

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

The festival of Christ the King is the newest festival on the church calendar. In fact, it is one hundred years old this year. It was decreed by Pope Pius XI in 1925 in a context of growing secularism and ultra-nationalism, particularly in Europe in the aftermath of the first world war. And the movement that epitomized ultra-nationalism at this time, and right next door to the pope, was the fascism of Benito Mussolini, who right then was in the process of dismantling the Italian parliament and becoming a full-on dictator. So you *could* call this Antifa Sunday if you were so inclined. Or No-Kings-But-Christ Sunday if you prefer, with particular relevance to authoritarian and totalitarian efforts in our own time. The point of the festival is to emphasize that for Christians, only Jesus Christ deserves our ultimate allegiance, and only in him is true peace and true prosperity to be found. Lutherans and other mainline Christians adopted Christ the King Sunday along with the new ecumenical liturgical calendar that came out of the Vatican II years, when it was moved to the final Sunday of the church year to share God's vision of the creation restored to how God intended it to be all along.

One way to lay out that vision would be to look at the beginning and ending of the Bible. The first two chapters of Genesis set the stage. The first chapter tells us that God created the world and everything in it. The second zooms in on human beings and our primal need for one another. Then chapter three gives us the complicating incident, "the Fall." Our ancient, ancestral sin is usurping God's rule, deciding that we can do things better than God, based on our own desires and inclinations, without regard to how that might affect the rest of the world. The fruit looked good to the first people, and promised to give knowledge – to make them like God. So they disregarded God's judgment in favor of their own. And immediately things begin to unravel. At the other end of the Bible is the book of Revelation, which ends with a vision of the new holy city descending from heaven to earth, and God coming to live with us in that city. In a nutshell, then: we make thing go wrong, God makes them go right. That's the "too long, didn't read" summary of the Bible, and the point of the story of salvation that we go through each year in the church calendar.

Another way to lay out that vision, and draw us into it, is with the three readings we have before us this morning. As I thought about these readings this past week, I kept noticing how perfect they are for our purposes today, and how well they work together. So, I'm going to quickly have a look at each reading in order, to see how together they give us a compelling and hopeful summary of the faith to close out the church year.

After the opening chapters of Genesis, the Bible is one sequel after another to the story of the Fall. Again and again God starts over with God's people, and again and again they disappoint, starting right away with Cain and Abel. The book of Jeremiah is another case in point. Jeremiah was called to proclaim mostly bad news to God's people: the end of the kingdom of Judah because of its unfaithfulness and injustice. Our text today is a hopeful exception to the bad news. But let's not ignore the fact that this is a distant hope in the face of imminent disaster. The shepherds that Jeremiah warns in this reading are the rulers of Judah. That makes this a text about politics. Jeremiah means to say there that those who would rule over others have the responsibility of caring for those they rule, like a shepherd has the responsibility of caring for the sheep in his charge. The implications for us and our time should be clear. If those in power use their power to advantage themselves by harming others, they stand under the judgment of God, and they should know that God will not put up with their injustice forever. In a democracy like ours – if we can manage to hold

onto it – each of us bears some responsibility for the injustice our rulers perpetrate. But I think this also has personal implications. Each of us has a degree of power in relation to others. The same principle applies. When we use whatever power we have to help ourselves at the expense of others, we are working against God's goal for the creation.

Our text from Colossians places the promised Messiah in cosmic context. It presents a claim about Jesus that would not have been apparent to anyone before his resurrection, including his own disciples, namely that he is not only the promised Messiah, but the source and focal point of creation: "in him all things in heaven and on earth were created," and "in him all things hold together." This Jesus who lived among us as one of us, who knows our reality as his own, our joys and our sorrows, is also somehow behind and interpenetrating everything. He is the source and the binding agent of all creation, and he is at work to repair what has been broken: our relationship with God, with one another, and with the reset of creation. And the focal point of that work is his cross.

That brings us finally to Luke's account of Jesus's crucifixion, which is full of references to kingship. First, we have the crowds taunting Jesus. They make fun of him by putting a sign on his cross that says "King of the Judeans." They taunt him with the title: "Hey, king, show us your power. Prove you're the king by saving yourself." Notice the temptation in that taunt. Save yourself. Serve yourself. Do what's best for *you*. It's a calculus that we are all too familiar with. It's the guiding principle of our culture and our economy. "Do what works for you," is our ancient sin on full display.

Then comes the back-and-forth with the two criminals on either side of Jesus, unique to Luke's Gospel. Matthew and Mark say that those who were crucified with him also taunted him like the soldiers and the other bystanders. But Luke makes it more complicated. One of them does taunt him, but the other seems to sense what is going on, and comes to Jesus' defense. He is the interesting one in this story. He recognizes his own guilt and accepts the justice of his punishment. He doesn't ask to be rescued, only remembered. It's hard to guess his motive, to decide whether this is only the desperate plea of a man who has no other hope, or whether he knows or senses something that no one else in the story does. Whatever his motive, Luke makes this criminal a kind of stand-in for all of us, and a spokesperson of faith, however weak or desperate it might be. In the face of all evidence to the contrary, he speaks to the dying Jesus as the king his disciples once hoped him to be, taking seriously the title that he is ironically labeled with on his cross and taunted with from the crowd, and he places his dying hope in him. And Jesus responds with a kingly promise: "Today you will be with me in paradise."

Here in these three readings this morning we have an epilog to the church year that can also serve as a preface to the new church year we start next week. Here we recognize our human condition, hopelessly mired in self-serving sinfulness, complicit with our fellow humans in the evil that threatens to undo God's good creation. But we also find here the hopeful news that God does not give up on us or our broken world. In Jesus Christ God comes to us, to suffer with us and for us the consequences of our sinfulness, and to blaze a trail through our darkness to life as it was always meant to be. We gather here each week, like gatherings throughout the world, to hang out with Jesus (as it were) – to acknowledge our helplessness, our hopelessness, and with our dying breaths to place what faith and hope God has granted us into the wounded hands of the king of the universe, and to hear the promise of our baptism: "today I am with you," says Jesus, "I am with you all of your days, amidst of all the joys and struggles of this life. And I am with you even in your death. I am with you to transform you and all of creation into the paradise I intended all along, and to make you my partners in loving the world back to life." May it be so. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.