

Scripture Lesson: Luke 23:32-43

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 83-84

³²Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. 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 in your kingdom." ⁴³He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God

All: Thanks be to God!

Luke 23:32-43

11/23/2025 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

"Rule In All Our Hearts Alone"

Rev. Amy Terhune

I'm going to start today by making a confession. Sometimes, I get distracted when I'm praying. Does that ever happen to anyone else? I start praying about something, and before I know, my head is somewhere else, and then I try to backtrack and deconstruct how my train of thought derailed along the way! I used to fight it, but in more recent years, I've started making time to let my thoughts go where they will in my prayer time. I figure maybe that's how God speaks sometimes, by derailing my train of thought so we can go in the direction He wants to go. Earlier this past week, I was praying about the preparations for Advent, which starts *next* week – let's not get too far ahead of ourselves – and I started thinking about how God took on human form, how Jesus became fully human and fully divine, and I began to wonder if Jesus, being fully human, ever got distracted. And I'll tell you, being totally honest, I don't like to think of Jesus as being distracted. That just doesn't sit quite right, y'know? Surely, Jesus was focused, poised, prepared. He didn't get distracted. He didn't space out. He didn't get sidetracked or derailed. Not Jesus. But still, I have to wonder. Was there ever a time, maybe before he began his public ministry, where he's working in Joseph's carpentry shop, and a neighbor comes in with a broken chair, and another needs a wheel fixed, and another needs help with warped barrel and by the time Jesus finishes helping those who have come to him, he has to stand there for a minute and say to himself, "now what was I doing?" Do you think Jesus ever ran from the house to the shed, and then said to himself, "now why did I come out here?"

Do you think Jesus ever had *déjà vu*? Scientists say that *déjà vu* happens where out subconscious minds pick up on something before we are aware of it consciously. By the time we stop and really notice and think about something, we find ourselves wondering if we haven't seen this before. Yes, a few nanoseconds ago when our subconscious took it in. "Comedian Steven Wright said

in one of his routines: “Right now I’m having amnesia and déjà vu at the same time—I think I’ve forgotten this before.” And Canadian stand-up comedian Stewart Francis routinely asks in his set, “Did I already do my déjà vu joke?” It’s funny every time. [from <https://www.just-one-liners.com/topic/deja-vu/>; as used in “Déjà vu or Divine Revelation?” by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

I don’t know if Jesus had déjà vu or not, but I wouldn’t blame him for thinking he did. As he hangs on the cross, the crowd jeers at him. If you’re the Messiah, come down off that cross. If you’re the Son of God, save yourself. It seems like someone’s maybe said that to him before. If you’re the Messiah, command these stones to become bread. If you’re the Son of God, throw yourself off the pinnacle of the temple. Those were words from the devil just before Jesus began his public ministry, when Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness. He didn’t do it then. He doesn’t do it now. Jesus doesn’t put on a show of power. Jesus doesn’t do parlor tricks. He could call down legions of angels if he wanted to. He tells them so in Matthes’s gospel. But he doesn’t. At a time when it seems only human that he would be distracted and derailed, his isn’t. Instead, he chooses the way of suffering, the way of forgiveness, the way of sacrifice, a shameful death on a cross.

Maybe you’re thinking that you’re suffering from déjà vu. I’ve heard this scripture passage before, but it’s out of context. What’s it doing popping up at the end of November? I’m ready to pull out the manger, and the preacher is reading lessons for Good Friday! Well, yes, I am, and for good reason. You see, Advent, which starts next week, begins a new year. Today is what’s called “Reign of Christ” Sunday. It’s the final Sunday of the church year. We mark the end of our year by reflecting on the Majesty, the Lordship, the Authority of Christ Jesus. As holidays go, it’s relatively new. Pope Pius the XI instituted this holy day 100 years ago. Remember what was happening in 1925. WWI was over, but Woodrow Wilson’s League of Nations was a failed experiment. Nations had fallen to bickering and infighting, so they felt no commitment to one another. An up-and-coming politician in Germany named Adolf Hitler wrote a book that year called *Mein Kampf*, and in the wake of crushing financial hardship imposed on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles, he was gaining popularity. The US in 1925 was experiencing enormous financial growth and an unprecedented number of average people were investing in high-risk, high-reward investments primarily fueled by widespread speculation, easy access to credit which led to financial overreach, and a faulty belief that the economy could only grow. The largest fraternal order in the United States in 1925 was the Ku Klux Klan, who demanded that only white Christians be allowed to immigrate here. Burned by WWI, the US populations mistakenly believed it could go back to isolationism, and nothing in the rest of the world would impact us. Pope Pius XI saw the writing on the wall before other nations did. Growing nationalism, isolationism, rampant greed, and systemic prejudice were inching the world towards a breaking point. In that context, he reminded the world: There is One King, and one Kingdom, and it is to this One Almighty King – our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ – that we all owe our allegiance.

