

Seeing the King  
Luke 23:33–43; Colossians 1:11–20  
Sunday, November 20, 2022 (Christ the King)

Let us pray: Speak your word to us, Lord, that we might *know* and *do* your will and dwell – now and forever – in the kingdom of Christ our King, in whose name we pray. Amen.

I read an article this week about royal marriages in medieval Europe. Most royal marriages were not based on love, they were based on politics. Let's say the King of England had a son, and he was looking for a *wife* for his son, a future queen. The King of England might contact the King of France and say, "I have a son, you have a daughter. Let's arrange a marriage that will be beneficial to both of us." It was a form of diplomacy that would hopefully create a good relationship between the two countries.

The *problem* was, this was before photographs or Facebook or Match.com or selfies or cell phones. A lot of times, the prospective bride and groom would not see each other until the day of the wedding. And *what if* they did not like what they saw? Or, a bigger concern, what if one of them had some kind of physical or genetic problem that would potentially be passed along to their children, the *future* King or Queen?

There were a couple of options to find out whether this prospective bride or groom was a good match for the future monarch. They *could* meet in person, but a lot of times the distance was too far to travel safely. They could rely on a *written* description. But since a picture is worth a thousand words, what ended up happening was that they would rely on *portraits*. They couldn't *take* a picture, but they could *paint* a picture.

The challenge was, who does the painting? You didn't just want to rely on *their* artist, because what would they do? They would paint the most amazing, flattering portrait they could to make the potential match look as appealing as possible. They learned this lesson the hard way.

In 1794, the future Queen Caroline of England was engaged to George, the Prince of Wales, and she talked for *generations* about her disappointment upon first seeing her husband. She said, "I find him very fat and by no means as beautiful as his portrait." Royal artists attempted to soften and disguise the physical abnormalities of King Charles II of Spain that resulted from generations of inbreeding. And when King Henry VIII was looking for his fourth wife, he received a portrait of Anne of Cleves. He liked what he saw, but said, "If that be your picture then shall we soon see how you and your picture agree." When he met her for the first time on New Year's Day 1540, he was *repulsed* by her, crying out to his advisors, "I like her not!"

They didn't want to rely on *the other* country's artist to paint what could potentially be an over-flattering, misleading portrait, so what they started doing was sending *their own* artist; someone they trusted. In 1428, Duke Philip of Burgundy sent the artist Jan Van Eyck to paint a portrait of Princess Isabella of Portugal to provide "eyewitness testimony to the person of the princess so that when she arrived in Burgundy...there would be independent proof of her authenticity through the matching of her image to her person."<sup>1</sup> They said, "We just want to make sure you're the same person," but what they were really saying was, "We want to make sure you look okay." And while a portrait could show you what a person *looked* like, it could not tell you what that person *was like* – their personality and characteristics and temperament.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.history.com/news/how-portraiture-shaped-royal-marriages>

None of us has ever *seen* God. So how do we know what God is *like*? We could rely on written accounts in scripture, but the challenge with that is, some places in scripture describe God favorably as patient and loving and generous and merciful, while other places describe God unfavorably as an angry, wrathful, consuming fire of jealousy and judgment. And what often happens is, we pick the image of God that we like best, the one that fits with our theology and (more often) our politics. We, who are created in the image of God, so often try to create God in *our* image.

But also, so much of how we live and relate to the world and the people around us is based on our understanding of *who God is*. If we understand God to be good, loving, kind, generous, and forgiving, we are going to *live* in ways that are good and loving and kind and generous and forgiving. If we understand God to be angry and judgmental and vindictive, we are going to live in ways that are angry and judgmental and vindictive. If we believe that God is indifferent, just doesn't care about someone or something, then why should *we*? So much about who *we* are depends on our understanding of who *God* is. So how do we know who God is?

In his letter to the Christians in Colossae, Paul writes that Jesus Christ is “the image of the invisible God.” None of us has ever *seen* God, but Jesus Christ is the living, breathing portrait of God shows us who God is *and what God is like*. Not what God *looks* like, what God *is* like; God's personality and characteristics and temperament.

Pastor and author Brian Zahnd has a great quote about this. He says, “God is like Jesus.” People often think that in the Old Testament we see an angry, wrathful, vindictive God, while in the New Testament we see a loving, forgiving God, like something *changed* about God in the coming of Christ. But what Zhand says is, “No, God is like Jesus. God has always been like

Jesus. There has never been a time when God was not like Jesus. We have not always known what God is like – but now we do.”<sup>2</sup> Paul writes that, in Christ, “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” *Everything* that is God is in Jesus. We look at Jesus, and we see God.

