

Maker, Defender, Redeemer and Friend
Luke 23:33-43; Psalm 46:1-11
Christ the King Sunday

Psalm 46

¹God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

²Therefore we will not fear,
though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
³though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

⁴There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.

⁵God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.

⁶The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.

⁷The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

⁸Come, behold the works of the LORD;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.

⁹He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.

¹⁰“Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.”

¹¹The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Luke 23:33-43

³³When 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.

³⁴Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵And 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!” ³⁶The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, ³⁷and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”

³⁸There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.”

⁴²Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

⁴³He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

The Sermon

A small band of experienced fishers were out on a boat on the Sea of Galilee.ⁱ They carried with them the man they had begun to follow, whose mission was already moving him, almost imperceptibly at this point, toward an encounter in Jerusalem.

But for now, what they saw and heard and experienced with this man was healing—astonishing healing—and teaching about who God is, and how God loves all the people God has made, and what it means to accept God’s love: how healing, and life-affirming it is; how God transforms us as we come to recognize everyone as our neighbor and learn to love everyone as we love ourselves—even our enemies. Even the world.

He was asleep on a cushion in the stern when, seemingly out of nowhere, a windstorm came up, and the waves beat into the boat, and it was about to be swamped. They woke him up and said, “Teacher, is it of no concern to you that we are dying?”

He woke up, and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Hush,” or “Peace!” or “Silence” or “Quiet.” (You could even translate it, “Pipe down!” or “Knock it off!”)

“Peace! Be still.” And the wind stopped, and there was a dead calm.

And he said to the disciples, “Why are you afraid? Do you still not have any faith?”

And in the quiet moments that followed, moments of a different kind of fear—of awe—they said to each other, “*Who, then, is this*, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

I invite you to take a moment now, to tell whatever storms are going on within you: peace; be still. Take a deep breath, and rest.

If it were possible to clear our minds in a few seconds, I would invite you to do that, but that’s not actually how it works; so let’s just accept that that’s not how it works. You don’t have to clear your mind, but I invite you just to let it rest for a little bit.

The reason I make this invitation is that I am going to say a word, and I’m going to invite you to hold whatever image comes into your mind the instant I say that word. It’s not going to be a test, and you’re not going to have to tell anybody about it; there’s no judgement about how good or accurate the image is. It’s just going to be a moment to reflect.

So if you will humor me, I’ll say the word, and then whatever image comes to mind, hold onto that, and we’ll do some thinking about it.

Ready? I’ll say the word, and you hold onto the first image that comes into your mind. The word is: King.

What did you see—I mean what image flashed into your mind immediately?

Was it an object? Or a place?—a crown; a castle; a throne; a scepter?

Was it a person? If so, what did they look like? Was it somebody you have pictured from the Bible, or Game of Thrones, or Shakespeare? Queen Elizabeth, or King Charles? A playing card? King Arthur? Martin Luther King? Leonardo DiCaprio on the bow of the Titanic shouting “I’m King of the World”?

Or was it some other image of a person, or place, or thing?

Today in the liturgical calendar is called Christ the King Sunday, or Reign of Christ Sunday. The Christian worship year starts with the First Sunday of Advent, which is a reflective season of preparation for the coming of God’s chosen one, a Savior, the anointed one.

51 Sundays later, the worship year culminates in Reign of Christ Sunday, wherein we take the time to reflect on what that sign, that was posted over a victim’s head at the site of an execution in Roman occupied Jewish territory, means to us: the sign that said, “This is the King of the Jews.”

We already have some idea what it meant to the people who put it there. They were making sure those occupied people understood: that next to, and against, the fearsome machinery of state bureaucracy and military dominance, this is what your king

is to us: a ragged, broken body, slowly perishing on a post with a cross-beam, about as primitive a contraption as there could be, a simple and unforgettable demonstration of the power of domination in a horizontal line crossing a vertical one.

And your religious authorities—and a population swayed by the constant drumbeat of paranoia and the grievances of those who fear that their surpluses and advantages will be taken from them and given to the undeserving poor—play right into the hands of those who would kill to preserve the status quo of zero-sum power relationships.

In his broken body on the cross, they are, in an arrogant and threatening way, saying, look how weak and small this little, broken man is. Compare that to our armies and all their technology. That's how little we fear him.