As long as we live in a world prone to nationalism, isolationism, rampant greed and systemic prejudice, Reign of Christ Sunday remains relevant and challenging to people of faith today. For centuries, the church has understood the cross to be Christ’s throne – the place where he demonstrates beyond any shadow of doubt his authority, his leadership, and his power. But they differ vastly from the world’s understanding. Jesus exercises these gifts on behalf of love and grace, not conquest and control. As he is crucified, he calls out for all the world to hear, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” In your pew bibles, as with most reputable translations, that verse appears in brackets. The reason for that is that scholars across the theological spectrum are fairly evenly divided about whether that verse is authentic to Luke’s gospel. The reason for that is that there are several dozen early copies of Luke’s gospel, and the verse appears in about half of them.

Given that it aligns with Luke's theology and language, and is emulated by Stephen, the first martyr for the Christian faith, some surmise that scribes left the verse out either because they were uncomfortable with universal forgiveness as it's presented here or because the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD could be interpreted to mean Jesus was wrong in that not all were forgiven. Others speculate that it may have been added in later, either to justify Stephen's use of the phraseology or to drive home prominent Lukan themes.

But regardless of how you want to take that, we see here Jesus exercising his authority to forgive sins. He's done it before and been challenged. 'Who are you to forgive sins?' The Pharisees ask. And Jesus both forgives and heals to prove his power. Now, there's nothing left to prove. Jesus pronounces forgiveness and secures it with his life. That is his authority, and he wields it to protect his people. That's why He is King of kings and Lord of lords. There's always some argument about who Jesus forgives. Is it the soldiers who crucify him? The Jewish Leaders who conspire against him? The Romans who give in to pressure? The crowd who watches? The disciples who have fled and hidden? I'm inclined to believe he uses his strength to say it out loud because he means it to apply to everyone – even those who may not yet know they need it. Without fail, this line drives me to my knees every time. Not a one of us is free from sin's tarnish. Jesus' prayer for humanity is that God forgive us. And he made it possible by paying the price of sin once, for all.

As he hangs there, he also interacts with the two criminals hung on either side of him. Mark and Matthew tell us they are thieves, but Luke only calls them criminals. They could have been thieves, or they could have been guilty of murder, treason, fraud, or any number of other crimes. Authorities back then didn't need a good reason to use capital punishment. All one had to do was tick them off badly enough. The one joins the crowd in maligning Jesus, but the other seems to see something that no one else can see.

We're told nothing about these criminals. I don't know if he ever heard Jesus preach a sermon or teach beside the sea. I don't know if he ever saw Jesus multiply loaves and fishes or cleanse a leper or restore sight to the blind. There's nothing to indicate that he was a follower of Jesus. And there was nothing about Jesus to suggest that he was a savior or a king. Indeed, the crowd who had followed Jesus, who had heard his teaching and witnessed his miracles, has relegated him to "...a sideshow in a circus, an object of curiosity. They marveled at what he could do, they even liked to hear him teach, but it never occurred to them that he was the messiah, the one who would save the people from their sins. [from "The Prayer of A Thief" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com]

Pastor Ray Pritchard writes: "Somehow this man saw Jesus bleeding and naked and hanging on a cross beside him and yet he believed that he would someday come into his kingdom. No man ever looked less like a king than Jesus did that day, yet this criminal saw Jesus as he really was, the son of God. He knew nothing of the virgin birth, the Old Testament prophecies or the raising of Lazarus. The coming miracle of the resurrection was unknown to him. All the things we take for granted, he knew nothing about. Yet there on the cross, he came to understand the heart of the gospel. In the crucified Jesus, beaten, mocked, forsaken, his life blood ebbing away, this thug saw a king. [from Ray Pritchard, <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/1991-02-10-Last-Second-Salvation/>; as used in "A King Like No Other" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.] Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom. And that is our prayer, too.