So the question is, what kind of God – what kind of *king* – does Jesus show us? And that is where we come to our *second* scripture reading today, from Luke’s gospel:

<sup>33</sup>When 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. <sup>34</sup>Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots to divide his clothing. <sup>35</sup>And 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!” <sup>36</sup>The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, <sup>37</sup>and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” <sup>38</sup>There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

<sup>39</sup>One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” <sup>40</sup>But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? <sup>41</sup>And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” <sup>42</sup>Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” <sup>43</sup>He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”<sup>3</sup>

*This* is the King of the Jews. The King of kings and the Lord of lords who rules and reigns over heaven and earth. Were you expecting something else? Because *they* were. They were expecting a mighty king who would sit on the throne of David and raise up an army to defeat the Romans. They were expecting power and glory, and what they got was a man who hung out with sinners and was nailed naked to a cross next to two criminals until he died. *He* is the image of the invisible God, in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

And what Jesus shows us about God is that the power of God is not found in wrath or violence or domination or judgment or self-preservation (as they said to him *three times*, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”). Jesus shows us that the power of God is *cruciform*. It is

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<sup>2</sup> <https://brianzahnd.com/2011/08/god-is-like-jesus-2/>

<sup>3</sup> Luke 23:33–43

found in humility and forgiveness and love and self-sacrifice. Jesus shows us that God does not condemn us for our sin. God stands in solidarity with us when we are condemned by our sin, forgiving us and assuring us that there is a place for us in God's kingdom.

That is *not* how the Kingdom of Man, the kingdoms of *this world* understand and utilize power. Power, in our world, is not *cruciform*, it is the power *to crucify* – our enemies, those who are not *like* us, those who disagree with us. Power, in our world, is the ability to do whatever we want. We see all around us, every single day, how power is used by the powerful for self-preservation, to control, or to kill. But the power of the Kingdom of God, as shown to us in Christ our King, is the power to love, to forgive, to heal, to bless, to redeem, to give life.

And what Paul says is that we have been rescued from the power of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of Christ our King. Our citizenship has been transferred from the Kingdom of Man to the Kingdom of God. And we have been *rescued* from the power of *darkness*. What is the darkness that you need to be rescued from?

Is the darkness *sin*, that no matter how hard you *try*, no matter how hard you *want to*, you cannot escape its power over you? Addiction? Anger? Fear? Sickness? Sorrow? Despair? Sometimes in scripture, darkness represents a lack of awareness or understanding. Is your darkness that you just don't understand – God, other people, this world, your own life, how things got the way they are, how it can ever change? Is the darkness loneliness? Feeling unloved?

What is darkness but the absence of light? And Christ *is* our light, the light of the world. So darkness is all that which is not Christ. But we have been *rescued* from the power of darkness.

Brought out of the darkness of all that which is not Christ, into the Kingdom of God to live as saints in the light. As Paul says to the Ephesians, “Once you were in darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light.”

Christ has shone the light of God into this world and our lives, conquering the power of darkness. There is *still* darkness, but that darkness does not hold *power* over us. As it says in John’s gospel, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” And the darkness will not overcome *us*. Because what Paul is saying here is that, in Christ, we are made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power and prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to God.”

On our own, we *cannot* overcome the darkness of sin and evil and addiction and fear and anger and despair. But we are not on our own. We are made strong with all the strength that comes from Christ’s glorious power.

There is still darkness, but in Christ, we find the power to *endure* the darkness. And not just to suffer through it, but to endure it with *joy*. Not just some Pollyanna joy, where we pretend like everything around us is fine. We know it’s not. The endurance that Paul is talking about is based on a deep and abiding hope and trust in the ultimate power of God to overcome the darkness of this world. “No matter what we are facing now, no matter what we might have to endure in the future, we can do so joyfully, because the cosmic battle against the darkness has already been won.”<sup>4</sup> “And that is what we should celebrate. Because of the cross, we can live in

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/christ-the-king-3/commentary-on-colossians-111-20-5>

great confidence and joy that all the things that are so wrong will be made right, and that Christ has already begun putting all things right.”<sup>5</sup>

On the cross, Jesus trusts that there is something beyond the darkness of pain and suffering and death. There is *life*. There is *love*. There is *healing*. There is *forgiveness*. There is *redemption*. There is *reconciliation*. There is *freedom*. There is *peace*. *That* is the power of Christ our King. Not the power to conquer or control, but the power to trust in the goodness of God despite the darkness that surrounds us. *That* is what we see in Christ.

Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God. He shows us who God is and what God is like. He shows us that God stands with us in the darkness and invites us to trust that something better is coming. If your only hope is in the power and politics of this world to set right that which is wrong, then you are only and always going to be disappointed. But if our hope is in Christ the King, who rules and reigns over heaven and earth and has already overcome the darkness of evil and sin, then you will have the power to endure whatever darkness you have to face, with patience and joy, trusting in the power of God to make you strong. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/christ-the-king-3/commentary-on-colossians-111-20-3>