

A Different Kind of King
Luke 23:33 – 43; Colossians 1:11 – 20
Sunday, November 24, 2019

The musical *Hamilton* is a reimagining of the story of Alexander Hamilton and the other Founding Fathers during the American Revolution and the formation of our country. So it has George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Aaron Burr, and many others. The first few songs in the show are about how the colonies need to break free from England; they're singing about revolution, self-governance, and how they are determined to be free. But seven songs in, we get a song from the King of England, George III. King George starts singing this light, happy, poppy song and dance number about how much he *loves* the colonists; that he's their man, and they are his *favorite* subjects – his *loyal*, royal subjects forever and ever and ever and ever and ever. That one day they will come *back* to him. That they will see the error of their ways. That he will fight and win the war for their love and their praise, and he'll love them 'til his dying days. He ends the song by singing, "Don't throw away this thing we had / 'cause when push comes to shove / I will kill your friends and family to remind you of my love."

The King provides the comic relief in the show – he appears a couple of more times, and it's all about *how much I love you and why are you doing this to me* – and we laugh about how *absurd* it is that he loves them so much that he would wage war on them and kill them and to *remind* them of that love. But while we laugh that off as ridiculous, I think that's also how a lot of people think about *God*. That God is this great and powerful king of the universe who loves us *so much* that God would brutally kill God's own son on a cross to *remind* us of that love. God loves us *so much* that when we do things wrong and wander away from God, God *punishes* us and sends natural disasters and pain and suffering and sickness into our lives to remind us how much God loves us so that we will come *back*. God loves us *so much* that, if we do not *reciprocate* that

love, God will condemn us to an eternity of conscious torment in the fires of hell so that we realize just how good we had it.

That is how a lot of people have been taught to view God – as the abusive king who can do whatever he wants, because he does it all out of love. I remember years ago doing a funeral for a 53-year-old husband and father who was killed in a farming accident. At the visitation before the service, I was standing there with his wife and teenage daughter, when this woman came up and said to them, “God just needed him more than we did.” So God loved him so much that God killed him (in a *really* horrible way) just so God could be with him forever? Is that who we think God is?

On this Sunday when we celebrate Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords, I think it’s a good time to ask, “What kind of king is Christ?” Is Christ a king like King George or any number of other brutal, power-hungry dictators who can do whatever they want because they’re in charge? As people who live in the kingdom of man, the kingdom of this world, that’s how we *used* to thinking about kings; that they use their power for their own benefit. How does *Christ* exercise his power and authority as King of heaven and earth? What kind of king is *Christ*?

Our reading from Luke’s gospel *shows* us what kind of king Christ is. Let me just start by saying, this is a *strange* scripture reading for Christ the King Sunday. Jesus being *crucified*. Several months ago, when I was looking ahead at the lectionary – the calendar of prescribed scripture readings for each Sunday – I saw this reading and thought, “Why would we focus on *that* today?” On this last Sunday of the church calendar, the *culmination* of the church year, this grand and glorious celebration of Jesus Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords, ruling and

reigning over heaven and earth, the story we get is Jesus dying on a cross, surrounded by criminals. Not exactly the first thing that comes to mind when we think of Christ the King.

But this story *does* show us exactly what kind of king Christ is (and what kind of king he is *not*). As he hangs there beneath a sign that mockingly says, “This is the King of the Jews,” the Jewish religious leaders mock him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!” The Roman soldiers mock him, saying, “If you *are* the King of the Jews, save yourself!” And the criminal hanging next to him – it says he *derides* him, but to me this almost sounds like more of a *plea* – says to him, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

So all these people around Jesus are saying to him, “If you are the *king*, use your power to save yourself!” Because that’s how they’re used to thinking about kings. And that’s how they’re used to thinking about *power*. That people in positions of power *use* their power for their own benefit; to *keep* themselves in power. And that’s how *we’re* used to thinking about power, too, is it not? I mean, it almost *surprises* us when someone in a position of power does something that is *humbling* and *selfless*. It’s not the *norm*; it’s become the *exception* to the rule.

