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The Power of the King

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Luke 23:33-43

Introduction to Scriptures: Today is the last Sunday in the Christian year – Christ The King Sunday. Next Sunday begins the Christian season of Advent – when we begin again to prepare for the coming of the Messiah, the anointed King that God has promised to send. Scripture is full of descriptions of both God’s promised king and of many other kings – some of them faithful and some of them not. Today the assigned Scripture reading bring us Jeremiah’s description of the last two unfaithful kings of Judah – Jehoiakim (609-598 BCE) and Zedekiah (597-586 BCE). Jeremiah calls the kings “shepherds.” Under their rule, Babylon defeated Judah and exiled and scattered the people of God. So, God promises to replace the unfaithful kings/shepherds with a faithful king in our Old Testament Reading. And in the assigned New Testament reading, we read of another king - The King of the Jews – as we read a portion of the story of the crucifixion of Jesus. Both Scriptures teach us more about God’s nature and God’s rule.

In the fourth chapter of Elie Wiesel’s book, Night, his account of surviving as a teenager in German Nazi concentration camps, Wiesel tells a story of an execution. Wiesel wrote that so many people were dying all around him each day that death no longer terrified, and that even the regular executions by hanging no longer bothered him. The German guards forced the prisoners to stand in formation while they hung those unlucky enough to be caught or accused of crimes, and then forced the prisoners to walk by and look each victim in the face as a means of deterring acts of sabotage. But Wiesel tells of one execution by hanging that upset everyone – even in that climate of daily death. Wiesel tells of a time when two men and a young boy were condemned to die on the gallows because they had been accused of sabotage and found to possess weapons. As the two men and young boy stepped onto the chairs placed on the gallows and had nooses placed around their necks, the two men shouted, “Long live liberty!” But the boy was silent. Wiesel remembers a prisoner behind him in the formation asking, “Where is merciful God, where is He?” The chairs were tipped over, the sun was setting and the prisoners were weeping in their formation as they watched. Wiesel writes, “Then came the march past the victims. The two men were no longer alive. Their tongues were hanging out, swollen and bluish. But the third rope was still moving; the child, too light, was still breathing . . . And so he remained for more than half an hour, lingering between life and death, writhing before our eyes. And we were forced to look at him at close range. He was still alive when I passed him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet extinguished. Behind me, I heard the same man asking: “For God’s sake, where is God?” And from within me, I heard a voice answer:

“Where He is? This is where – hanging here from this gallows . . . That night, the soup tasted of corpses.”ⁱ It is easy to understand why Wiesel thought that God was dead.

The Hebrew and Christian Scriptures are not unacquainted with suffering, grief, evil and death. Anyone who thinks that Scripture is a story of holy people doing good has not read much Scripture. Today, the Lord speaks to Jeremiah of the terrible suffering and anguish of the Babylonian exiles and lays much of the blame squarely on the kings of Judah, whom he labels unfaithful shepherds. God says that because the shepherds/kings did not attend to the people – caring for them and leading in faithful paths – God will now attend to the shepherds and replace them with a good shepherd who will gather the people from their exile and make good on God’s promises of justice, righteousness and safety. God will show up and it will be good news for those who have suffered, good news for those who have been scattered and good news for those who want justice. But God’s appearance will be bad news for those who had the authority and power to care for the people, but who sought their own advantage and privilege instead of tending to those entrusted to their care.

Next Sunday we begin the Advent season, when all of our images of Jesus become of a tiny, helpless infant in a sweet hay filled manger. The lights are soft and pink and our favorite songs are about mangers, angels and peace on earth.

And while there is nothing wrong with those images and I love those Advent carols, Scripture will not allow us to shrink God to our own comfort level. So, the readings today remind us that just as surely as God came to earth as an infant, so also does God come to earth as King, Ruler and Judge who can both condemn and open the gates to paradise. And our faith and lives must include BOTH affirmations. When we picture God only as a sweet infant, our faith is but a comfortable illusion. But if we picture God only as angry Judge our faith becomes a harsh and angry tool used to create fear and guilt. Scripture says both are true of the one God we worship.

