

“Thy Kingdom Come”
Luke 23:33-43

This might not be the story you were expecting to hear in the midst of this weekend of holiday kickoff festivities. This is a story of the end. And as Rusty said in the Word for Children, this is the end. The end of the church year, the church year ends with a remembrance, ever holding before us, that Christ is our King, at the end.

There isn't a countdown, or ball dropping, or joyful noisemakers to mark what will be the New Year. It may be odd to know that with several weeks left in our calendar year, that today is in fact the last day of the year. Christ the King Sunday. Christ is here at the end, Christ our Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end. We read then, the story from the gospel of Luke of what everyone thought would be the end – the crucifixion. But we get a glimpse beyond into “kingdom come,” paradise today.

Next week our new year begins in Advent, with joyful anticipation, watching and waiting, for the birth of a newborn King, it is the birth of this baby Jesus for whom Mary sings out loud in her Magnificat, “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” Even in Mary's song of thanksgiving, we hear hints of what kind of kingdom Jesus will be king of.

It's a *baby* whose birth even powerful King Herod fears, all of a sudden some strange wise men from the East show up asking about some newborn King of the Jews. And Matthew tells us, “When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the *Messiah* was to be born.” This Messiah Jesus, from the beginning a king, and here at the end, king. Jesus, King of the Jews.

But this isn't really a good PR campaign for kings that we find in this story. This probably isn't what Mary imagined when the angel promised her that son she would bear, the one called Jesus, “will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, 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.”

As Herod feared, this is indeed a job description of the very Messiah that so many Jews of the time were looking for. You see, the Messiah, a Hebrew word, means anointed one. It's not a word we use often for anyone but Jesus, but it is a common concept throughout the Old Testament. In Psalm 18, we read “Great triumphs [God] gives to his king, and shows steadfast love to his **anointed**, to David and his descendants forever.” This is the line Jesus is a part of! A son of David, an heir to the throne. Early in his ministry Jesus quotes from Isaiah, “The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has **anointed** me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.” This is why we call Jesus the Christ – Christ is simply the Greek word for Messiah. Each time we say Jesus Christ, we celebrate that Jesus is King, the anointed one, the promised and coming Messiah.

What kind of king is Jesus? What is the king doing on a cross? Obviously this was the question on everyone's minds, gathered there watching that day, because it is repeated THREE times in this reading from Luke, “If you are the Messiah/King, save yourself!” Because that's what everyone thought the Messiah would do! Many Jews of the time awaited the coming of the Messiah, because they thought he would restore Israel, bring back the glory of the days of King David and Solomon, kick the Romans out of Jerusalem, rule with a strong and mighty hand. But here, on the cross, hangs the so-called King of the Jews. Seemingly power-less, who won't even save himself, much less anyone else, much less save Israel. As the choir sang, this is a paradoxical kingship.

“Clothed in light upon the mountain, stripped of might upon the cross
Shining in eternal glory, beggar'd by a soldier's toss
You the everlasting instant, you who are both gift and cost.”

No one seemed to get it. It is a hard thing to grasp. His disciples either betrayed or deserted him, he hangs as a criminal. Even the criminal at his side taunts him, "If you are the Messiah, save yourself *and us!*" But the moment of grace in the story comes from an unexpected voice, from the criminal on his other side somehow grasping something no one else there did, says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into **your Kingdom.**"

Kingdom? I'm not seeing a kingdom here, I'm only seeing the end. But the criminal's prayer and plea points us in the right direction. He approaches Jesus with a spirit of confession. "I know I have done wrong and deserve this punishment, but he is innocent. Jesus remember me." And Jesus promises him that he will be with him as his kingdom comes, even that very day.

In that same spirit, we pray, each time we pray the words of the Lord's Prayer, we ask, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done."

Presbyterian minister Patrick Willson, says about the Lord's Prayer, "If prayer is as natural as a child calling out to a parent in the dark, this prayer is as unnatural as surrendering our lives, our wants and wishes and wills, to Another. We readily cry out in our need but we do not so readily give up what we want. This is advanced prayer. It takes time and experience and maturity to learn to pray "your kingdom come, your will be done," and it does not come easily if it happens at all. It's really quite simple: we want what we want; we pray for our will to be done; we may even pray for the coming of our own little mini-kingdoms."

As I thought of this idea of mini-kingdoms, I remembered what it was like at as a child to play. And I have the gift of two half-siblings who are young, seven and five, and they love to play with me. So I join them in their playroom, not quite sure what to expect, usually how things go: My seven year old sister says, "Jenny, play with me! We're playing doctor's office, you take all of these dollies and sit over there and you're gonna be the mommy. I'm the doctor. Ian, you're the secretary, you don't get to have any dollies. No, you can't do that!! Jenny, stop him! Those are my dollies! You go sit over there!" What she did, is created her own imaginative world, and she was in charge. She was the queen of her little kingdom of the doctors office.

