

This Man Has Done Nothing Wrong
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Colossians 1:11-20

¹¹May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Luke 23:33-43

³³When 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. ³⁴Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’ And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!’ ³⁶The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, ³⁷and saying, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’ ³⁸There was also an inscription over him, ‘This is the King of the Jews.’

³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’ ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?’ ⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.’ ⁴²Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ ⁴³He replied, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’

It may seem a little strange to you that, just weeks before we celebrate the birth of Christ, we recount his final moments and his death. The church operates on many calendars: the school year calendar, beginning in September, the traditional Julian calendar, beginning in January, and, most importantly, the church calendar, which begins with the first Sunday of Advent. With that being next week, we are in the last week of the church calendar year and this Sunday is designated as Christ the King Sunday or Reign of Christ Sunday. While we do take a detour during Lent through to Easter, each church year we begin with the birth of Christ and follow through Christ’s life to a reading about Christ as king.

Such a trip through the church calendar travels, too, across the spectrum of ways in which people relate to and understand Christ. For those who think more frequently of Christ in his humanity, Christ

incarnate, whether as infant, like we encounter at Christmas, or adult, the theology is considered one of a low Christology. For those who think more frequently of Christ's divinity, the theology is named high Christology. The author of the letter to the Colossians offers an excellent example of such a high Christology: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible...He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church," and so on, and so on. One view is not more right than the other – both are 100% right, just as Christ is both 100% human and 100% divine.

Perhaps, and I suspect those in charge of determining the readings for Sundays are onto this, we need this reminder of Christ's divinity to help us marvel even more that this same Christ of power and glory, this almighty Christ, who is above all and can do all, **chose** to come among us as one of us, and in the most vulnerable of ways. **This** is how much our God loves us. And this is how our king is like no human king. So, today, celebrating the Reign of Christ, let us be awed.

In the letter to the Colossians, there is some language that has not held its original meaning. Pastor Elizabeth Barrington Forney explains:

The word 'transferred' is of special note. The Greek verb here is *methistēmi*, a word with special significance in relationship to the spoils of battle. As William Barclay notes, 'In the ancient world, when one empire won a victory over another, it was the custom to take the population of the defeated country and transfer it...to the conqueror's land.' Christ is the conqueror of darkness, sin, and death, and we are taken to dwell as a whole people in the kingdom of God. No longer are we subject to the powers of darkness, but we become God's beloved people and citizens in the kingdom of heaven through Christ' sacrifice.¹ We read "He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son." We are used to thinking about how Christ died for us and through his death and resurrection we have new life. Maybe we even think of Christ in battle against sin on our behalf. How often, though, do we think of ourselves as the spoils of war with which Christ will do what he wills? And what he wills is that we live richly and abundantly under his benevolent reign, better off than we ever were, or could imagine, under the power of darkness, because of his power which is greater than darkness ever could be.

Part of recognizing Christ's divinity is recognizing his presence as is noted at the beginning of the gospel of John. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."² The author of the

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4*, p. 327, 329.

² John 1:1-5.

letter to the Colossians says so much of the same, and it bears repeating: “for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created...He himself is before all things...He is the beginning.” He shares in being our divine creator. And through his death, he is one in three person part of our redemption, that saving from the power of darkness.

Our reading from Luke, on the surface, is about the human form of Christ, about the bodily Christ who can be bruised and pierced, who speaks to us in words we recognize, with tongues like ours and tears like ours. But the divine comes through even here. To save himself would have caused our hope to never exist. Had he not chosen death, there would be no resurrection, no defeat over death, no hope of life eternal with a God of love. While it seems in the moment he did not use the divine power afforded him, we mustn't be deceived. He wielded divine love and divine sacrifice and divine obedience so that we might have life. This same obedience and love are summed up by one criminal, who spoke of the moment but could have easily been speaking of his life: “this man has done nothing wrong.” Not because he was divine, for we know in his humanity he was tempted as we are – reminders are found at the beginning of his ministry in Matthew, Mark, and Luke and throughout when he was asked to provide signs of his power. No, because he was as fully human as we are each created to be, fully open to relationship with God, fully obedient to behaving according to God's will, fully attuned to the divine.

In this coming season, we often hear performances of Handel's *Messiah*, fitting for both Christmas and Easter. One of the most memorable, and repeated, lines from it, and this morning's new song, is “King of kings and Lord of lords” in reference to Christ, the Messiah. This song fits throughout the season, whenever we are looking toward Christ as king, whether we are pointed there by the letter to the Colossians or by mocking soldiers. And in its aptness we find a multi-layered high Christology. In all my hearings I had understood the line “King of kings and Lord of lords” to be a superlative statement. Christ is the best of the kings, the best of all lords. The other dimension is this, the one to which Colossians points: not only is Christ the best of all, Christ also rules over them. If all rulers are subject to Christ, why would we rely on anyone or anything else? It is the question of so many of the epistles, of so many parables. And the answer is always Christ is above all else.

Despite all the illusions of power in the world, none, no matter how great they may appear, are above Christ. None give us strength from their own power. None enable us to share in an inheritance of light, of goodness. None have rescued us from darkness or delivered us by redemption and the forgiveness of sins. None have created all things. None would make peace through their own blood. Let us be awed.

Let us pray: Jesus, remember us when you come into your kingdom, we pray. Amen.