

Jeremiah 23

Watch out, you shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture, declares the Lord. ²This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, proclaims about the shepherds who “tend to” my people: You are the ones who have scattered my flock and driven them away. You haven’t attended to their needs, so I will take revenge on you for the terrible things you have done to them, declares the Lord. ³I myself will gather the few remaining sheep from all the countries where I have driven them. I will bring them back to their pasture, and they will be fruitful and multiply. ⁴I will place over them shepherds who care for them. Then they will no longer be afraid or dread harm, nor will any be missing, declares the Lord. ⁵The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up a righteous descendant^[a] from David’s line, and he will rule as a wise king. He will do what is just and right in the land. ⁶During his lifetime, Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And his name will be The Lord Is Our Righteousness.

Psalms 46

God is our refuge and strength,
a help always near in times of great trouble.
²That’s why we won’t be afraid when the world falls apart,
when the mountains crumble into the center of the sea,
³ when its waters roar and rage,
when the mountains shake because of its surging waves. *Selah*
⁴There is a river whose streams gladden God’s city,
the holiest dwelling of the Most High.
⁵God is in that city. It will never crumble.
God will help it when morning dawns.
⁶Nations roar; kingdoms crumble.
God utters his voice; the earth melts.
⁷The Lord of heavenly forces is with us!
The God of Jacob is our place of safety. *Selah*
⁸Come, see the Lord’s deeds,
what devastation he has imposed on the earth—
⁹ bringing wars to an end in every corner of the world,
breaking the bow and shattering the spear,
burning chariots with fire.
¹⁰ “That’s enough! Now know that I am God!
I am exalted among all nations; I am exalted throughout the world!”
¹¹ The Lord of heavenly forces is with us!
The God of Jacob is our place of safety. *Selah*

Colossians 1

¹¹ by being strengthened through his glorious might so that you endure everything and have patience;¹² and by giving thanks with joy to the Father. He made it so you could take part in the inheritance, in light granted to God’s holy people. ¹³ He rescued us from the control of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son he loves. ¹⁴ He set us free through the Son and forgave our sins.
¹⁵ The Son is the image of the invisible God,
the one who is first over all creation,^[a]

16 Because all things were created by him:
both in the heavens and on the earth,
the things that are visible and the things that are invisible.
Whether they are thrones or powers,
or rulers or authorities,
all things were created through him and for him.
17 He existed before all things,
and all things are held together in him.
18 He is the head of the body, the church,
who is the beginning,
the one who is firstborn from among the dead^[a]
so that he might occupy the first place in everything.
19 Because all the fullness of God was pleased to live in him,
20 and he reconciled all things to himself through him—
whether things on earth or in the heavens.
He brought peace through the blood of his cross.

Luke 23

33 When they arrived at the place called The Skull, they crucified him, along with the criminals, one on his right and the other on his left. 34 Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." They drew lots as a way of dividing up his clothing.

35 The people were standing around watching, but the leaders sneered at him, saying, "He saved others. Let him save himself if he really is the Christ sent from God, the chosen one."

36 The soldiers also mocked him. They came up to him, offering him sour wine³⁷ and saying, "If you really are the king of the Jews, save yourself." 38 Above his head was a notice of the formal charge against him. It read "This is the king of the Jews."

39 One of the criminals hanging next to Jesus insulted him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

40 Responding, the other criminal spoke harshly to him, "Don't you fear God, seeing that you've also been sentenced to die? 41 We are rightly condemned, for we are receiving the appropriate sentence for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong." 42 Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

43 Jesus replied, "I assure you that today you will be with me in paradise."

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

There she was, buried in a pile of colorful, crunchy leaves all fallen from the edge of the forest, glaring across the open field at the hill she so desperately wanted to claim as her own. She'd planned her hostile takeover. She knew how to execute the mission. All she needed now, of course, was opportunity. The current king constantly glared her way, not actually seeing her but knowing the woods and the leaf pile presented too good of a hiding place to ignore. As she schemed the best way to approach, a better opportunity arose opposite her position. The king had looked too long her way, and another usurper charged, full of vigor but not of intelligence, directly toward the King of the Hill. As the King turned to tangle with the direct assault, her window opened. The sudden movement exploded a colorful canon

of foliage as she dashed toward her prize. She chugged up the hill, pushed both boys from the crest, toppling their would-be reigns, and declared herself King of the Hill just as the bell rang to end recess.

And that's how we typically expect kings to behave, right? We expect power hungry individuals, either on their own or with the help of others, to take over the terrain of the earth, to reign from on high with force and vengeance, to politically exercise their will on us, even if we don't want them to rule. We expect the world stage to play out like full scale version of King of the Hill. This game, one which many of us likely played throughout our childhoods, offers a silly example of our very real expectations: that authority is taken by force.

