

If Jesus is the King
Luke 23:33-43
Second Baptist Church, Memphis
November 25, 2007
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There was a commercial awhile back that had a man in it who is always a little behind. In the first scene he is playing tennis, waiting for the serve. The ball goes past him and then after a few seconds, he swings his racket. Then he's on a golf course, and after his ball strikes another player, he shouts the golfer's warning cry, *Fore!*

At a restaurant, over a glass of wine, a woman who appears to be his girlfriend says, *I love you*. After a long pause – long enough for her to leave, he finally responds, *I love you, too*. All through these three scenes, the narrator is speaking about the importance of good timing. In some ways, focusing on this scripture text today makes me feel like that man. We're reading a text that reminds us of Good Friday while the rest of the world is either basking in the afterglow of Thanksgiving or already singing Christmas Carols. With this story of Jesus' crucifixion, I'm either seven months late or five months early. Either way, my timing is off.

I'm not one of those people who went to Wal-Mart at 5:00 Friday morning. That would be my own personal hell to do that. Seriously, if I were to end up in hell, that's what it would be. Every day would be the Friday after Thanksgiving at Wal-Mart or Costco.

My point is, even though I was not out shopping this weekend, I know that if I had been, I would have noticed that the

background music has changed to Christmas Carols. The Christmas stuff is out. I know that.

It's true at our house. Heidi spent Friday changing the "theme" of our home decorations from fall to Christmas. Our Christmas tree is up. While Heidi and Ivy and Heidi's mom were doing all that, they had Christmas music playing.

Everybody's getting ready for Christmas, and I'm preaching on the crucifixion. My timing appears to be off.

But did you know that this is the last Sunday of the Christian year? Are you aware that in my preaching and in our worship here, we try to follow the Christian calendar?

For millions of Christians all over the world who follow this Christian liturgical calendar (certainly Mullins United Methodist down the street and Holy Communion Episcopal across the street), this Sunday, this last Sunday of the Christian year, the last Sunday before Advent, is traditionally known as Christ the King Sunday.

There are a lot of ways to mark time, you know. There are fiscal years that have their own beginning date, and there are school calendars. There are the sports seasons—it's basketball season or football season. There are lots of different ways to mark time. Shopping even has its own seasons and high holy days with names like "Black Friday."

There are a lot of different ways to mark time; there are a lot of different calendars.

There is only one way of marking time, one calendar, that is shaped by the Christian story. When we follow the Christian year in our worship, as we do, it takes us on a journey through the Christian story. And it keeps us from skipping parts or jumping ahead before it's time.

Today is the last Sunday of the Christian worship year. Next Sunday will be the first Sunday of Advent, which is the beginning of the new yearly cycle.

On this last Sunday of the church year, we complete the cycle. If you think back, over this past year in our worship we've seen a baby born in a manger, we've seen Jesus' baptism and his temptation in the desert. We've seen his ministry. We've seen his final week, his death, his resurrection. We've seen the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. We've traveled with Jesus through the Gospel of Luke this fall.

And it makes sense, on this final day, to declare that God in Christ is the ruler of all.

So we say today that the times of our lives are not marked by Hallmark or the fiscal year or the school calendar or the Christmas shopping season.

We declare today that Jesus Christ is King of all our days.
[Peter Buehler, Faith Presbyterian Church, Sacramento, California]

Christ the King.

So, if Jesus is the King... what does that mean? What if Jesus is King? Did you notice that in our scripture today—all those questions about if Jesus is the King? What if Jesus is King?

Actually way back in chapter 4 of Luke's gospel the devil offers a similar version of the proposition, *If Jesus is the King.* [thanks to Patrick J. Wilson in *Lectionary Homiletics for this insight*]

Jesus was fasting for 40 days out in the wilderness, Luke says, and the devil proposes, *If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread* (4:3)—save yourself from the pangs of hunger, weakness, perhaps even death, since 40 days stretches toward the limit of human endurance for fasting.

Then the devil tries again: *If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down* (4:9) and count on God to *command his angels* (4:10) to protect you so that not the slightest harm will come to you. It only stands to reason that if Jesus is the Son of God, God would want to protect his own son, God's anointed one, the agent of God's salvation.

Now, at the scene of the crucifixion, the "if Jesus is king" propositions continue and intensify. Jesus hangs on the cross between two thieves. Over his head is the mocking inscription: *This is the King of the Jews.*

The leaders of the plot against Jesus pose the "what if" challenge: *If he is the Messiah of God let him save himself.*

Then Roman soldiers, outsiders and foreigners who have been charged with this business of carrying out the execution, pick up the challenge: *If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself.*

One of the criminals, next to Jesus on the cross, takes the same approach. He says to Jesus, *If you are the Messiah, save yourself and us.*

If you are the son of God...

If you are the Messiah...

If you are the king....

Everyone seems to think they know the second part of that sentence. Everyone seems to think they know what comes after that prepositional phrase. It's the classic "if...then" statement. If one thing is true, then it logically follows that this other thing is true.

