

November 24, 2013 “Remembering Who Is King” Luke 23:33-43 Deut. 8:11-18

Today is both Christ the King Sunday and Thanksgiving Sunday. Next week a new church year will begin, with Advent. But today as we end the liturgical year we started in 2012, it is appropriate for us to assess where we are in terms of our relationship with God. It's easy to want God to serve us, to be our Savior, to make things right for us. It is much more challenging to let our Savior be LORD of our lives, our true King.

A middle-aged man was matter-of-fact about his relationship with God. “I send a check once a month, I go to church two or three times a year, I consider myself a decent Christian, and I tell God not to bother me; I'll call God if I need something. I like the benefits, but I don't want my religion to be a burden.”

We may laugh, but this kind of treatment of God is not so rare. Some have suggested that we treat God as a heavenly bell-hop or a benevolent genie. Here's my list, God. If you are real, prove it!

So much of this year has been spent holding up our concerns to God; perhaps praise and thanksgiving have been afterthoughts or even lost. We have cried out for healing from cancer and for help with strokes, we have asked for jobs, we have yearned for peace for our world and a stable economy for our country. We have prayed for our children and our friends and have sought solace in God's promise to be with us no matter what.

But have we remembered to give thanks, not only when we have enough to eat, but even more, to deeply search through our hearts and our lives to identify our blessings?

God knew that we human beings tend to have trouble with being thankful. In Deuteronomy, shortly before the Israelites were to take possession of the long-promised land, God warned them not to forget God. “Be careful lest you forget the Lord who made your good life possible.” (Fte paraphrase)

Perhaps that's why, as our church year ends and we start thinking about candlelight and a baby born in a manger again, the lectionary asks us to visit the crucifixion once more, to remember what this whole year's worth of stuff is all about. It is about God so determined to love this sinful world that God became flesh and in Jesus offered HIMSELF as the sacrifice to cover our sins. In the face of hatred, betrayal, scheming religious authorities, and cruelty, our King cried out, “Father, forgive them, for they do not grasp what they are doing!”

There have been lots of kings throughout the centuries, and we've surely been exposed to lots of politicians, but there's never been a king like Christ Jesus. Most kings want to do good for their kingdoms, but they have not been willing to give up everything for the sake of their subjects.

We are a people who have learned to view life with skepticism. We all had people will say that they will do something, but then not show up. We've experienced people cheating and hurting

each other and telling lies. We have learned that folks pretty well try to look out for themselves. If they can help somebody else without inconveniencing themselves very much, then they will. But rarely will a person choose to lose life or checkbook or well-being in order to help another person. The cross shows us that God is different.

An old story is told of a holy man who saw a beggar and took him in for a meal. As the holy man was saying the blessing before the meal, however, the guest started cursing God, yelling that God had not helped him out in his hard life, so he would not listen to a prayer thanking God. The holy man was totally offended, and immediately threw the man out of his house. That night, as he was trying to sleep, God spoke to the holy man: "Dear child, why did you throw that poor man out onto the street without feeding him?" The holy man replied, "Why God, that man said terrible things about you and interrupted my prayer of thanksgiving!" God responded, "My dear child, I have endured thirty-six years of that man's wrath and verbal abuse, and I still watch over him and yearn for him to know my love. Could you not have put up with him for just one evening?" (Story reconstituted from memory; source unknown)

Not too long ago I spoke with a woman who was so burdened with disappointments and problems in her life that by the time we finished talking I found myself filled to my brim with headache and heaviness. On top of her struggles, the terrible trials others are facing in life right now filled my heart. Then some of the stories I read in the newspaper hit me, and I felt so impotent and low in spirit that I wondered why we even bother to believe in God's kingdom. It felt as though the negatives of the world had won. It felt as though cancer and illness and crime and war and greed didn't even need a recount. The title of the musical from years ago came to mind: "Stop the World; I want to Get Off!"

I can find myself overwhelmed: the church roof is in bad shape; this person needs housing, this father of four who was laid off four months ago is still looking for work, this person is immobilized by grief and guilt, this relationship is rocky, those folks don't talk to each other, these may lose their house, this family's child made a mistake online and has been thrown out of his school, this woman is dying of pancreatic cancer, another friend faces treatments....

Sometimes, when things are overwhelming, there are hard questions. "God, are you really here? Are you really more powerful than all these things that threaten to undo us?? Can it be that forgiveness is offered? *Are you the King? Is there hope for us when we cannot seem to make things better or even find answers to the suffering around us??*"

Finally there comes peace and God's answer. "I am the Lord your God. My specialty is bringing hope in times of impossibility, light in the deepest places of darkness, and peace in the stormiest episodes of a person's heart. My kingdom is not stymied by the brokenness of this world; indeed, my kingdom offers a path through all the assaults, fears, and challenges of life. My hand reaches out to you; my grace is sufficient for you. Trust my ways, for my kingdom is the way to life."

Here is a story, which speaks of giving thanks to God in the very midst of pain and

disappointment. During a harvest festival in India, an old widow arrived at her church with an extraordinarily large offering of rice - far more than the poor woman could be expected to afford. The itinerant pastor of the church did not know the widow well. But he did know that she was very poor and so he asked her if she were making the offering in gratitude for some unusual blessing. "Yes," replied the woman. "My son was sick and I promised a large gift to God if he got well." "And your son has recovered?" asked the pastor. The widow paused. "No," she said. "He died last week. But I know that he is in God's care; for that I am especially thankful." This woman knew who was King in her life. (Source unknown)

We hear of a kingdom where God is in charge; at the same time we hear the roar of the world around us and the uncertainty of our own lives. We hope to find joy and goodness in our own hearts but often stumble over our resentments, prejudices, disagreements, and fears. Most of us have too much to eat, and yet we know a deep gnawing of emptiness.

It is to us, whoever and whatever we are, that God is offering the kingdom. It is for us, when we are failures and when we are stars, that Jesus died and lives. It is through us, whether we are strong or weak, certain or full of doubts, that God even today is extending the kingdom to others, touching others with Christ's love. This is a miracle: WE are part of the kingdom of God, brothers and sisters in Christ, all children given life through God. God is with us. If we have nothing else in life, for this we may - and must - give thanks. Amen.