

SERMON
"The End"
Becky A. Hebert
Reign of Christ
Stewardship/Memorial Service
November 21, 2010

Jeremiah 23: 1-6

Luke 23: 33-43

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." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. 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**."

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. The he said, "Jesus remember me when you come into your **kingdom**. He replied, "Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

SERMON

This is a glorious day! A stand up and shout sort of day, for this is the day we celebrate the reign of Christ. This is the last Sunday of the liturgical calendar. Today the Christ story draws to an end. This is the place, like in the old movies, where “The End” flashes across the screen. Next Sunday we start the story all over again with the first Sunday of Advent. But today the hero rides off into the sunset leaving all evil-doers put in their place. This Sunday we celebrate that in the end God wins—and Christ rules supreme!

So why in the heck does the liturgical calendar offer up, on this crescendo day, this gruesome scene of Jesus hanging on a cross? Granted, there are more than enough mentions of Jesus as **the King, the Messiah, the chosen one**—but from all of them but one, radiates off the lips of mockers. This is one of the saddest scenes in the bible. Our sweet Jesus has endured being deserted by his friends, whipped, spit on, forced to drag his own cross, had nails banged into his flesh and bones and hung between two criminals. To all of this he responds, “Abba, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” What compassion, what love he had—and has—for all of us. How could the people standing by watching not have heard it in his voice and seen it in his eyes?

Instead they scoffed, mocked and derided him. The people standing by; the leaders, the soldiers and even one of the criminals—ridiculed him, made fun of him, and belittled him saying, “If you are the Messiah of God, if you are the chosen one, if you are the King of the Jews, save yourself.”

Maybe, I can’t be certain, this is just an idea that ran through my mind in my attempt to write this sermon. Heaven knows, I’ve got to put some of those thoughts down on paper so I will have something to say come Sunday, but maybe, just maybe, all those men who put together

the lectionary decided, “Why not **remind** those who know...how the story ends. **Remind** them how the evil-doers got put in their place as God and Jesus rode off into the sunset”.

For you see, the following verses say it all. “It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun’s light failed and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Abba, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having said this, he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, “Certainly this man was innocent.” And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home beating their breasts.” How’s that for a riding off into the sunset scene, with the mean spirited mockers going home with their tails between their legs?

When all is said and done, we live in the present as different people, hopeful and confident because we know the end of the story. In the end God wins. The dooms day shouters and the mocking bullies may tattle their tongue, yet, with the last tick-tock of the story, God wins and they go home beating their breasts, berating ourselves for being so blind to not see the truth right before our eyes. Am I all alone here, or have some of you done this scene once or twice—realized how blind you were to see the truth before your eyes, and realized it when **it was too late to undo what had been done**, only left to rebuke yourself and go home beating your chest?

When I was serving a church in Minneapolis there was a dear heart with whom I loved to talk. She was 98 years old. She had lived through the death of her first husband when she was a young mother and left with two sons to raise on her own. She accomplished this by cleaning other people’s homes. One of the homes she cleaned was for a man who had lost his wife. They fell in love and married. “Oh the love I felt for him,” she told me, “was much greater than the love I had for my son’s father. Those were truly blissful years. Then he died. Oh, how I

grieved. Then one of my sons gave me a wonderful granddaughter who has been the love of my life. If only I had known that in the end it all turns out just fine. If I'd have known, I would not have fretted so. Oh, how much time, I wasted fretting.”

We never know exactly what the future holds, but we who build our lives on a foundation of Jesus Christ, the one who was crucified because he was perceived to be a threat to the reigning order, will discover in the end no matter what happens, how foolish and blind we are. Christ reigns! When the world is at its bleakest or we are caught up in a whirlwind of confusion, God does God's best work. If only we could remember that in the end it all turns out just fine. And by “in the end”, I do not necessarily mean just at the end of our lives. It's more like in-the-end when all is said and done kind of thing—a sort of bottom line to life.

