



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Reign in the Forecast”

Luke 23:33-43

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Last Sunday, after the second worship service, we celebrated the life of former Broad Street head usher Jim Grossie. As the memorial service began, seventeen ushers processed down the center aisle and filled the front pews. It was a moving sight, to see Jim’s church family, especially because his wife and brothers were unable to attend. Amy’s thoughtful words so captured our experience of Jim. The choir led us in singing hymns he chose. The final hymn was “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise.” The third verse was Jim’s favorite.

To all, life thou givest, to both great and small. In all life thou livest, the true life of all.
We blossom and flourish like leaves on the tree, then wither and perish; but naught changeth thee. ¹

Today we celebrate this Giver of life, who lives in all life, who is the true life of all. We call this Sunday Reign of Christ. It is also known as Christ the King. Whatever its name, today we celebrate the universe-spanning sovereign Christ who has been and is in all times and in all places. Today our worship year crescendos in a grand finale. This understanding of Christ as Alpha and Omega, beginning and end, is interwoven throughout the whole Christian story. Next Sunday Advent begins and we enter a new church year. Even Jesus’ infancy stories foreshadow crucifixion and resurrection. Even the manger forecasts the eternal, cosmic Reign of Christ.

Except, there’s a problem. Our scripture reading doesn’t focus on a glorious cosmic reign. It zeroes in on a vulnerable man dying on a cross. The king Luke describes is a man trapped in the first century criminal justice system. Luke claims that the majesty of the Reign of Christ is most fully revealed not when we look up toward heavenly glory, but when we look at this gruesome scene and see human suffering.

Jesus the Christ, the Lord above all lords, was arrested, whipped, humiliated, mocked and crucified. On this Sunday the global church takes this history seriously and points to a paradox, that the universal, galaxy-creating God is best seen in a man suffering on a cross. A human being in immense pain is the Messiah, the Lord.

He dies slowly. The Romans have a goal—to intimidate, terrorize and control. A public execution warns others. It’s a spectacle of hatred, like a lynching. Jesus hangs on a cross. Friends flee. Every taunt underscores his true identity, as Messiah, chosen one, King and Savior. Anger and hatred surround him. There’s so much verbal abuse; public ridicule on top of unbelievable physical pain. But Jesus does not speak in anger or with hatred. Instead, he makes an elegant statement, glistening with empathy and compassion. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34)

Jesus’ words shock the earliest Biblical scribes—these men who methodically work to hand copy handwritten New Testament scrolls. Jesus’ message of forgiveness for the perpetrators goes against all their human instincts. Some scribes hesitate to include these words in their scrolls. Others leave them out entirely. For

¹ *Gloria To God: The Presbyterian Hymnal*, Hymn #12, “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise.”

some, forgiving people based on their ignorance is not morally justifiable. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” How could Jesus forgive those involved in his death, for being stupid? The religious leaders, the Romans, the soldiers.

But offering forgiveness is absolutely consistent with how Luke portrays Jesus. He comes to seek and save the lost. Over and over again, even when dying, he extends forgiveness.

In our own lives, we know how hard it can be to forgive. Author Anne Lamott writes about her struggle, our struggle, with forgiveness:

To forgive someone is the hardest work we do...Not forgiving makes you toxic. And then you really have very little to offer your family or the world...because you're faking it...[there's] that predicament of that clenched, clutched feeling when we don't forgive. And then that miracle of grace, like a spiritual WD-40, that gets into the very stuck, grinding places inside of us. I've had to forgive both of my parents for very major injuries...just because someone dies doesn't mean they're off the hook. You carry it inside because there's an injury inside.²

Forgiveness is not our default. But it is the last thing Jesus does. He offers us a powerful master class on forgiveness. When we gloat, when we hate, when we betray, Jesus says, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” When we judge, when we ignore, when we lash out; Jesus says, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Over and over again, Jesus chooses forgiveness, speaks forgiveness, lives forgiveness. His words of forgiveness soften hearts, clear vision, guide feet, and heal hurts. We look at Jesus so we can learn to see the world more like he does.

Acquaintances watch him from a distance. Leaders scoff, “He saved others, let him save himself ...!” Soldiers cast lots to divide his clothing and offer him sour wine, mocking him; “If you are the King... save yourself!” Talk of salvation hangs thick in the air. But in a mess like this, who can see salvation?

Two crucified criminals also watch, as their own agony allows. One speaks up, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” A second criminal defends Jesus. “We...have been condemned justly...but this man has done nothing wrong.” He turns and talks to him, in the simple ordinary way one person talks to another. Except these men are not walking in the park. They hang on crosses; doomed, beyond hope. “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” (Luke 23:42) He doesn't ask for rescue. He asks to be remembered.

Deep down, we all want to be remembered. We hope that our lives will matter enough that someone remembers us.

This week on a morning walk I ran into a neighbor, standing on the street corner, arms folded, gazing off in the distance. Her two young elementary-aged children walked alone, without her, toward the school entrance. Her eyes were full. “First time?” I asked. “Second,” she said. “It's hard,” I said. “Maybe my daughter will remember me,” she said. And sure enough, from down the block her youngest child spun around as if on cue, and waved. We all want to be remembered.

² <https://www.facebook.com/AnneLamott/posts/here-are-my-thoughts-on-forgiveness-as-told-to-scott-timberg-at-salon-as-part-of/593723490757298/>

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” It’s a tender, grace-filled moment. Someone society considers a throwaway is seen and welcomed by a love so amazing we have trouble understanding it and trusting it.³

This love is real. Jesus the thorn-crowned Christ somehow participates in our suffering, instead of passively observing it. No one ever looked less like a king than Jesus did that day, yet the second thief sees him as he really is.

This Jesus, the Christ, also remembers you, includes you, loves you and is saving your life. This One will never stop forgiving you, no matter where you are or what you have done or how far you have strayed or how lost you feel.

Last Sunday we remembered Jim Grossie. We remembered how gruff he was on the outside, how soft within. We remembered him as dependable and brave. And in it all, we gave thanks to God for his generative life.

We blossom and flourish like leaves on the tree, then wither and perish; but naught changeth thee.”

Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom. Jesus, remember us, when you come into your kingdom. Amen.

³ A line from a sermon preached by the Rev. John Buchanan at Fourth Presbyterian Church, on April 1, 2001, “What Do You Have to do to Get to Heaven?”