

SERMON: "THIS IS THE KING?"

**TEXTS: OLD TESTAMENT JEREMIAH 23:1-6
NEW TESTAMENT LUKE 23:33-43**

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INTRODUCTION

The way the calendar works is that we spend some time focused on stewardship in October and early November. Johnny and I enjoy tailoring sermon series for that time of the year when we start planning for the next year. We then shift from the stewardship series back to the lectionary and the liturgical year, to the last Sunday of the church year. Then a new year begins with advent the next week.

The shift feels to me a bit like driving across the country, like I just did for football last week and will do again next week for Thanksgiving. You're driving along on cruise control, making good time ... then signs for road work ahead then brake lights, then quality time with other drivers who, seems to me, could move a little quicker, close some gaps ... or just get out the way

Here's the traffic pattern for the end of the church year. Stewardship series then the Reign of Christ Sunday, then the first Sunday of Advent with passages about the rapture, the end of time, on the Sunday after Thanksgiving That's a traffic jam. And to ratchet up the anxiety for pulpit and pew for the Reign of Christ Sunday, we get the story of Jesus' crucifixion

If you are thinking, why did Dave pick this passage? I did not I was asking the same question ... why did the scholars who put the lectionary together pick this passage for this Sunday? They could have gone with something about Jesus as the King of kings, something lofty like the statue on the screen ... But they went with the story of Jesus on the cross.

Once again, I defer to the wisdom of others. This just might be the best way to talk about Jesus as king ... by talking about Jesus' on the cross I like the question raised by a Lutheran pastor writing on these verses from Luke for Working Preacher. She raised the question, the central question ... *"How do we respond to the King who reigns from a cross?"*

First, let's take all our assumptions and expectations about leadership – what it looks like, how leaders lead, what we look for in our leaders. and be honest about that. Get that mental picture, name some names Then set that aside for later use. Now take your expectations about Jesus who you understand him to be, how he leads, what we look for from him

Now take those two. Set them side by side and see how they fit together If they do. I think that is what we are supposed to do as followers of Jesus to do that regularly and routinely, especially on this Reign of Christ Sunday To ask ourselves, "who do we follow and how do we follow?"

FROM THE CROSS ... MERCY

Listen again to these verses and notice how active Jesus is on the cross
He says two things, does two things. Actually, it looks like he does
the same thing twice. He shows mercy. Interesting time and place for that

**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."**

Jesus is suffering in ways unimaginable to us and not just physically
He's an innocent man hung on a cross between two criminals
The verses we read earlier show how so very many were against him
The religious leaders who had Jesus arrested in the first place
The crowds, the soldiers, even the people crucified next to him

They all join in mocking him ... and his status as a king, saying in effect
'Show us your power.' The sign they choose to tack on his cross
also seemed designed to send the same taunting message

**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."**

How does Jesus respond to all that cruelty? With mercy! Forgive them, he says.
He adds ... "for they do not know what they are doing."
I admit, I'm not so sure about that ... in their context or ours

I remember going to see the movie, "The Passion" about Jesus' crucifixion
directed by Mel Gibson. It was controversial because it is so violent,
so graphic and bloody. One scene stuck with me – the one where Jesus
is handed over to be whipped, beaten and mocked before he is crucified.
In the film, the men who were beating Jesus were clearly enjoying themselves

Let's be real. There are those among us, and a little something within us
that knows exactly what we are doing, that does enjoy the violence
and if not that ... somehow finds it easy to overlook or explain the cruelty.
History teaches us, if we have ears to hear, about the cruelty we are
capable of when we are convinced we are in the right

Jesus practicing mercy from the cross and saying, "father, forgive them for they
know not what they are doing" is not an excuse for us to practice cruelty or
willful ignorance. It is instead an opportunity – one to receive that radical mercy
and two to actually be so bold as to try and practice that kind of mercy

QUESTIONS FOR US

Jesus shows mercy ... from the cross. That is how he reigns as king
He does so at the beginning of this passage in a very plural way – Forgive them
and then again at the end of the story in a one on one kind of way.

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 in your kingdom.” He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

In this case, the one man asks Jesus to remember him in his kingdom
Sounds to me like he asked for mercy, like he asked to be included
In a way the telling of this story makes this guy look relatively good
He admits he has been justly condemned ... and he asks for mercy

Could we do that ... admit our wrong and ask for mercy?
And to take it a step farther and follow Jesus' example, can we then show mercy
Can we show mercy in the tough times, show mercy when we are not shown mercy
Show mercy when we are shown ignorance or indifference or cruelty

I'm noticing a shift in my approach to studying scripture, as I get older and I pray wiser
I used to bring all sorts of questions to the text. I still do
That is my occupation and my vocation, to be a student of scripture

But what the Holy Spirit has been teaching me of late (and maybe I'm late
to learning this valuable lesson) is to let the text, God's word, ask questions ...
to ask questions of me – to let it challenge me, open my head and heart
and eyes see to what God is doing and trying to do through me.

I could wrap this sermon up by pointing out the difference between Jesus
and how he reigns from the cross ... and comparing that to our leaders
and how they rule from gold trimmed halls of power. I could do that
but that would not be letting the bible ask questions of me

You see, here is my thinking about our leaders – how I read history.
Our leaders don't really lead us. Rarely do they get out front with a vision
and challenge us to rise to that opportunity. All too often, our leaders follow
They follow the trends – like stalling on releasing the Epstein files to then,
when a tipping point is reached, voting almost unanimously to release them

Our leaders, far too often, instead of bringing out the best in us, tap into the worst of us
the part of us that cheers when someone else is humiliated or hurt ... like the crowds
and soldiers and the man on the cross who mocked Jesus and his suffering
“You call yourself a king ... well, Jesus, show us, impress us”

SUMMARY

I have tried through my own life to learn from trial and error ... And more errors.
I've tried to learn from the times I have cheered on the bullies,
or stood by in silence ... or worse been the bully. I am committed
to learn from my own mistakes ... to be honest about the bad
I've tried to regularly preach and practice that kind of honesty and humility

That kind of humble intentionality is a big part of my walk with Christ
I need that at least weekly opportunity in our worship together to admit my sin
and shortcomings. But that is not enough. Actually it is bit backwards

Seeing the bad news clearly is a good thing
But a better thing is seeing the good news clearly,
seeing what God has done and is doing ...

What we see in the gospels is that Jesus' story is one of him extending mercy

Jesus reigns. He reigns from the cross by showing mercy
So putting first things first - Receive that mercy, claim and keep it
Because I am, you are, we are, they are ... kept by that mercy

Then, emboldened by that gift of mercy
If I really want to follow Jesus and I do ... then I will show his mercy
And I won't just show it ... I'll share his mercy, I'll practice his mercy

We do that, we receive mercy ,, then show it, share it, practice it
Who knows enough of that mercy starts going round
It might just trickle up to our leaders