I don't know if Jesus ever got distracted. I don't know if he had déjà vu. But I sure do. So let me close with a story. As a teenager, I came to Christ through the work of several devoted people in my life over the years. I was a sophomore when I attended a concert downtown Detroit. It was at that concert that the lightbulb of understanding turned on in my brain. Suddenly, I got it. The singer described, in music, what Christ endured on the cross—the critical loss of blood, the crushing weight

on his arms, the agony of being unable to draw breath, the slow suffocation, the splinters digging into his wounds. Gruesome, yes, but I got it. He'd suffered for love of humanity; for love of me. It moved me to tears. For the span of several years, it moved me to tears. Until it didn't. As a young adult, I grieved the loss of the emotionalism that had surrounded my coming into faith as a youngster. I thought I was becoming desensitized to Christ's enormous gift of love. I thought I was getting too comfortable, too ambivalent about the love of God, and it scared me because I wanted to love and serve God with my whole being.

I'd been in Columbiaville a couple of years when I was invited to go see a passion play during Lent. There was an ecumenical group that put on, every year, a dramatic production of Christ's final week, trial and death. Several of my people were in it, I thought it might be a good way to support them. And I have to say, it was beautifully done. By the end of the play, Christ had been crucified and stabbed and laid in the arms of his weeping mother. You'd think that would make me cry, but it didn't.

The two criminals crucified with him were each carried off by centurions and so forth, but the activity on the stage grew still, and the lights grew dim as the spotlight remained on Christ's cross and one centurion, standing there at the foot of the cross. The centurion looked at the cross, reached out to touch it hesitantly, trembling. Then he noticed a scrap of bloodied purple cloak left on the ground at the foot of the cross. He picked it up, fingering it with deliberate wonder. And then he sunk to his knees in front of the cross and began to cry, moved by what he had witnessed. And I watched.

Then the centurion reached up and took off his helmet, with the plume thing on top, and set down. He unfastened his shield, almost as if it was burning him somehow, and set it down, and he took off the sword buckled around his waist and set it down. Then he stood up, free from one kind of power, and he put his hand on the cross and bowed his head, and I had the sense a different kind of power was moving through—the power of a life forever touched by love! The stage went dark, and I was weeping. I realized that I hadn't forgotten what Christ had done. But I had grown. It's not that I failed to appreciate or respect the atonement of Christ's sacrifice. It still speaks to me. But what moves me, what inspires me, what touches the deepest recesses of my soul, and what drives my commitment to the King of kings and Lord of lords was not what Christ had done, but what he does now! He was not King for a moment in dim annals of history, he is the Lord of history, and he still works, still sacrifices, still frees, still unbinds, still speaks, still touches hearts and opens minds and sparks imaginations and heals wounds and changes lives one at a time—a criminal's, a soldier's, mine! Yours?

When we say Christ is King, we acknowledge his power to forgive us, change us, grow us, claim us, love us. When we say Christ is King, we declare that love is still the most powerful force in the world – more powerful than the distractions that derail us, more powerful than nationalism, isolationism, rampant greed, or systemic prejudice. If Christ is your King—if Christ's spirit has somehow taken over your heart, grown your compassion and forgiveness, transformed your soul and your vision of others into lights of possibility—if Christ's spirit reigns in you, then I don't need to highlight the needs around us. And I don't need to tell you about Thanksgiving and gratitude. You know the gifts you've been given. And I don't need to tell you about light and peace and promise. But since I'm so easily distracted, I will...next week. Same time. Same place. New year. Amen.