If you are the king, then... what? At least it must mean that then you would exercise your power to keep yourself from harm and provide for your own needs and wants.

I read one time about a movie in which a medieval prince goes deer hunting. Hundreds of peasants were pressed into service, forming lines and beating the bushes to drive the deer toward the prince. Other brigades of servants erected temporary fences that literally funneled the fleeing deer into a large corral from which there was no escape.

Inside the corral the prince completed the hunt by shooting a stag with his bow and arrow. The assembled crowd applauded politely. Other servants began the messy job of field dressing the deer, but the prince wanted the heart so it was presented to him. He held it up to more applause, then handed it to another servant.

The scene closed with yet another servant washing the blood of the deer from the prince's hand. He did not wash his own hands, but someone did it for him.

If you are the king...well, that's one picture of royalty. To be a king is to be elevated—to have everybody else at your beck and call. All the onerous and unpleasant tasks of life are performed by others. Everything is geared toward the success and comfort of the king, and the cost is borne by commoners.

If Jesus is the king... Is that what it means?

All the people at cross certainly seemed to think so. The soldiers and the leaders of the people and the thief on the cross seem to assume that if one is king, if one has God's favor and God's power, proof of God's favor and power would be to use it to end your suffering and avoid death.

It is a sad truth that many of us still think this way about the use of God's power— for our own relief. If Jesus is King, he must save himself. That's what those at the cross seem to assume.

So there is Jesus on the cross. *This is the King of the Jews* is the sign above his head. Crucifixion added shame and pain to death itself. Luke doesn't go into detail about crucifixion. He assumed that his readers knew what a crucifixion is.

Literally it meant to be impaled on a stick. Apparently the Romans added to this ancient torture the crossbeam. It was usually this crossbeam that the accused carried to the place of execution, where the body was affixed by ropes or nails.

If Jesus is King... What does that mean?

The larger truth, the other truth, the real truth, is if Jesus is to save others, he cannot save himself.

King Agadir was a good and wise King. His sons seemed to think that being a King was all about riding on a shining white charger and using a sword. They would often show off their fencing skills, especially in front of the prettier princesses.

King Agadir would just laugh. He remembered the times when he had been a young and brash Prince himself. He too had had no idea of the real qualities needed by a King. His father had sent him on a journey back in time to find out for himself the qualities required to be a King. He tried to tell the young princes something of his story, of what he saw when he went back in time. *I found a King, said Agadir, riding on a— a donkey! Yes, we know, finished the young Princes, groaning. We've heard it all before! But that wasn't a real King. That was just a man people wanted to be King. Real kings are born. Only princes can be real kings. So which one of you will be King?* asked Agadir looking from one to the other. *You can't both be kings. You may be both my sons, but only one of you can be King. Which will it be?* The boys looked at each other. They were grinning, for they'd heard this conversation before. *Whoever lives the longest!* said the eldest prince smiling. *May the best swordsman win! Did I ever tell you the end of the story?* asked Agadir. *You see, I thought the same as you, to start with. I laughed at the man on the donkey. But then I went around with him for some years. I discovered he was the kindest, gentlest, most lovely person I had ever met. And he was so brave! I've never met anyone, before or since, with such courage.*

Not much courage in riding on a donkey! laughed the youngest Prince, with a sideways glance at his brother. Agadir looked at his son with frustration. There were times when he wondered whether he inhabited a different world from his sons.

I saw that same young man in remarkable acts of courage, said Agadir. There was one occasion when he went into the temple, and threw out all the merchants. He overturned all their tables and scattered their wares on the ground. And he drove them out with whips. He called them all thieves, because a temple should be a place of prayer. After that, the religious leaders were out to get him. He knew they were out to get him, but he went on teaching and preaching quite openly. What happened? asked his oldest son, interested in the story despite himself. *He was eventually arrested, said Agadir. They picked him up at night in a garden. They rigged a trial. Even then he could have saved himself. He had only to protest his innocence, and the governor would have set him free. But he refused to say a word. Whatever they did to him, he simply stayed silent. He must have been stupid!* exclaimed the youngest Prince. *The really courageous people in this world, explained Agadir, are fools for love. They love another person so much, that they have a burning desire inside for the person they love. They will do anything for that person. They will even die for them, if necessary.*

Some parents love their children like that. But that particular man didn't only love his own family, but everybody he met. Rather than sell them down the river, or tell any lies to save his own skin, he chose to die for all those people he loved.

The boys were quiet now, struggling to understand how anyone could be so foolishly brave. Their father added, *That's the mark*

of a true King. Someone who loves all his people so much that he will go to the stake for them. Now which one of you said you would be King? The Princes grinned at him sheepishly, for they weren't bad boys at heart. They ran off to practice fencing with their swords, but somehow it didn't seem quite so important now. And each of them wondered in his heart whether he was really brave enough ever to be king.

[story told by Janice Scott on www.childrensermons.com]

Three times, Jesus is mocked: If you are the Son of God, if you are the Messiah, if you are the king, save yourself. Finally, true King that he is, he does save, but not himself.