It's Christ the King Sunday, a day when we might find ourselves drawn to the songs and stories of victory and strength. We sang once again today, "This is the feast of

victory for our God. Alleluia!" We might imagine Christ's throne something like those belonging to Peter, Susan, Edwin, and Lucy Pevensie in the Chronicles of Narnia: carved white marble with gilded inlays and ornate, plush cushions. We might think that Christ's crown is like that of Prince John's in Disney's Robin Hood, bejeweled, golden and altogether too big to stay on his head. We might even look for a scepter in Jesus's hands, long and shiny like that of Saruman in Lord of the Rings, indicative of the massive authority and unchallenged power that Jesus, our King, holds.

But instead we find Christ's hands wide open, nailed to the wood that constitutes his throne: a cross, roughhewn and heavy, carrying the weight of his life and, eventually, his death. There's no jewels in his crown, but thorns that dig deep into his scalp, scraping the bone of his skull. Here is our King, here is our God, hammered to his throne. He's raised,

not on a pedestal in a palace, but on an instrument of capital punishment. There is no scepter to indicate his power, but instead a few words of seemingly empty promises as he gasps his last breaths. And this is the feast of victory for our God? Though raised high on a hill outside of Jerusalem, this seems like a powerless king.

Though we might think that we're participating in an ancient celebration – I certainly did until a few weeks ago – Pope Pius XI made Christ the King Sunday a feast of the Church in 1925, which is incredibly recent. Unlike Pentecost, Christmas and Easter, whose origins and celebrations date back to the first century of the church, Christ the King arose between the World Wars. Until 1929, the Papal States still had limited political authority, which they eventually lost to Italian nationalism and the rise of fascism under Il Duce, Benito Mussolini. At the time, the world was reeling from the devastation of WWI, anxieties

were high due to the continued militarization of Europe, North America, and East Asia, and many people were claiming rights and authorities over lands far from their traditional boundaries. In a sense, everybody wanted to be the king, not just of their own castle, or country, but of the entire world.

Now, I'm not saying that Pope Pius was innocent of this political maneuvering. In fact, there was as much political intuition as spiritual intention in the creation of Christ the King. This was his best attempt, in religious terms, to declare himself and the church king of the hill. However, as is the case, the Holy Spirit works in ways that bring beautiful and profound truth sometimes despite our intentions for self-serving political maneuvering. I say that because Christ the King Sunday proclaims God's authority over and above all temporal authorities, all governmental powers, and even all ecclesial influences. When we celebrate Christ the King

Sunday, we're doing something incredibly subversive. Instead of looking to bishops or pastors, politicians or corporations, or generals or doctors for leadership, we're looking to a person dying on a cross for a word that gives us life. We're putting the importance of the world's leaders into perspective, and the subversive thing is that we're putting more importance on the one murdered by the world's authorities than on the authorities with the power to kill, which tells those authorities, well, that maybe they don't have as much authority as they think they do. Christ is King of the Hill, not because he shoved everyone else off of the peak, but because the rulers of the world hung him high on a hill to die. And there, in that place, salvation appeared.

In this season of political strife and division, not only here in our country but truly across the world, CTK declares something fundamental. We belong first not to country or region or even this globe of a planet that we call home. In

the words of St. John Chrysostom “If you are a Christian, no earthly city is yours. God is the builder and maker of our city. Even if we control the whole world, we are all but immigrants and foreigners in it every place. Our citizenship is in heaven!” These eternally timely words make as much sense today as it did when Chrysostom wrote them at the turn of the 4th to the 5th century. If Christ is the ultimate king, and that is our claim, then we’re subject first and last to the one who is first and last, who is the alpha and omega, who is the beginning and the end of all things, the God and King of the Universe made known in Jesus of Nazareth.

Though we love all of our Christ the King hymns, our enthronement psalms and liturgical proclamations of joy, perhaps the best song for Christ the King Sunday is the one whose lyrics come from this scene here in Luke. *Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom. Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.* In this

simple tune from the ecumenical monastic community in Taize, France, there's something of that thief's recognition that here, dying beside him, is not just the king of the kill, or even the king of the world – that title still belongs to Leo in Titanic – but the King of the Cosmos, the one who holds not just the whole world, but all that ever was and all that ever will be, in those hands that are nailed to a cross. Here, on this ragged, rugged throne, on top of this hill named the skull, with thorns of his own creation piercing his own skull, a thief sees the Creator of all things, and murmurs, *Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom. Jesus remember me, when you come into your kingdom.* Let's all, on this Christ the King Sunday and on every day, see our king just as he is: reigning through the suffering of the world. Amen.