SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE LAST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST: CHRIST THE KING, NOVEMBER 23, 2025
JEREMIAH 23:1-6; PSALM 46; COLOSSIANS 1:11-20; LUKE 23:33-43

THE END IS WHERE WE START FROM

Luke 15:1-10 *[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. The people stood by, watching Jesus on the cross; 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." Then 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."]*

If T.S. Eliot is right in *Four Quartets* that "the end is where we start from," then a day like today makes some sense. How else do we explain Jesus on the cross in our Gospel just as we're preparing to celebrate his birth? It's not about throwing a wrench in the Christmas industrial complex, as tempting as that might be. It's not a preemptive downer to dampen our holiday cheer. That's not the point of today. Sometimes, we can't make sense of the beginning of a story until we get to the end. It's only at the end that we come full circle and see truly what's come before and what comes next. Once we know what we're looking toward, we can trace a path to get there – and find the strength to begin again.

Our opening prayer today makes a similar move. It gives us a glimpse of an end worth living toward – a future where the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, are freed and brought together. For the last three weeks with the Terra ball, we've gotten some practice in this kind of God's eye perspective. We've seen what it looks like when we're all part of the same awe-inspiring whole – where the very notion of us vs. them seems petty, wasteful, absurd. So then, how do we get from here, where we define ourselves by our divisions, to there? Our prayer at least points us to Christ as our King.

It's a strange claim to make, I grant you. Most of us as Americans do not associate kings with freedom. Our founding story is about fighting a revolution to get away from one. For us, kings are not symbols of unity and calm who lead by example. If not fairy tale figures, they're at best the world's most conspicuous consumers. At worst, they're power-hungry mad men. No wonder some of us would like to throw off this image of Christ as King altogether. Gender-specific imagery aside, it's hard to picture a costume more ill-fitting for Jesus than that of a king.

He didn't look like a king when he was born in a stable, and he doesn't look like one now as he dies. Even so, at least one person in our story recognizes him as his king. One of the criminals hanging next to him asks Jesus to remember him when he comes into his…kingdom. If he has a kingdom, then he must be…a king. What could this criminal have possibly seen or heard that led him to this conclusion?

Anyone within earshot of Jesus in the last few years of his life would have heard him talking about the kingdom of God. It was his favorite topic, the subject of most of his parables.

It was ultimately part of what got him sentenced to death for sedition. The Emperor never wants an alternative to empire. While Jesus was not threatening Caesar directly, this political image was not an accident either. Consider the contrast. In the kingdom Jesus proclaimed, the strong do not prove their strength by crushing or mocking or silencing anyone. Power is neither

established nor maintained by violence. Human value is God-given and inherent, not earned; and there is nothing that anyone can do to take it away. And Jesus didn't just talk this talk; he walked the walk.

He practiced forgiveness and compassion in his everyday life. The kingdom of God redefined who he thought of as family. He'd eat with anyone who wanted to share a table with him. He'd talk with anyone who sought him out – rich, poor, sick, healthy, man, woman, child. He came close to the people everyone else avoided; he welcomed them without judgment or fear. And when he needed to protect the vulnerable from danger – whether it was a woman caught in adultery or a slave caught in the crossfire at his arrest, he could draw a line and do so without sacrificing anyone's dignity.

If that is what the kingdom of God looks like in real life, then Jesus acts exactly as we'd expect its king to act. He doesn't prove his strength with force or retaliation. He can recognize the moral trauma of soldiers and leaders and all those caught up in systemic violence long before we had words to name it and create a space where forgiveness is possible. "Father, forgive them; they don't know what they're doing." Jesus can extend compassion in his final breaths and promise a dying criminal that "today you will be with me in Paradise."

And with these words, we come full circle. The end meets the beginning. Immanuel, "God with us," keeps his word. Wherever I'm going, Jesus says to the most socially powerless person imaginable, I'm taking you with me. At Jesus' birth, we are told that this is going to be good news for all people – and today, we see that it is.

This end is where we as Christians start from. This is how we get from here, where we define ourselves by our divisions, to there – by letting forgiveness and compassion redefine who we consider family: who's welcome at our tables, who's worthy of our most precious commodity, our time. We practice coming closer to each other without judgment or fear, so that when the most vulnerable among us are threatened, we can step up and stand with them – because we know whose kingdom we're living toward. We know

who has the power to free us and bring us together, and we follow where he leads. Once we know the end and glimpse what comes next, we can trace a path to get there – and find the strength to begin again. Amen.

SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

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