The Feast of Christ the King was created in the Roman Catholic Church in the mid-20th century. It was a time when states were asserting their dominance over world affairs. When the world was torn asunder by wars instigated by totalitarian governments; the church asserted that though states may battle for control and power, ultimately Christ rules.

William Willimon, suggests that one of the reasons why some people find it hard to believe in Jesus is because they find it difficult to believe that there is any sovereign power greater than that of the secular modern government.¹

When I was in Louisiana a while back I got into a political argument with one of my cousins. There is no getting around it. Cajuns love to argue politics. Since so many of them are in agreement about the current political scene, I was a welcome adversary. My cousin, Billy, and I had made all of our best points and were settling into realizing, yet again, we were not going to change each other's minds. I said, “You know Billy? In the long run, it is not going to be the Republicans or the Democrats who are going to save us.” He bit. “Well, who is, then?”

¹ William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource for November*, 34

“Ultimately, it’s up to God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit—to save us.”

“Huh! No sense arguing with a minister on that one.” With that response he walked off to check on the latest election returns.

Recently, Forbes magazine published a list of who they perceive to be the most powerful people in the world. Of the first 10, seven were heads of state, one a religious figure and one the wealthiest man in the world. I wonder, would Forbes find it difficult to believe that there is any sovereign power greater than that of the secular modern governments, the Pope, or Bill Gates? Do we really? Do we really...believe? Are we able to invest our money, our gifts and our lives on the sturdy foundation of Jesus Christ?

How easy it is to get caught up in fretting while we try to crunch figures that add up to a balanced budget—even when we know how the story ends.

We who wear the name of Christ often need to be reminded to relive our salvation stories. Pete Graham somehow knew this last week. As all of you know, Perdy and John Scafe’s son, Phil, had a brain tumor that turned out malignant, removed week before last. John received the news that his youngest son may not have long to live, at the bowling alley. He fell apart, sobbing. Pete walked over and started talking to him about the salvation history they had shared over the years. He talked about how hard they had worked to build their church and early memories of this church’s beginning. John wondered at the time why he was talking to him about this, but then he realized it was working. John said what Pete was saying was very comforting, and later he wondered if Pete knew or how he knew that this would be such a comfort. Pete said he was only trying to get John’s mind on something else. Pete may have not known it, but in choosing to talk about salvation history, he chose that which gives us courage and hope. We live in the present as different people, hopeful and confident because we know the

end of the story. Sometimes we just need to be reminded; reminded of how evil gets put in its place when we remember how the story ends.

This does not necessarily mean that all stories have a happy ending. Remember Jesus died tragically at the young age of thirty-two. It means that when we remember the history contained in this space (*motioning to the space in which we are sitting*), all the events we have suffered through together, the weddings we have celebrated together, the confirmations, the baptisms, the conversations in that Narthex—and down the hall and around the corner to the Fellowship Hall once sanctuary, all the sausage suppers, bazaars, and the night we became a shelter and Pete walking that lady's dog, and the two of you who took that same lady home with you because no other shelter would take a woman with her dog, and oh, the general good times and laughter. When we remember, we know we are hearing the most powerful story ever told.

Remember the night they made fun of him while he hung on the cross. How they mocked him saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, why don't you come down from there and save yourself. Yes, Mister King of the Jews, why don't you save yourself." This has to be the saddest story in our long history." But the government then and now does not hold the ultimate power; nor does death, nor does wealth, and nor do those discretionary dollar bills to which we cling for security...have the power to save us. This last one can be a big one for us. You know the "what if" we part with too much of our money? What if some unexpected expenses arise? Then we mentally go through a litany of things that could go wrong along with reasons to give the church less—the very place that houses our salvation history that can truly save us. "Forgive us God, for we know not what we are doing. "

Do you not remember the night Trinity rode off into the sunset? I know it seems so long ago, but time does not change the fact that in the end, God wins. With God, it is never too late to

undo what is done. We live in the present as different people, hopeful and confident because we know the end of the story. Amen.