or uncertainty, trial or fear.

We are much better at marking beginnings than endings, but as this Christian year ends, I pray we can all reflect with honesty, and anticipate a future with hope. Jesus will never forget us. Of that we can be sure. Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. Finley Peter Dunne (1867-1936), writing of journalism [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Diana Butler Bass, The Cottage, 2022, [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Thomas, Debbi, The Journey with Jesus, 2019, https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2458-a-king-like-no-other [↑](#endnote-ref-3)