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Christ the King C
Peace, Seattle
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Luke 23:35-43

THE REIGN OF CHRIST

We've seen it played out in scores of films:
- The world is in grave danger from the forces of darkness,
- Death and destruction seem unstoppable,
- And the one person who could reverse the course of the battle is captive.
- But then, just then, when all seems lost, an act of power, or will, or love—a surprise—takes place, and suddenly the momentum shifts, the pendulum swings, and the HERO—now free—defeats the forces of darkness and saves the day.

We know the plot inside and out, don't we? It's the American way: against all odds the underdog makes good; life's script as it was meant to be!

Today, on the final Sunday of the church year, Luke's story of Jesus reaches a climax as the most ghastly evil and the most exquisite good converge upon a cross. But we better watch this scene closely—because this story doesn't follow the plot line we're so used to.

Yes, Jesus has finally made it to Jerusalem, the epicenter of his people's religious culture.
Yes, Jesus finally has his day in court and he confronts the powers—but the powers slap him down.
He's put on trial, and he loses. The sentence? DEATH. The means of execution? Crucifixion.

If today "Christ the King Sunday"—where's the coronation? Where's the throne?
- Real kings have power; but Jesus is powerless.
- Real kings have domains; but Jesus has nowhere to stand.
- Real kings have subjects; but Jesus has torturers and hecklers.

Where in this story is the evidence of this Messiah's reign? From all we can see, there is none.

The religious leaders cry, "He saved others, let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God!"
The soldiers cry, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"
Even one of the criminals hanging with him cries, "Save yourself and us!"
But how can Jesus save anyone if he's hanging on a cross?

Suspended helplessly between heaven and earth, suffering, bleeding, suffocating; surrounded by mockers who can't get enough of this comeuppance, Jesus is the antithesis of a king. **Yes, today, beneath the cross of Jesus, it looks for all the world as if his kingdom has come to a screeching halt.**

Yet, as hope vanishes and darkness descends, an odd exchange occurs; odd and so subtle that we might have missed it altogether. In the mouth of a convict who hangs there beside him, we hear the truth about Jesus. **"JESUS," he rasps, "REMEMBER ME, WHEN YOU COME INTO YOUR KINGDOM."**

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It's worth noticing that in all of Luke's gospel, only three characters actually say the word "kingdom." [1]

- Gabriel says it first, to Mary, as he pronounces the news of Christ's birth.
- Jesus speaks of it over and over again.
- Then, when Jesus will say it no more, this dying criminal does.

Coming from the mouth of this condemned man, these words somehow transform this horrible death scene into something else, leading us to a second sight, taking us deeper into the fabric of the unfolding of God's mysterious will.

With the words, "Jesus remember me," the story turns; the sovereignty so conspicuously absent becomes visible. The fire re-enters Jesus' eyes. And summoning what meager energy remains he answers: "TRULY I TELL YOU, TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE."

Like a king from one of his own parables, Jesus lavishes gifts on a most improbable recipient.
TODAY…IN PARADISE.

God's kingdom is here alright, but it is hidden; hidden in suffering.

Where is God? God is with the outcasts, the condemned, the powerless.
Where is God? God is wherever we are weak, vulnerable, small, and dependent.[2] God reigns from the cross.

How difficult this all is to comprehend! How utterly absurd it sounds! It's so 180 from every message about power and status and success we are taught in our culture! That Christ's reign is not made visible in HERO worship, but rather through suffering, through compassion, even through death.

Each of us knows something of what it feels like to be lost or bruised or broken.
Each of us carries a longing for wholeness, for a sign that one day all will be made well.
And today, the gospel tells us, we find the greatest evidence, the most eloquent testimony for life hidden in the death of the one we call Lord.

Sisters and Brothers, it is not a little thing our God asks of us.
To look at the Tree which signifies death and see in it the supreme sign of God's healing.
Perhaps this is why God makes a gift of the very faith we need.

- Faith that can grasp that Christ's reign on the cross is no cause for cynicism or despair.
- Faith that leads us to discern Christ's presence in our daily lives, in the touch of a friend, the welcome of a stranger, the outpouring of support and prayer in a crisis.

With the gift of faith vision, we look at the suffering of our world, and see Christ at work:

- bearing the load,
- going down with the victims,
- working behind the scenes to transform human hurts and hopes.

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[1] I am indebted to Paul Duke for some of the language around this notion of the hiddenness of Christ's reign and the sovereignty of suffering. See his article, *Calling Forth the Word*, in Christian Century, 11-8-1995, p. 1043.
[2] Henri Nouwen, *Sabbatical Journey* (Crossroad: New York, 1998) p.71.

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- Taking what has been lost and bruised and broken and shaping it, turning it, shepherding it toward new life.

The crowd that gathered around the cross of Jesus, the quiet ones who did not speak but only watched him bleeding and dying, they could only see in his violent death the end of their hopes and dreams.

WHAT DO YOU SEE IN THE ONE WHO HANGS THERE?

The one whom we worship this day chose not to count equality with God as something to be exploited; instead, he willingly emptied himself, immersing himself completely in our humanity, even to the point of experiencing death on a cross. (Phil 2)

This Lord has experienced human darkness in its fiercest forms. Whatever shadows and dark places you and I have or will endure, we can be confident he has been there before us and will go there with us once again—to hell and back.

In coming weeks, as the secular world prepares for Christmas by trying to purchase happiness through conspicuous consumption; as we are badgered and battered by invitations to put our faith in the redemptive power of the almighty dollar; as we go with offerings from our purses and wallets to the temples of modern consumerism; let us remember the words of that criminal—"Remember me, Jesus. Show me your reign."

Amen.