

To God Alone Be The Glory

Devotions on the three Scripture Lessons for Christ the King Sunday.

What do you suppose was happening 600 years ago here in Lake City? I doubt any written record about that time exists. It would be another century before Columbus would find America. So the native American Indians in this area were probably doing what they always did at this time of year: trying to keep warm and well fed. They were not getting ready for Black Friday or 5G or the surge in ownership of electric cars.

You cannot say the same about the time 600 years before Christ the King was born. Things were going badly in Judah. God had made a date with destruction for his rebellious people. The cruel Babylonian army was a-coming, but Judah refused to repent and do right in God's sight. Oh, they would put in their time at the Lord's house, carry out the required sacrifices intended to patch up their relationship with holy God. Then they'd leave the temple and immediately go back to the very things God calls sinful.

As if that weren't enough, the leaders in Israel were using their power to serve themselves instead of the people. In today's Old Testament Scripture lesson, these leaders are called "shepherds." Now, you and I are accustomed to calling our **church** leaders shepherds ('pastor' means 'shepherd'). But back then, all leaders, especially kings, were called shepherds. So then the sheep in our first lesson are the people of Israel. And God is angry because the leaders in Israel have fleeced the sheep instead of caring for them. (And when a few people get away with wrongdoing, pretty soon everybody wants in

on the action.) God is angry in this lesson because the sheep have been scattered. Now they are more vulnerable to attack. And it's not just a wolf or a lion. No, the enemy we're talking about is Satan. He wants to drag people off to hell.

Well, the Lord's just not going to put up with it any longer. So in this lesson he promises to punish the leaders for doing evil—his first promise in this lesson. This is good news for anyone with a clear sense of right and wrong. God is watching, he is keeping track; if the perpetrators do not repent, their actions will condemn them when they stand before God in the final judgment. *But in many cases, God doesn't wait until the final judgment to deal with the unrepentant. Instead he sends punishment in various forms now: stubbed toes, accidents, broken relationships, health problems, attacks against one's person or reputation, natural disasters, etc. God sometimes sends these troubles so everyone (not just leaders) will think about their sins and repent, turning to Jesus for full forgiveness.

But what about those poor sheep who were scattered by the selfish and cruel shepherds? God won't abandon them. His second promise in this lesson is: "*I will bring them back to their pasture.*" For the Jews that meant God would bring them back from Babylon after their 70-year exile. For us it means the Lord will faithfully and lovingly call us to repentance. May we always listen to God's Word, no matter who speaks it to us.

God also promises to place good shepherds over his people (the third promise). But if you think it's a blessing to have good leaders who protect and care for the flock, wait till you hear about the really **big** promise (the fourth promise) God makes in this lesson.

God will raise up from the line of King David someone called ‘the Righteous Branch.’ This Righteous Branch would himself be a King. We know who this Righteous Branch is, because of the name that the lesson gives him: the Lord Our Righteousness, that is, the Lord who will be righteous as our Substitute. That’s Jesus! Christ the King! During his lifetime Israel would be rescued. And although the lesson doesn’t say what God’s people would be rescued from, we know from the Gospels that Christ rescued us from sin and death and the power of the devil.

And that explains why this lesson was chosen for this final Sunday of the Church Year. When the Last Judgment has come, and we have been revealed as Saints Triumphant, the only thing important after that will be Christ the King. We will be able to worship him as our King because he will have supplied the very thing that we sinners need in order to be in the presence of God: righteousness—the quality of having done everything right in God’s sight.

Do you know why the Lord makes such big promises in his Word? Because he wants to make it hard for us to fear those things that he has overcome. “But, Lord, sometimes when I get rolling on a sin, I’m afraid I’ll never stop.” “Don’t be afraid; I will place shepherds over you, even fellow Christians, to call you back. I will forgive all your sins. You need only be afraid when you stubbornly refuse to listen to correction.” “But, Lord, I’m a little afraid of dying.” “Do not fear, I am the resurrection and the life. If you believe in me you will live, even if you die.” “But Lord, I’m a little afraid about what will happen next week.” “Next week isn’t here yet. Let me help you through today. I am Christ the King: if I can predict my birth and my victory 600 years ahead of time, I’m sure I can take

care of next week for you until next week becomes today, and then you can work at living that day to my glory too. Don’t be afraid of anything. I have overcome everything.”

Old Testament Lesson: Jeremiah 23:2-6
2This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: “Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done,” declares the LORD. 3“I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. 4I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing,” declares the LORD. 5“The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. 6In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness.”

Today’s **Epistle Lesson** has a lot of spiritual meat in it to chew on. Listen closely to Colossians 1:13-20.