But what they are also saying for themselves is: look what ugly, soulless destruction we will stoop to, crushing humanity, smiting true humanity, silencing love.

Because that's how afraid we actually are of the astonishing power of the human capacity for love.

And think of the global chaos that would ensue, how much of our hoarded treasure would be converted to food for the hungry and abundant life for all, if that much love were let loose in the world. This is how terrified we are that people will realize and unleash the essence of God that is within them, which no army or government can withstand.

It turns out they *are* literally that afraid. And earthly powers will do what they do to retain their power and protect their surplus. And Jesus died for us all.

To them, there was both a subtle irony and an unmistakable threat in the message that was inscribed on that sign.

For Christians, over two millennia, the irony has another level.

This broken body on a cross represents, of all inconceivable things, a cosmic victory, not won by us, or by an institution, or by a philosophy or a government or even a theology, but a victory won by God—

and not a victory that God needed (the Creator God doesn't need any elevation, thank you very much), but a victory that humankind needed—that humanity itself needed, and that you and I needed.

And all our symbols of sovereignty, our thoughts of what monarchy means and represents, our images of what it means for someone or something to be queen or king—those are all for us, not for God;

and in the shadow of the cross, in the extravagance of God's love, all of those symbols of power and strength are found to be inadequate, in the face of the one who gave his life in ultimate vulnerability.

“Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition,” says the Brief Statement of Faith in our Book of Confessions,

“Jesus was crucified, suffering the depths of human pain and giving his life for the sins of the world. God raised this Jesus from the dead, vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, delivering us from death to life eternal.”ⁱⁱ

So today is the day, and this is the week, in which we observe his kingship, and consider what it means, to Christians and to the Church,

that Christ is our Sovereign;

that we affirm exactly what the soldiers inscribed on that plaque, which was meant to be an obscene token of derision, but that we take absolutely seriously as an answer to the question posed by those fishers on the Sea of Galilee just a few astonishing years earlier: who, then, is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?

This is the King of the Jews.

In 2022, the meaning of words like King, and Queen, and monarchy—and the meaning of the symbols associated with those words—has become, at best, opaque,

but in many ways, deeply problematic, especially when taking a closer look at history and hearing the voices of *all* involved, not just the winners on the battlefields and in global industry;

and the value attached to the ideas that those words and symbols represent is, to put it delicately, undergoing serious reconsideration.

In an eight-line poem, William Butler Yeats imagined the magi who had brought the gold, frankincense and myrrh to the toddler Jesus. Now it is years later, and they are much older: grey-templed, standing in view of the cross, and still, all these years later, still searching for... What exactly *were* they searching for on that long-ago night when a celestial sign told them that a new king had been born in the city called House of Bread—Bethlehem?

Now as at all times I can see in the mind's eye,
 in their stiff, painted clothes, the pale unsatisfied ones
 appear and disappear in the blue depth of the sky
 with all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones,
 and all their helms of silver hovering side by side,
 and all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more,
 being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied,
 the uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.ⁱⁱⁱ

What are *you* searching for and finding in the uncontrollable mystery?

And who is this man to you, this king, the one we acclaim as Lord of Life and Sovereign God of the universe,

this ragged man who in his divinity taught us what it means to be fully human, whose testimony about who God is and what God wants for you was proclaimed through feeding and healing

and restoring to life; through calling outcasts in and sending disciples out; through teaching and enacting and embodying love; whose defeat was the source of his victory, and whose love was confirmed in giving to the very end?

As we move toward next Sunday, another cosmic voyage around the sun and another season of preparing for the coming of Christ into our hearts and into the world;

as we prepare for the national holiday this Thursday, and the spiritual opportunity to take stock of all we have to be thankful for;

as we prepare to go from here today, proclaiming Good News to the world in everything we say and do, and even in what we think and how faithful we are to God, each other, and the very best and noblest of what each of us can be,

who is this man to you, and what does it mean to you when he is called King?

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November 20, 2022

ⁱ Mark 4

ⁱⁱ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions, “A Brief Statement of Faith”

ⁱⁱⁱ W.B. Yeats, “The Magi” (public domain)