

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
Christ the King Sunday
November 20, 2016

Three men went, walking together, in tandem, ushered along by the sound of marching boots, stomping on the path beside them, rushing them along at a brisk rate, while still possible. The dirt was hard and smooth, almost as glass. Many had passed this way before, victims and spectators alike. Shouts of condemnation erupted from the crowd, fiery insults were slung their way, and children peered through the crowd with eyes as big as saucers, with a strange attraction to this horror show unfolding before them.

The three men went, walking together, in silence, feeling a strange and morbid sense of comradery. They recognized each other's thoughts, bore each other's fear, winced at each other's pain.

The three men went walking together, negotiating their way down the steep and winding path on the holy hill, the Mount of Olives, slogging their way across the Kedron Valley, languishing as they approached the gates of the holy city of Zion, Jerusalem.

The three men went walking together. One remembered taking this same route, just days before, under very different circumstances. That day, there were also shouts and exclamations and children peering around their parents' legs to catch a glimpse of the spectacle unfolding before them, but it was joyous and the crowd was brimming with excitement. There were shouts of Hosanna in the highest! Faces were filled with expectation, anticipation, and possibility.

The three men went walking together, each bearing the weight of a cross, lugging this weapon of terror to its, and their own, final resting place.

People stood watching. For some it was an out-of-body experience, wallowing in utter disbelief. Others slung words of hatred, incited violence, and stripped these three men of all their dignity, inflicting pain, reveling in the horror as they heard the hammer hit the nails and the shrieks of pain. Torment and distress contorted the faces of most.

Then, in this most unlikely place, at this most unlikely time, one criminal, struggling and with great effort, imperceptibly lifts his chin, and slightly rotates his head toward his savior and says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom".

This exchange is preposterous. Through the crowd's eyes, Jesus certainly did not look very kingly at the moment; rather he appeared powerless, having dominion over nothing and no one, and adorned with a crown of thorns, not jewels, as would befit a king.

And at that moment, I bet you could have searched the entire human realm and it would have been impossible to find two people with less earthly hope of anything beyond their death than these two conversation partners. By any reasonable human standard, they were finished. Finished because they were Jews oppressed under a Roman system of domination. Finished because they were convicted criminals. Finished because they were hanging on the cross as a public spectacle of punishment inflicted upon insurrectionists. Yet this happens. This criminal confesses, calls Jesus by name, and asks to be remembered in Jesus' kingdom. This criminal, one of the three men who went walking together this morning, acted as though Jesus were King. In these most unlikely circumstances, he acts as though Jesus were the Lord of lords, was and would be the one who saves us all. The criminal saw something others would only see much later.

How this criminal knew this about Jesus is a mystery. Maybe in the long hours the previous night, when they had each been lowered down through the chiseled, round hole in the ceiling into their stone-enclosed jail cells, he had listened to Jesus pray. Maybe in those vulnerable early morning hours, when the light is still so dim as to barely be able to discern the shape of the person chained beside you, he saw a resolve in the way Jesus moved his head, he heard a confidence in his breathing, he felt the presence of something unfamiliar to him, yet something that drew him near.

Jesus turns his head in reply, and in his last exchange of words during his earthly life, Jesus whispers, "Truly I tell you, today you will be in paradise with me."

The criminal's words seemed scant, insufficient, and almost pitiable. Yet they were all that was needed. The request was minimal, merely that Jesus remember him. The response was extravagant. Jesus gave him the kingdom, then and there. Jesus gave him peace. Jesus gave him love, and Jesus died doing the one thing he was called to do all along: offer forgiveness. In his last exchange with humankind, Jesus fully lived into his vocation of bringing reconciliation to all humanity. For, like the king or the father in so many of Jesus' own parables, Jesus offers the ones most unworthy the entire feast, the whole garden of God, the state of shalom or wholeness. The criminal's reward was abundant because, in the moments before he died, he began living and acting as though Jesus were king.

This is our challenge too: living and acting as though we believe Jesus is our King. That Jesus is sovereign over our lives, that all that we do, all that we are, and all that we have belongs to Jesus, that Jesus' power and might is true and real and manifested in our world, that there is reason to hope and dream in the midst of despair, that there is a way other than a world full of dominion and oppression.

For when we live and act as though Jesus is King, we are given the gift of hope. As the Christmas carol, "O Holy Night" proclaims: "on the night of our dear Savior's birth, when the world lay in sin and error pining, til he appeared and the soul felt its worth, a thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices." When we fall on our knees and proclaim Jesus as our king, we are given the gift of hope, which our weary world now desperately needs.

Living and acting as though Jesus were our king means that we search for the outbreaks of mercy in the midst of hatred; means that we are inspired by the epiphanies of divine power which draw unlikely people together in reconciliation; means that we refuse to give into the meanness and arrogance which surround us, and which surrounded Jesus as well; means that we refuse to be called away from our core identity as beloved children of God, and means that we offer forgiveness, as Jesus did on the cross.

Our story tells us that the tenacity of God's love is greater than the tenacity of human despair, and when we live and act knowing that Jesus is our king, we lean into that love and receive the gifts of the kingdom: hope, love, peace, wholeness.

In this past week, we as a nation have experienced an outbreak of hateful language and crimes, violent actions, hurtful insults, and the stripping away of human dignity. I imagine this was very much the scene at Jesus' crucifixion. At what seemed like the most helpless and hopeless moment, someone turned their head, spoke to Jesus, acted as though Jesus were king and received salvation. There was no good reason that either Jesus or the criminal could be thinking about anything beyond their own death, yet they both lived in a hope that was not in vain, for they both entered into the kingdom that day.

What would that look like for you, to order your life in the knowledge that Jesus was sovereign over all that you are and all that you have? Would you need to make any changes in what you do? Adjust any attitudes? Surrender something, lay something down as the crowd laid their cloaks down before Jesus the week before in his triumphant march into Jerusalem?

Maybe you need a touchstone, something to hold onto to remind yourself of Jesus' kingship in your life. This may be a dedicated time of holy prayer in the wee hours of the morning. It may be the return to your prayer beads each evening as the day draws to a silent close, and you remember with each bead, a moment in the day when grace appeared, and you offer thanks to the God who is the Lord of all. It may be a commitment to be here each Sunday, making this community your priority. Or it may be your touch of the smooth metal your cross is made of, as you place it around your neck each morning, reminding you that Jesus surrendered it all to God, and you are too. And it may be reaching out to the lonely you encounter each day. Or it may be knitting prayer shawls or quilting lap robes for our veterans, or it may be something small you do each day to make this world a safe place for all.

One of the most powerful moments for me as our group walked the Via Dolorosa, the Way of the Cross, the Stations of the Cross, early one morning through the streets of the Old City of Jerusalem, was the number of people who, on their way to work, stopped and touched or revered one of the stations of the cross, where we happened to be praying. It was their touchstone, I imagine. By placing their hands on the image, or the numbers indicating the station, or on the cross etched in the metal door, it appeared they were connecting themselves to the Christ who hung on the cross, and to whom they are bending the knee of their heart each morning. Touchstones can remind us of our surrender to Jesus the king.

Three men hung on a cross together. One man lived and died into the surrounding darkness. He joined the crowd and mocked and derided the truth of Jesus. The other man lived into the light, lived as though Jesus were King, lived as though there were another reality to ask for, to be given, to live and die in, one where hope resided. The other man, Christ our King, did what he intended to do all this life, welcome, forgive, and offer the entirety of God's kingdom to the least deserving. The kingdom is ours too when we live and die as though Christ is our King.