Today we remember that Christ is King! Christ is the King who judges, brings justice and who expects faithfulness and justice of us. Christ is King - a God whom we should fear, not because God is capricious, vicious or unpredictable, but because we fall so short of what God intends for us. It is right that all who use their own power and privilege for their own advantage should fear God’s coming. It is right that all who lie to protect themselves, take what is not theirs or who fail to care for the poor should fear God’s coming.

When God guided Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and into the wilderness, and when the people crossed through the Red Sea on dry land, and when the Egyptian Army marched into the middle of the Red Sea and were swept away by the rush of the returning waters, the Egyptian news stations did not report this mass drowning as good news. Only the Israelites on the far shore were cheering, and even they were humbled and afraid of the awesome power of God. Because when God shows up it is never good news for those who abuse power, use what they have to ensure that they will get more, or who refuse to care for the hungry, the homeless or the oppressed.

If the concept of fearing God seems uncomfortable to us, or if we don't like the idea of God being fearsome, it probably means that we have not suffered sufficient injustice, persecution or evil. Because those who are oppressed, those who suffer, those who bear the weight of injustice, they call out for the God of justice to come and make things right. A fearsome God who is both King and Judge is good news for those who pray for justice. This is exactly the God that Elie Wiesel called for, waited for, wanted to show us. Where is God!? In the face of evil, injustice and suffering, God's people call on God who is able to come with thunder, lightning and power.

But in a way that the prisoners of Auschwitz and Buchenwald could not understand, and in a way that we resist, in the person of Jesus Christ, God as King also shows up as suffering servant. In some way that we cannot fully understand, God comes among us to suffer at the hands of the powerful and proud. Luke remembers that when Jesus was crucified – with two others – he offered no defense, but instead offered good for evil, and mercy for mockery. Luke says that the people stood and watched Christ's crucifixion – passive. The Leaders scoffed. The Soldiers mocked and one of the criminals being crucified with him derided Jesus. Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" The truth of the inscription over Jesus's head, "The King of the Jews", was not evident to most of the people there that day. There was no consensus about truth. No clear recognition of God in their midst. It seems important to Scripture to remind us that truth is often not the majority opinion. But somehow, the one criminal recognizes God, and asks for mercy. This one criminal recognizes his own sin and, rightly fearing God, asks Jesus, "remember me when you come into your kingdom." In other words, do not remember me because of my sin and failure, but remember me according to your mercy, your power, and your righteousness. Not, remember me because of my goodness. But, the cry of faith and recognition is "Remember me because of your goodness and mercy, O God!"

The God of Scripture, the God fully present in the person of Jesus Christ is coming again as a King

- Who is to be feared by those who support injustice, protect their own privilege and power, and who refuse to be humbled, serve the poor or work for justice.
- Who is welcomed, sought out and found by those who need Good News and who are willing to humble themselves and acknowledge their own failings and sin.
- Who is the protector of the weak and the rescuer of the slave and the forgiver to the repentant.
- Who is acquainted with suffering, grief and death because God came to earth and suffered alongside and on our behalf, a King who knows our deepest griefs and who does not leave us alone.
- Who is found not in palaces and power and pride, but a King who is found in humility of the manger, the shame of the cross or the noose of the gallows.

That King is coming, says Scripture. God is not dead as some suppose. Next week we will begin again to prepare ourselves for God's coming. Christians can have fun with Santa and presents and mistletoe, but that is not what we are waiting for or preparing for. As we anticipate the coming of the King that God has promised to send, we prepare for the King who loves us enough to suffer a painful and slow death for the truth of love; a King who calls us to use all of our gifts, talents and treasures for the good of all of God's children, a King who is able to judge and who is willing and able to forgive. Christ is King. Let us prepare.

¹ Night by Elie Wiesel. Pp. 63-65; Hill and Wang Publishers, c. 1958.