13He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, 14in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. 15He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth,

visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. ¹⁷He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

What a scripture! It almost makes you want to jump up and join in the coronation parade for King Jesus!

“Pastor, there’s only one word in that lesson which refers to Jesus as King: ‘kingdom.’ The rest of the lesson describes his glory as Creator and as Lord of his Church.” That’s true, but if Jesus has a kingdom, he must therefore be a king. And what is Jesus’ kingdom all about? Economic prosperity? The price of homes or healthcare? The impeachment hearings? No, Christ’s kingdom is about Jesus rescuing us from the dominion of darkness, where you can’t see what’s out there and it will get you. That’s why we are glad to be part of Jesus’ Kingdom. We have forgiveness in him!

But wait! Doesn’t the Apostles’ Creed teach that **the Father** created and cares for the world, and that **the Son** redeemed us. But this reading says it the other way around: **God the Father rescued** us from the dominion of darkness, and all things were created by **God the Son** and are held together by him. What’s going on here? Well, this is one of those places in the Bible

where we can see: don’t divide the oneness of God, as if three separate gods each control their little part of the world. It’s easy to see God as three persons. But here we get to focus on God’s oneness. Jesus and the Father are, as the reading puts it, from the same mold; that’s what it’s hinting at when it says Jesus “*is the image of the invisible God.*” Not deep enough for you? How about this: all of God’s fullness dwells in Jesus. The man Jesus, truly human, is also Christ the King, truly God. No wonder everything is under the control of Christ our King! No wonder we can speak of Jesus as being Creator and Preserver, and the Father as being Rescuer and Reconciler. There’s only ever one God. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit work together on everything.

Now maybe you’re saying to yourself, “This is all fine and good. Yes, I even believe it to be true. But how is all this relevant to me today? How will this help me on Tuesday?” Here’s how. There isn’t anything more important in life than being right with God. By God’s grace you have not tricked yourself into believing that you are right with God on your own. You haven’t relegated God to some distant corner of your mind so that his name is just for expressing surprise or anger. You get it, that if you think about God only on Sunday, Colossians 1:13-20 won’t help you much on Tuesday. But if on Tuesday and Thursday and Saturday you will ponder the truth that “*God was pleased through Christ to reconcile to himself all things by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross,*” your heart will be filled with God’s peace as a part of the Kingdom of the Son

he loves. And your day will be truly blessed, no matter what else happens.

Read the lesson again.

Christ the King Sunday: celebration! Christ the King Sunday: coronation! Christ the King Sunday: acclamation! ?The Gospel for Christ the King Sunday is Luke 23? Really? This man is our King?

Gospel: Luke 23:35-43

³⁵The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.” ³⁶The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar ³⁷and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” ³⁸There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. ³⁹One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴²Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” ⁴³Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”

With all the fanfare we’ve had in the coronation hymn we sang, with its regal words and royal melody, does it not seem out of place for today’s Gospel to take us to Golgotha, where we must view our Savior at the lowest ebb of his humiliation?

But the more you think about it, the more

it makes sense to hear this Gospel on Christ the King Sunday. Jesus’ kingship is referred to three times. First the soldiers taunt him, “*If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.*” Well, he will save himself—after he finishes paying for our sins. On Easter Sunday morning, he will pick up the sledge hammer called Life and smash the chains of death, saving himself AND US from death’s grip.

The second mention of Jesus’ kingship is the notice hung over his head at Pilate’s order. It labels Jesus as “*the King of the Jews.*” You have to wonder what is going through Pilate’s head when he orders this notice posted. Is he jabbing at the Jews as if to say, “This is what happens to every Jew who tries to free Israel from Rome’s control”? Or is he afraid of what Jesus told him when they were alone: “*My Kingdom is not of this world... I came into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me*”? If Pilate is afraid, is he perhaps hedging his bet? Can you hear him thinking, “If Jesus really is who he said, I better do something that shows I’m not totally ignorant of his person. If he comes back, I can say, ‘Well I tried to tell everyone who you are by hanging that sign over your head.’” Oh the irony of the sign: this really is Christ, the King of the Jews and of the Gentiles.

The third allusion to Jesus’ kingship comes from the repentant thief who asks Jesus if he might please be remembered. Jesus’ comforting words indicate positively that the humiliated man crucified on the middle cross is truly Christ the King. Only God can promise to take someone’s soul to heaven after death. Therefore, this suffering Jewish carpenter is also true God,

Christ the King, our King, who has promised to take our souls immediately at death to himself where he is preparing a place for us in his heavenly mansions. So as it turns out, this is the right Gospel to read on Christ the King Sunday.