

“The Gathered Remnant”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, November 20, 2016

Christ the King Sunday

Readings from scripture: Luke 23:33-43 and Jeremiah 23:1-6

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.”

Luke 23:33-43

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! Says the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: “The Lord is our righteousness.”

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words and images that each of us carry within, the words we have offered in song and in prayer, the words we have heard read from the gospel and the prophet, and the words that you have laid upon my heart this

morning to share. Touch, bless and transform all of these into the living word, the word of Jesus Christ our Lord. And let that word do its work within us, among us and through us out into a hurting and broken world. We ask this in his faithful name. Amen.

In case you were wondering, God through the prophet is not very happy with those who have shepherded his people. The prophets, the priests and the kings of Israel and Judah have let the Babylonians come in and take over, invade their land, destroy the temple and cart the people away. All of this, God says, is because of the evilness of the shepherds with which he will deal in due time. But this is just the first part of the passage, this judgment part, and then what God says to the people is *I will come and gather you back together into all the far-away places that you have been driven. I will bring you back into the fold and you will be fruitful and multiply. I will raise good shepherds over you who will watch over you, protect you and care for you. You need not be afraid. You need not be dismayed. All of you that have gone missing will be brought back and restored. I will take care of you. I will raise up from David a righteous branch, a king, who will deal with you wisely and justly and in a righteous manner. I will make sure all of this happens, and "the Lord is your righteousness" is what you will call this one.*

The people of Israel, as they heard this prophetic message, first were wondering what would happen to their shepherds, but then they heard the promise that was for them—that God would continue to do God's work in their lives, that God would raise up someone to lead them, and that they would be restored and okay. It's a wonderful message for Christ the King Sunday, that God is still at work bringing righteousness and justice to the land, to lift up just and good leaders who will deal wisely in all manner of things. But I gotta tell you that as I sat with this passage this week, the overwhelming message that I got on Christ the King Sunday was that **we**—you and I—are sheep. And I don't know about you, but I don't like being a sheep. Every message that I hear on television, every ad, every thought that kind of rolls around in my head when I'm not reading something—the message is always the same: You are special. You matter. You can make a difference. You're in charge of your life. You set the course of your trajectory. It is up to you to pick yourself up by your boot straps, to advance as far as you can and to make a difference in this world. It's all up to you!

But I wonder on this Sunday, Christ the King Sunday, if just for a moment we could stop and realize the significance of what it means when we confess Jesus Christ as both our Lord and our Savior—what it means for each of us to realize that there are times, maybe all of our life, when we are sheep, when we are led, when we are cared for, when we are nurtured, when we are protected by a power that is benevolent and greater than each of us. We don't talk about this very much in our lives. We talk a lot about self-empowerment and self-fulfillment, self-determination. But today, on Christ the King Sunday, we talk about something else. We talk about being disciples and followers. We talk about people who serve a power that is greater than us, and as the old testament alludes and all this talk about shepherds, we contemplate what it means for each of us to be sheep.

It seems like an odd message and I must confess that most Sundays as I stand before you, I seek diligently to promote and encourage all of you to share your gifts, your God-given gifts with the world. I encourage you to be faithful people, unafraid of what others would say in your service to the Lord and all the ways that you reach out and change lives. But, today, I believe the invitation is for us to just stop for a moment—maybe just as long as this sermon—and think about the reality that someone else is in charge, someone else is caring and watching, someone else is providing, that our life is not up to us.

As I was thinking about these things this week, I was walking towards my office and on the counter just outside there was a book called The Road to Character by David Brooks. I suspected that the book may have belonged to the Reverend Dr. Karen Blanchard, who reads a lot of great books and often has them out in that area, and so I just picked it up on my way in and started reading from the beginning, thinking I'm just going to read a few pages or whatever and then I'll give it back to her. Well, a few pages turned into a few more and then I found out that the book was for a book club on Tuesday, and I had already marked in it, so I ordered her a new one because I've written in this one. What captured me was what David Brooks was talking about at the very beginning. He set up sort of two straw men to make his point about what it is for all of us to be people of character. Citing work by Rabbi Soloveitchik, Brooks says there is Adam I and Adam II, and that the struggle for all of us is to get to that stage of life where we can embrace being Adam II. He says:

