

“Lord of our Life”

Rev. Jayneann McIntosh, Lead Pastor
First United Methodist Church of Wausau
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Colossians 1:11-20

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for by him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and by him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Luke 23:33-43

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 Christ, God’s 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 Christ? 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.”

Reign of Christ Sunday. We come to it every year, just before Advent begins. But what does Reign of Christ mean? Generally we think of crowns and thrones, royal robes and a scepter. As the Colossians writer tells us, “Christ is the image of God. Everything was created through him and for him and everything holds together by him. ... In him rests all of God’s fullness, and through him God was pleased to reunite with all creation.”

Christ is lord over all that is. This ancient hymn of praise is very moving and we might want to stand up and join in song. Then again, maybe this view is too heady for you, too much high Christology. You just want to hear a good word to help you get through the next week.

Luke offers us other images for the Reign of Christ. An innocent man hangs on a wooden cross. A newborn baby sleeps in a straw-filled wooden box. An unorthodox teacher accepts a gift of oil poured from a broken flask. A revolutionary rabbi gathers with friends and enemies at table together then prays in a garden awaiting his arrest.

Today we consider one moment of Luke's description of Jesus' last day. A moment of suffering, abuse and cruelty, through which we can yet catch a glimpse of God's unquenchable light. We've heard the story so often that we can miss the moment's shock value as Jesus is nailed to the post. Leaders scoff at this so-called Messiah who cannot save himself. The crowd watches in silence. Soldiers mock. The insurrectionists on either side of Jesus debate his identity.

We notice that Luke directs our attention to them as their disagreement receives more attention than any other part of the story. Only in Luke does one of them ridicule Jesus while the other defends him, "This man has done nothing wrong." More than the other gospel-writers, Luke stresses Jesus' innocence. Three men hang in agony, dying. One of them recognizes Jesus' identity. Instead of asking him to save them, he says, "Remember me."

Jesus' answer? "Today you will be with me in paradise." Plenty of people race to the end of this sentence. To *paradise*. As in, "Hang on, we'll get there soon." But if we put emphasis on the word *today*, it reads very differently. "Today you will be with me." Today. However much we analyze these words now mean *in this very moment*. As in, Jesus invites his companion – right now – to join him in creating some meaning of this experience. Right now, Jesus offers to be with this man in his ordeal. Just as Christ offers to be with us in ours.

This is part of what Reign of Christ means. It speaks of One crucified. It means that though nations treat defeated enemies with humiliation, God will work all things into good. God will wrestle some good out of every situation, never letting evil or loss or hatred or death have the final word.

Again, this story asks us, who is Christ? What kind of a king is he? The word *king* could leave us missing the point. *King* leaves us with an image of a fixed sense of order and a place rather than a sense of God's lively intention for us all. God's realm does not displace earthly rulers with a heavenly one. Jesus is not advocating for a regime change. Instead, he announces the start of a way of being in relationship with each other and with God. It's not the governments that change, but the ways in which we live. God's realm is ruled not by a monarch but by commitment.

We are trained to think in terms of nations and empires but God's realm is not a place. It's a

persistence in justice and caring for all creation. The realm Jesus espouses can be anywhere, anytime that kindom behavior is practiced. Because it's lived out we can recognize it when we see it. People who live by this realm's authority will be observed and noticed. This is the point that Jesus' detractors miss. What we often miss.

God's realm has never been a place. It is a perspective, a way of being in the world. And yet, for all of this, how often we give our consent for wolves or vultures to control our communities, our nations. Our worlds. We surrender our power not to God but to people and organizations that tell half-truths. Who tap into our insecurities and fears so that we will acquiesce to them.

Why do we do this? One reason is that it's easier to live under the current regime than to work for something different. While possibly unreasonable or unjust, rules are clearly defined; expectations are known. It's easier this way, less risky to accept the way things are than to resist. We think of Jesus and all the others who pressed for a better world. We think of the consequences of challenging those in authority. And we choose the safer path.

We may speak out from our place of comfort but we seldom step into the middle of the fray. We have witnessed that when one stands up to privilege, they pay a price. When a person stands up to the workings of the world that rely on fear and hatred, they expect to be disregarded, discredited or silenced.

The kingdoms of the world count on sowing suspicion and authorizing autonomy. They thrive on individualism. If we all have our own private agendas, we are less likely to join together *en masse*, less likely to work for any lasting difference.

In God's realm, individualism and competition have no place. God's realm is ruled by relationship and connection, mercy and justice. In Christ, we have a Lord, crucified who forgives the people who have secured his death and who offers solidarity and accompaniment to one dying next to him. In this, God offers us the Truth. We're encouraged to ask ourselves, "What one thing am I going to do today to chip away at the [so-called] theological assumptions that continue to sow misogyny, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and exceptionalism in our ... seemingly respectable institutions, practices, rhetoric, and confessions?"ⁱ

For the church to be the force of what is good and right in the world, we may need to apologize for not standing up for the very ones Jesus sought to save. We need to confront those who try to silence its voice. To look around and notice who is getting hanged on a tree and loudly remind the world that, "Evil settles into everyday life when people are unable or unwilling to recognize it. [Evil] makes its home among us when we are keen to minimize it or describe it as something else."ⁱⁱ

If anything is able to call out evil, it is the church. If anyone is able to call out evil, it is us.

We take steps but what more will we do? Will we, as the church, say that your God is not my God? That a God who supports ... your rejection of refugees, your refusal to see the worth of every human being and the value of caring for our planet home, your insistence that women should not be in ministry, your judgment of LGBTQIA+ persons, and your exertion of power over any who are not like you ... is not my God? God's realm is based upon relationship. God's realm lives within the pains and griefs and injustices of the world. God's realm promotes and lives the Truth.

We are called to pledge our allegiance to God's realm accepting that for it to make any difference, we have to live as if that realm exists now and that our activity in bringing it about is vital, for our salvation and for the world's. God kingdom exists regardless. But God requires our participation, commitment, and dedication to this kingdom, so that it can be more than it would be without us.

As followers of Christ we declare our ultimate allegiance not to a nation, an ideal or a dream, but to a person. Our faith at its essence is about relationship with God through the one who reigns over us, in whom we find our identity and our being. Reign of Christ Sunday is about both acknowledging Christ's Reign and participating in it. Deliberately. Purposefully.

Today you have an invitation to look ahead and ask yourself how you will live that out. Christ reigns, exactly where he needs to reign. He reigns where you are, where the broken are, where the hurting and the hungry and forgotten are. Christ reigns where young girls and boys are stolen away to be playthings used and cast aside, where people question themselves, their sexuality or gender, their purpose, their value. Christ reigns.

Today. Always and forever. Amen.

ⁱ Matt Skinner in Karoline Lewis' "Who and What is Your King?" Working Preacher,

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