

“An Uncommon King”

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Luke 23:33-43

Colossians 1:11-20

I love Thanksgiving! A relaxed day....at least after the Turkey Trot....the traditional turkey, mash potatoes, and pecan pie shared with family and friends topped off by remembering the many blessings we enjoy. We are a blessed people and Thanksgiving provides us with the occasion to name our blessings. So, to kick-off our Thanksgiving week I want to give you the opportunity to share some of the blessings of your lives. For what are you thankful?

As we come to worship on this Thanksgiving Sunday, we come giving thanks for Jesus as King of kings, and Lord of lords. For this is *Christ the King* Sunday. In America the thought of a king doesn't often cross our minds. After all, we turned our collective back on the monarchy 234 years ago. We didn't want any part of a king back then and we still don't want a king.

One of the reasons we don't want anything to do with a king is we often imagine a king to be a powerful man sitting on a throne, with life and death authority, in complete control of everyone's destiny and one who makes decisions based on his own purposes. No wonder we don't think in terms of kingship. However, we do like our super-heroes. Friday evening Connie and I watched the *Masterpiece Mystery* of Sherlock Holmes in “*The Great Game*.” This TV movie is described.....“*consulting detective Sherlock Holmes teams up with former army doctor John Watson to solve a dizzying array of crimes with his signature deductive reasoning.*” Whether it's **Sherlock's** “signature deductive reasoning” or **Harry Potter** on a mission to destroy the Horcruxes or **Rambo** with guns blazing, we love our super-heroes who *always* win and *always* save the day.

It's natural for us to transfer our desire for a super-hero to Jesus, especially as we call him King of kings and Lord of lords. We remember that he healed the lepers, raised Lazarus, and walked on water so why wouldn't we, especially on this *Christ the King Sunday*, picture Jesus as the super-hero who always wins and always saves the day. It's natural that we would rush to a quick and easy certainty that Christ the King will rescue us from all hardships and prevent any bad things from happening to us.

But *Christ the King Sunday* challenges us to rethink our understanding of Jesus and begin to see Jesus as an uncommon king....a different kind of king....a king who marches to the beat of a different heart and authority. Christ's way is not as exciting as Sherlock Holmes, Harry Potter or Rambo but it is God's way and, therefore, as Christ followers, our way as well! Christ the King's way is highlighted in today's gospel reading.

Read 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."

Not in our wildest dreams would we have come up with the story line of a king being crucified between two criminals. Kings don't die this way unless they are *defeated* kings. Yet there it is, posted above Jesus' head, "***This is the King of the Jews.***" From our perspective this picture is all wrong but from God's perspective this picture is all right. We have to look closely to understand this uncommon King's way!

The religious leaders, standing at the foot of the cross, mocked him, "*He saved others: let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!*" If you are truly God's anointed then come on down from the cross and save yourself. The soldiers mocked him, "*If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself.*" If you are truly a king, then show us your power and save yourself from the pain and slow death that is to come. The taunting and mocking were all a part of the humiliation designed to kill Jesus' spirit as his body died a slow and awful death. Remember Jesus would not have been crucified high off the ground but close enough to the ground that mockers could spit, curse and ridicule him up close and personal.

One of the criminals derided him ***“Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”*** The criminal wasn’t only thinking about Jesus but of himself *“and us.”* He speaks for each of us who cry out to Jesus to save us from the crosses we bear. *At times, don’t we all yearn for a super-hero savior who would come save us?* We all have crosses to bear....some are public and easily seen but many are private and hidden from the view of others. Don’t we all, at times, join the criminal who calls out to Jesus, *“Save me?”*

We hear the extraordinary description of Jesus in the first chapter of Paul’s letter to the Colossians: ¹⁵***He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;*** ¹⁶***for 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.***

If Jesus was the Messiah....*if* Jesus was the King of kings and Lord of lords why didn’t he save himself? And why doesn’t Jesus save us from our crosses, too? Why didn’t Jesus save those three people murdered near Mt. Vernon? Why didn’t Jesus save my friend from bankruptcy? Why didn’t Jesus save Linda from the slow death of Alzheimer’s? Why doesn’t Jesus, like a super-hero king, save you and me from the crosses we bear?

On this Christ the King Sunday we celebrate Christ as the king....the creator of the galaxies, the first born of the dead, the head of the church. But what kind of king is Jesus anyhow? What kind of king is this who does not use his divine connections and power to get himself off the cross? What does it mean to believe in a Savior/King who doesn’t save himself or doesn’t save us in just the nick of time?

All of us wish for a Savior/King who comes to the rescue, kills the bad guys, cures the disease, ends injustice and solves every painful circumstance. But that’s not the kind of Savior/King Jesus is. The cross, in fact, is Jesus’ ultimate and climactic demonstration of the kind of Savior/King he is. Contrary to first impression, the cross is not a symbol of defeat but a demonstration of the mystery and power of God’s love. When we stand at the foot of the cross we are standing on holy ground and we are entering the holy of holies in which we can look straight into the very heart of God. God chose, through God’s Son, Jesus, to experience the greatest pain, abandonment, and suffering the world could offer. Rather than avoid the cross Jesus accepted the cross as God’s deepest affinity with human brokenness and suffering. The cross is God’s message of love! The question is whether we will get the message or not.

The cross demonstrates that God does not avoid suffering or the places of pain. So Jesus finds his way to the place called “*The Skull*” and is crucified in that place of pain. That’s the way love is; that’s the way God is; not to avoid pain and not to avoid the places of pain. Intuitively, we understand this. We have witnessed, over and over, friends using their resources, connections and their presence to bring love, hope and healing to their loved ones. I have seen it as you faithfully stand by loved ones in Hospice. I have seen it as you sit with loved ones in hospitals. I have seen it as you visit loved ones in memory units. How many parents or grandparents have not stated that they would gladly crawl into the bed of a sick or dying child and take their sickness and pain upon themselves? Love is always stronger than pain! As we think of the power in human love we are just beginning to understand the incredible love of Jesus on the cross.

Jesus, the uncommon King, goes to the place of his peoples’ deepest suffering and shoulders their pain and dies for them that they might have life. This is the mystery and power of the cross which gives us a glimpse of the depth of Jesus’ love for each of us. None of us can fully comprehend it however we can receive it with thanksgiving!

This past Wednesday, at our small group gathering, each person shared their favorite passage of scripture. One person chose the 23rd Psalm and said they particularly appreciated verse 4 “***Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil for thou art with me.***” This is God’s promise to walk with us *through* the valleys of life. Life is not always lived on the mountain peaks. At some point we will find ourselves in the valley. The cross is God’s most profound promise that God is with us in every! There is no valley too deep for God’s abiding love!

Salvation is not an event or a miracle that rescues us from pain. Salvation is a relationship with a Savior/King who endured the cross. The salvation Jesus brings is not a miraculous changing of circumstances like climbing off the cross. The salvation of Jesus is about a “***thou art with me***” relationship that endures, survives and persists through all circumstances. God’s love will not let us go! Yes, Jesus is an uncommon king who takes a cross for you and me. Now that’s the kind of King I want to follow. That’s the kind of king who deserves our great thanksgiving!

Amen