We adults hang on to these fantasies too, we want to climb the ladder, we want to extend our sphere of influence. However to pray, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done" is to let go of the illusion that we are in charge, that we are the king or queen of our little worlds. And it is to acknowledge that Christ is King, and that it is through God's power and providence that the true Reign of Christ will come, not by our own, however righteous actions.

To acknowledge Christ as King, to call Christ Lord, is to give our allegiance to him. As we will read together from "A Declaration of Faith," a modern confession of faith of the Presbyterian church, we confess that Jesus is Lord. It is a central confession of our faith and one of the earliest uttered by the Christian community. It is the first question that we each answer when joining a church, or baptizing a child, or when ordaining officers and leaders in the church. "Who is your Lord and Savior?" But what does it mean? To us, maybe not so much, because we don't live in a system of patronage or a feudal system of lords and serfs. But for early Christians to say that Jesus was Lord was to put themselves outside the system, they didn't belong to Rome, but to God. And to call Jesus King – well that was quite astonishing when you realize that the Greek word that we translate King in the gospels is the same word the Romans used for their Emperor. Jesus is Emperor, not Caesar. You can see how this was a startling confession. If Jesus is Lord, then we are not. If Jesus is Lord, then the powers of this world are not! The powers of this world that end in brokenness and oppression and violence are not our end. This can be a liberating thought, if we can choose to accept the grace of it.

But not everyone desires the kingdom that Jesus offers; some people prefer different kingdoms and different kings. Not everyone wanted Jesus Christ. Jesus was not crucified because he was misunderstood; he was crucified because people understood him all too well. Not everyone wants the Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus preached. C. S. Lewis elegantly described this dilemma in his novel *The Great Divorce*.

The premise of Lewis' story is simple: each year a tour bus arrives in hell to offer the inhabitants of hell a vacation, a holiday in heaven. There's no catch. They get a vacation in heaven. If they wish, they may stay. Most of them choose not to stay. They want something other than heaven, they are committed to something other than what God would gladly provide for them.

All of the souls from hell feel they deserve better, as a matter of fact they feel entitled to something better. Hell is the Kingdom of Entitlement. "I only want my rights," says one, "I'm not asking for anybody's charity."

"Then do. At once," his guide says, "Ask for Charity. Everything is here for the asking and nothing can be bought."

In heaven no one gets what he or she deserves, no one gets what he or she are entitled to. What heaven has to give is Joy, Grace, only a gift. Joy only comes as a gift and can only be received with gratitude. If hell is the Kingdom of Entitlement, heaven is the Kingdom of Gratitude.

Those who know the gentle customs of the Kingdom of Gratitude know how to open their hands to receive the joy and grace that God gives so generously.

Heaven is a Kingdom of Gratitude, where nothing is earned, only given through the gracious act of God. This is the Kingdom Jesus promises to the criminal who hangs beside him, and the Kingdom he indeed ushered in during his life and ministry.

It is a topsy-turvy kingdom, a paradoxical kingdom! Where the last are first, and the first last. Where the greatest is the servant and slave of all. Again, to use Isaiah's words, it is a kingdom that speaks a word of "good news to the oppressed, peace to the brokenhearted, liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners." It is a kingdom where there 5,000 are fed with a few loaves and fishes, and there is more than enough to go around.

Thy kingdom come!! And this vision of God's abundant kingdom can help us realize the problem of praying for our own will to be done or our own little mini-kingdom to come – it's that we don't make room for the abundance beyond our imagining that God stands ready to offer. Thomas Traherne, the 17th century English theologian and poet wrote that our own human wills and wants are small and paltry but that Christian faith causes us to want like God wants. God's will for us so much more extravagant than anything we might dream or desire. Praying for God's will to be done does not surrender what we hope for, rather it opens us to look for a kingdom that is so much more than we knew to hope for.

And so in this season of harvest and abundance, we will gather together with friends and family to give thanks. We will share table and count our blessings. But as we give thanks for what we have, we can also keep in mind the feast in the heavenly kingdom. The feast that Jesus described when he compared the banquet of heaven to the man giving a wonderful feast, but his guests didn't show up. So the master sent servants into the streets to gather those to share the banquet. Let us say yes, let us receive the invitation we cannot deserve but can only be offered as a gift. An invitation from our very Lord and King – to share the feast, to share in the kingdom, to truly pray "thy kingdom come." And when we truly pray, "thy kingdom come" let us give thanks, let us recognize that what we have is a gift, let us pray for others to share the feast with us. Amen.