But Jesus does *not* use his power to save himself. He absolutely *could*. It reminds me of the story from Matthew’s gospel just before Jesus is crucified, when the soldiers come to arrest him. One of Jesus’ disciples pulls out a sword to fight back, and Jesus says, “Put your sword back into its place; for all who *take* the sword will *perish* by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at one send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?” Jesus does not use his power as the Son of God, King of kings, Lord of lords to save himself. He uses his power to

save those *around* him...and to save *us*. As he is being killed and mocked by those around him, Jesus says, “Father, *forgive* them.”

It is often in times of great stress or trial or suffering that our true character shines forth and we show who we really are. How do we respond when the rubber meets the road? Well, here for Jesus, in the moment of greatest suffering, the moment of his death, he does not respond with anger or violence or some great act of divine retribution. He responds with *forgiveness*. With *mercy*. With *grace*. He does not fight back, and he does not run away. This is not an act of *weakness* or *passivity*, just letting life happen *to* him. This is an act of great *strength*, *choosing* to face suffering and adversity with *love*.

Author Jill Duffield writes, “Jesus is like no earthly ruler. [He] is the antithesis of dictators, bullies, and power brokers. King Jesus does not coerce or intimidate, use violence or bribery to get his way. The One who rules heaven and earth hangs...on the cross for the sake of the ones hanging beside him, both the criminal who *recognizes* him *and* the one who *blasphemes* him. He takes on the sin of the spectators and the scoffers, the mockers and the deniers. Jesus’ reign...comes by way of the cross, ushered in through solidarity with the helpless and those who suffer unspeakable cruelty and pain. Christ the King...came not to *be* served, but *to* serve. He came not to stand *apart* from the least of these, but to *take their place*. He came not to puff himself up but to pour himself out...Jesus will defeat death, conquer sin, and save the world not through military might and worldly wealth but through vulnerable, sacrificial love.”¹

The defining event of our faith is not a power play that follows the rules and logic that we are familiar with – retaliation and self-preservation. Jesus saves *others* only by *not* saving himself.

¹ Jill Duffield, “Looking into the Lectionary – November 24, 2019” from *The Presbyterian Outlook*

He refuses that temptation, and in doing so shows us what kind of King he really is.² He does not *retaliate* – he *forgives*. He does not resort to *violence* – he makes *peace*. As Paul says in our reading from Colossians, he reconciled all things in heaven and on earth by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Paul *also* says that Jesus is the “image of the invisible God.” The God that we *cannot* see is shown to us perfectly in Jesus. In showing us what kind of King *he* is, Jesus shows us who *God* is. And what he shows us is that God is not a God of vengeance and violence, inflicting suffering on those who do not love God enough. In Christ, God *forgave* the very people who were mocking and killing him. So how do you think God responds to *us* when *we* fail to recognize God’s lordship in *our* lives? With grace and mercy and forgiveness and compassion and love.

If this is the kind of King that *God* is, then what kind of *subjects* should *we* be, we who live our lives in the Kingdom of God under the rule and reign of Christ? How can *we* be God’s loyal royal subjects?

Paul writes, “May 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 giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” We are called to live in the *light*, not under the power of *darkness*. To live in ways that demonstrate *patience* and *joy*. Not to respond to threats and conflict and suffering with violence or retaliation or fear that seeks to serve and save

² *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year C*, pg. 607.

ourselves. But to respond as Christ does, with grace and peace and mercy and forgiveness and compassion and love, remembering that forgiveness and compassion and love are *not* acts of *weakness* or *powerlessness* but acts of great *strength*.

When we live in ways that show forth the grace and peace of Jesus Christ, we are showing the world the very image of God, and we are living in the Kingdom of God here on earth, under the rule and reign of Christ our King. So may that kingdom come, and may God's will be done, in us, on earth. Amen.