

Strange King

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

Palm/Passion Sunday - April 10, 2022

Texts: Luke 19:28-40; 22:14-23:49; Philippians 2:5-11

Luke 19:28-40

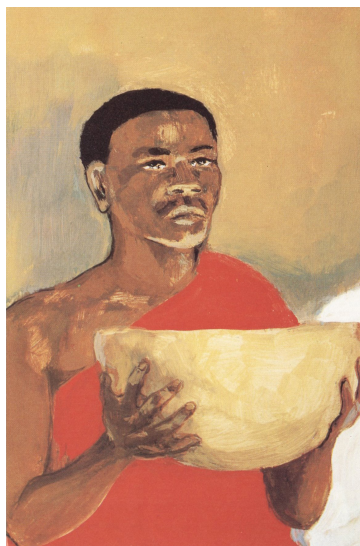
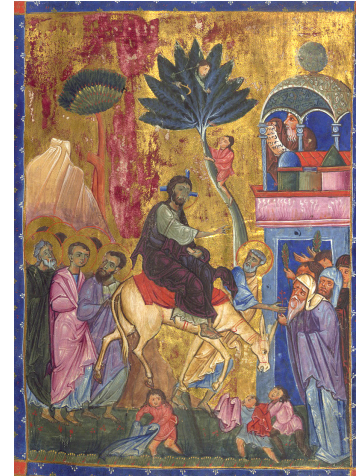
Jesus went on ahead of the crowds listening to him, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

The story of Jesus' final days is so dramatic, so powerful, it really stands alone. It needs no embellishment. You'll hear it read in a few moments. But some of it sounds foreign to us, too. For one thing, there's a lot of king language floating around. We don't know kings in the same way that people did then. And yet, it may be that this ancient tale can still tell us something about power and its use and abuse still today.

A thousand years and more before Jesus' birth, his people, the Israelites, had no king but God, who spoke and led them through prophets and judges. They envied their neighbors who had kings with fancy crowns and courts and, most of all, conquering armies. The Israelites begged the prophet Samuel to get a king for them, too, so they could keep up with their neighbors, the Hittites, the Canaanites, and the Jonesites. Samuel warned them: "A king will tax you into poverty, and take the best of everything you have, and draft your sons and daughters to serve him as slaves and die for him as soldiers." But they insisted. So Samuel anointed first King Saul, then King David - Jesus' ancestor. And in fact, while some of the kings that followed were valiant and good, like David, or wise, like Solomon, they did exactly as predicted. The kings' pride and greed and vanity led the people into some very bad times.

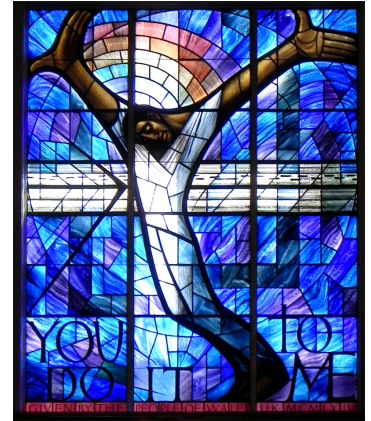
By Jesus' time, the kings of Israel were only puppets of Rome: like the Herod you remember from the Christmas story. And the people were impoverished and oppressed by Roman forces and Caesar, their ruler. Again the people longed for and prayed for a king with a conquering army to come and save them. Some of them expected Jesus to be that king, a warrior who would come in the name of a righteous God to set them free.

What they got wrong was the warrior thing. Once again what they wanted and what they got was different. The freedom Jesus brought was deeper and wider than any war could win for them: a freedom of soul that no one could rob them of. In the crucial days and hours after the donkey ride into Jerusalem that we associate with waving palms and cheering crowds, Jesus spent his time teaching in the temple, warning people of dark days to come, and behaving in a most unkingly manner. He didn't incite them to riot or overturn Roman rule by violence. But his enemies whipped up the people against him.



When he shared with his closest friends the last meal of his earthly life, he knew more about their lack of loyalty than they did. What king would tolerate the betrayal of his allies? But he loved them to the end. He tried to tell them, to prepare them for what was to come—for they would suffer, too. Their response was once again to argue among themselves who would be the most important when Jesus took his rightful place as king on the throne. They never got tired of that discussion! So Jesus once again tried to tell them what sort of king he was and who his companions must be: “Earthly kings lord it over others, and pretend to be strong and gracious. Not so with you: the greatest among you must become the least, and the leader must be the one who serves. I, your teacher, take the place of a servant among you. That is what it means to serve in my kingdom.” In some ways these are the most important words he utters.

Can these words still speak to us today? The title of king may be somewhat obsolete, but the grab for personal power is timeless—power that will crush ordinary people in its march toward domination. And still we seek to match power with power. We argue about who's greatest. We betray the simple command of Jesus to love one another. We forget that in God's realm, the littlest are the greatest, and the strong ones bow to the weak. That's why we still need these sacred stories of the one who serves himself the bread and wine, and kneels in front of his followers to wash their feet with his own hands. That's why, as dearly as we love the glitter and glory of Easter, with its promise of eternal life, we can never forget Good Friday, and the indelible image of the strange king on a cross - who taught us not only how to die, but how to live.



Hear again the story. Jesus and his disciples have joined the Passover crowds in Jerusalem. Together they celebrate the festival remembering the Hebrews' liberation from slavery in Egypt. Christians know it as "the last supper." Meanwhile, Judas Iscariot has conspired to betray Jesus with a kiss. Following the meal, Jesus prays in anguish in the garden while his disciples sleep; there he is arrested and taken before the high priest. As Jesus waits for his sham of a trial, Peter "the rock" denies him. The cock crows, just as Jesus predicted, day dawns, and the religious leaders turn Jesus over to the Roman governor to be sentenced to death.

Luke 23:1-49

Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. They began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king." Then Pilate asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" He answered, "You say so." Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no basis for an accusation against this man." But they were insistent and said, "He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place." When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.

Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, and said to them, “You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. I will therefore have him flogged and release him.” Then they all shouted out together, “Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!” (This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; but they kept shouting, “Crucify, crucify him!” A third time he said to them, “Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him.” But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.

As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.’ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us’; and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. 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. Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots to divide his clothing. 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!” The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.” One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having said this, he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, “Certainly this

man was innocent.” And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

Prayers:

Jesus, your deepest humility and self-emptying is not of rank or status or even suffering, but of love; your greatest miracle is this: that you loved the people who are impossible to love. May we love you and entrust ourselves to you. May your heart be in us, that with all our lives, we may thank you, we may worship you, we may follow you.

When the world erupts in wars and disease, may we choose the simple path of service: to preserve your good creation, to further peace and understanding, to lift up the little ones in danger of being crushed.

For all who are near to us in body and all who are dear to us in heart we pray: for those undergoing major transitions; those healing and those in mourning. May they know resurrection joy.

Our Father in heaven...

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