that Adam I is the external or resume building person. Adam I wants to build, create, produce, discover, conquer. He wants high status and victory after victory at no matter what he faces. Adam II, on the other hand, is the internal Adam. This person wants to embody certain moral qualities. He wants to have a serene inner character, a quiet but solid sense of right and wrong, not only to do good but to be good. Adam II wants to love intimately, to sacrifice self in the service of others, to live in obedience to some transcendent truth, to have a cohesive inner soul that honors creation and one another's possibilities—especially their own, but also their neighbor's. While Adam I wants to conquer the world, Adam II wants to obey a calling to serve the world. While Adam I is creative and savors his own accomplishments, Adam II sometimes renounces worldly success and status for the sake of some sacred purpose. While Adam I asks how things work, Adam II asks why things exist and what ultimately we are here for. Adam I wants to venture forth. Adam II wants to return to his roots and savor the warmth of a family meal. While Adam I's motto is “Success,” Adam II experiences life as a moral drama and his motto is “Charity, love and redemption. 1

In a sense in the prophet's message to the people of Israel, you hear God passing judgment on the prophets, kings and priests who embody the Adam I sense of who they were as the leaders of the people of God--those that claimed positions of power and prestige at the expense of the Adam II aspects of their calling. The invitation is for all of us and for them to realize that we are here to serve one another and to care for those in the flock, to be mindful that we are followers—sheep—of a great and good shepherd. Adam II's motto, again, and the motto of a faithful shepherd is “Charity, love and redemption.” We see this embodied in the person of Jesus Christ, who, when he was on the cross and called the King of the Jews, was asked to save himself and his response to those soldiers was, *No. I am the King of the Jews but I will not save myself.* Christ knew at that moment that through his faithfulness, through the death and resurrection that he was to face, his saying “no” in the moment was saying a “yes” to something greater. He was saying “yes” to the salvation of all of humankind. Was he going to save himself and be the Adam I or was he going to save us all and be the Adam II? That's what we honor and celebrate this day—that decision of Jesus Christ. To look out not only for himself but for each and every one of us. It is not easy to be this kind of person who follows, who is humble, who realizes that sometimes when we have the opportunity to save ourselves, we need simply to say “no” in order that we might say a more faithful “yes” and serve the needs of our community.

My wife, Jani, and I have fallen in love with the TV miniseries called “The Crown”. It's on Net Flix. It's the story of a young Elizabeth as she comes to grips with the passing of her father and, more importantly, the passing of the crown from his head to hers. In this miniseries there are three things that have captured my attention in relation to both this passage from Jeremiah and this concept of Adam I, who is out for victories, and Adam II, who is wise and oriented towards charity, love and redemption. One of the scenes is of her getting ready for her coronation as a young woman. She is in the palace surrounded by courtiers and one of them brings this huge crown and places it, heavy, upon her head. And as the crown slips down you can almost see the weight of the office pushing on her shoulders, and she just looks in the mirror. The enormity of what was being asked of her, being realized, as she felt that weight on her head, and I believe the weight of an entire kingdom, an empire, on her shoulders. Throughout the miniseries, you watch her wrestle and grow into what it means to be a monarch and to have the common good as her first and only priority. But also in this miniseries there are two men near her: one I believe represents Adam I and the other Adam II.

The first is her husband, Prince Phillip, who as a young man, newly married, wants to stand by his wife and be proud of all that she is about and do everything in his power that he can to be supportive and encouraging while still being who he is. He wants to fly and he wants adventure. He wants to go hunting. He wants to drive his MG sports car around London like a madman and go carousing. He wants to be himself. And every time he comes into her presence after she is crowned, you watch him bow in reverence to his wife, the Queen. And in his eyes you see anger and confusion and frustration. Because rather than bowing he wants to stand up and be seen for who he is. He wants his person to be recognized and instead he needs to bow in submission to her majesty, the sovereign, the chosen one.

Also in this movie there is a character named Winston, with a stogie in one hand and a scotch in the other and a cantankerous personality. He storms around trying to get the government to do the right thing and he is trying to get everything to move in the way that he wants it, but what he wants most at the end of his public life, as a man nearing 80 and being frail, his weaknesses showing evermore, he wants her, the Queen, to be prepared for her job. His only purpose, it seems at the end of the miniseries, is to make sure that Elizabeth is ready to serve as Queen. Winston Churchill, who did all these amazing things as a young man and as a Prime Minister, ends his public service with a single purpose: to make the Queen the best she can be. And what I find amazing is that the young man who wants to stand tall rails against bowing before her; and the man of 80 is bowing because his body is giving way and he is at peace because he realizes his purpose is to obey the Queen and to prepare her.

The invitation is for each of us to realize that we worship a sovereign God, a Good Shepherd, and that our job is to be humble in His presence. Amen.