

<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 in your kingdom.” <sup>43</sup>He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

This is the word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

It may seem strange to hear verses about Jesus on the cross in the middle of November. But today is actually not just the middle of November. It's the last day of the church's calendar year. It is a day to be thankful, a day to celebrate all that has happened, a day to be with all our spiritual family at one time, and a day to celebrate that Jesus Christ is the one whom we have been following. Next Sunday, November 30, is the first Sunday of Advent, which marks the beginning of a new church year when we symbolically wait for his arrival all over again.

And so, today, we celebrate Christ the King day. Having heard his teachings and witnessed his miracles for a year, we proclaim our allegiance to Jesus, who lived among us and showed us how great God's love for us truly is. And we proclaim that even on the cross, Jesus is our king, just as Pilate had written in Greek, Latin, and Aramaic, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.”

But, friends, it's ironic that we even have a Christ the King Sunday because Jesus didn't ask for or want to be the king of the Jews. He didn't want to be the king of any earthly kingdom.

Jesus came instead to bring the Kingdom of God to earth.

It's all counter-intuitive. How could a king be hung on a cross? How could a king who represented God on Earth wind up with a crown of thorns instead of a crown of gold? My friends, on the cross, he proved what the kingdom was about. And at the same time, he defied every temptation to be something else. To bring something else. Something more familiar to us. Something earthly.

An earthly king was what everyone expected. From the priests in the temple to the widow woman and the magi and the carpenters and fishermen. They all were waiting for the Messiah to come and drive out the occupying force, reclaim the throne of David and bring peace, prosperity, and glory to Jerusalem. It was as certain as the rising of the sun in the east.

And Jesus had every opportunity, multiple opportunities to claim it. Despite his humble birth, Joseph was from the line of David. Despite his birth in Bethlehem, the Magi from the east came to pay homage to the newborn king.

Despite his upbringing in a carpenter's home in Nazareth, Pilate called him a King. And even despite his crucifixion, the thief said to him, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

None of it makes any sense. It's all upside-down, but sometimes turning upside-down helps you see things more clearly.

Let me just offer you some parallels that help me understand the kingdom a little better. Do you remember what happened to Jesus right after he was baptized? Luke 4 says, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, was led by the Spirit in the wilderness." Then [temptation showed up].

It was time for Jesus to begin his earthly public campaign. Time for him to declare who he was and reveal his power and be all he was meant to be, and in the wilderness, he was deciding how to do all of those things. Where would he go? Who would he speak to? How would he use his miraculous power?

If I were Jesus, I think I'd be doing a lot of levitating in public. Just to get their attention. Or I'd be riding on a big, beautiful horse. I'd be silencing my opponents with my photographic memory of scripture and law and history. I'd embarrass them by revealing their secret sins. And I'd summon the choir of angels who had sung at my birth and maybe I'd have a silverback gorilla by my side and a snow owl that sat on my shoulder, and they'd have conversation with me. That would be fun, but then again, I think I've seen too many Disney movies.

Jesus, on the other hand, was taking this more seriously. He had been fasting, and he was hungry. Really hungry. The first temptation was for him to use his magic and turn stones into bread and eat. He could have done it. I'm convinced he could have. And not just bread, but stuff like we had at the bazaar yesterday. Pumpkin bars and banana nut bread and jalapeno cheddar loaves. Whatever he wanted.

But he refused to use his power for show. Instead, at the end of his ministry, he turned things upside down and said to his disciples, my body will become "bread broken for you" so that we might always have him to sustain us.

And then temptation showed him all the kingdoms of the world and said to him, "You could have all the authority and power instantly." Jesus could have united all the world under one monarch. He could have instituted justice and legislation right then and there. He could have overthrown empires and distributed wealth and resources however he saw fit. He could have, but he didn't.

Instead, he went to his hometown synagogue, and he read about the kind of kingdom he was there to bring about. He quoted Isaiah and said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me." Now, stop right there. That's the vocabulary of the

monarchy. Anointing is something that happens when a person is made a king. Samuel anointed King David. The Archbishop of Canterbury anointed King Charles.

So Jesus is claiming authority, but to do what? . . . “to bring good news to the poor . . . To proclaim release to the captives . . . to let the oppressed go free, [and] to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

The kingdom of God is not about earthly power. The kingdom is humanity living among each other in right relations and love for the vulnerable. And . . . folks . . . I’ll preach on this one hundred times if I preach on it once, the year of the Lord’s favor is upside-down, radical, completely counter-cultural, and impractical and yet GODLY.

The year of the Lord’s favor is Jubilee - the celebration that God explained in Leviticus 25 and has wanted us to practice every fifty years since the Hebrew people came out of Egypt but which we NEVER have. It’s a time in which debts are completely forgiven. Not suspended for a year but wiped clean. Land is given back to original owners. Slaves are released from bondage. Everyone chills out and takes a year off of hard work. That’s what the kingdom of God is supposed to look like periodically.

Jesus wants to be the king of that. The head of that. Not the Roman Empire or the British Empire or the United States of America or the Jewish people of Palestine or all of them rolled up into one.

Jesus says, I am the King of a Kingdom that is not of this world. A people who do not follow the ways of this world, but if we follow Jesus and call him King of Kings and Lord of Lords, then we live with our bodies here, and our hearts and minds in a completely different realm! And it’s exhausting to be so pulled in two directions!

But remember, there was one other temptation Jesus faced. In Luke 4, temptation said, you are the Son of God. You should never have to suffer. Since you are divine, jump from the highest point of the temple and have the angels catch you before you fall. Use your power for self-preservation.

And in Luke 23, the ones who surrounded him on the cross said the same thing. If you are the Messiah – the King we have been waiting for – use your magic. Call on the angels. Use your powers to save yourself. You do not look like a king from our vantage spot. You look like an ordinary human being. Like us.

But when one of their hearts was changed by the grace he saw in Jesus and he asked Jesus to remember him, he replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Jesus knew that he was divine. He did have a kingdom to call home. And he did what he could, how he could, to show everyone on earth how to live it into existence here. On the cross Jesus said, “Forgive them, they do not know what they are doing,” but we do now. We know that we can follow the King when we serve humbly and give generously and do not give in to the temptations of this world. We see it in scripture in the child who offered his lunch box when thousands were hungry. In the shepherd who celebrated finding one lost sheep. It’s in the father who threw a party when a rebellious child came home. But it’s also in the cancelation of debts and the hospitality to the strangers. It’s in our making sure that our neighbors have enough to eat and enough shelter for the cold nights. It’s lending our voice to the voiceless. It’s when we don’t seek to use our power for self-preservation or our money just to support ourselves. That’s our upside-down behavior. That’s the kingdom, and Jesus is our king. That’s who we serve. That’s who we pledge our allegiance to. It doesn’t always make sense. It’s not always rational. In the eyes of the world, it rarely is, but it *is* the way to Paradise. So we keep on praying, “Jesus, remember us, when you come into your kingdom.” For Christ is our King and we are a grateful, thankful people. Alleluia. Amen.