

“The Widest View”

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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky

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This week, we reach the end of our church year. We rest for the next seven days between the long season after Pentecost, when we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit to God’s newborn church, and the season of Advent, a time of preparation and anticipation of the coming of Christ into the world. For the past twenty four weeks we have journeyed through the Gospel according to Luke, with a few detours along the way. We have witnessed the healing of the sick and the restoring of those who have been cast aside by society. We have heard Jesus express forgiveness to sinners and call upon the rich to let go of their material wealth, so that nothing might hinder them in answering God’s call. Jesus has warned us that the good news he brings to the earth will burn like a fire in our hearts and cause divisions among us as we wrestle with the hard truths of faith. Jesus has even given us advice about how to behave at table with our friends, placing ourselves not at the place of honor but in the place of servants, that we might have the highest honor of serving our Lord.

Jesus has told us stories and asked us questions and taught us to pray to our Father in heaven. And now, today, as we stand on a precipice, the season of preparation before us and twenty-four weeks of lessons behind us, we also kneel before him. Today we kneel at the foot of a cross. The man whose story we have shared again and again around this family table, the one who has anointed us with healing and absolved our sins and challenged us to be more than what the world sees in us, our beloved teacher, hangs above us, crucified.

The Son of God has endured betrayal, and abandonment, imprisonment and torment. He has been interrogated and accused by both the Imperial powers and by his own people. He has been sentenced to death, and has been forced to carry the very implement of his own execution. Soldiers of the empire mock him as a would-be king, and the religious leaders scoff at him as a false prophet. Above his head, the inscription calls him King of the Jews, a warning to all that this is what happens to those who threaten the power of the Emperor's politicians. The men who wrote those words had no idea how right they were, and also how much they had missed the mark.

Why? Why in this time of thanksgiving and joy and generosity and charity do we find ourselves here, taking in the brutality of an execution? Why today, on this day when we celebrate the reign of Christ, does our King of kings and Lord of lords wear a crown of thorns, flanked by criminals and mocked by soldiers and religious leaders? Because even from the cross, our Savior does not stop teaching us the good news. Because with his last breaths, our Lord speaks of salvation to penitent sinners. Because today we stand between an end and a beginning, a death and a birth, and it is in this space that we have the widest view.

King, Messiah, Chosen one. The people who gathered that day on the foot of the cross to hurl these words as insults at a crucified man did not see the truth of their own words, too blinded by their own idolatry. The soldiers mocked the Christ by calling him king, because they believed a king to be a military ruler, a larger than life commander whose reign was established and defined by weapons and strength and violent intimidation. They did not see that the king of glory is a king of peace, a God who makes war to cease in all the world, who breaks the bow and shatters the spear and burns the shields with fire. They did not understand that in his submission on the cross, they were witnessing Christ's coronation.

The religious and political leaders mocked Jesus by calling him the messiah, the chosen one, because they did not believe that God would anoint a prophet to speak first to the least and lost, the poor and the sick and the friendless. They did not believe that God's Word would be born to a woman of no particular importance. They would not be convinced that God's voice would come from the mouth of a young man who spent his time among women and children and tax collectors. Those invested in the balance of power remaining sinfully unchanged, those whose lifestyle depended on the subjugation of the poor and the exclusion of the vulnerable, looked on Jesus and saw not a savior, but a threat. They did not see that the Lord of hosts was with them, that the city of God could not be overthrown by the powers of empire.

The criminals on either side of Jesus were privy to the last lesson he would teach before taking his final breath. The one accosted him, saying "Save yourself and us!" This criminal saw not the savior of the world, but an escape hatch. This man looked upon great power, and attempted to lay claim to that power for his personal salvation. He asked for a personal savior at the exclusion of others. On the other side of Jesus, a man with nothing left to lose and with the last breaths in his lungs repents of his sins and confesses the faith that many of Jesus' own disciples failed to name. This penitent looked upon the face of innocence and saw the image of the invisible God. This is the moment, the final lesson before darkness falls and the wait for the resurrection begins. The soldiers did not see it. The leaders and the politicians and the crowds did not see it. The least and the last, one whose agency and power have been utterly stripped from him, the humblest of sinners saw the defeat of death in the eyes of a dying man. We stand in witness of this, this icon of the Kingdom of God, on this feast of Christ the King. On this day we have a panoramic view of the whole story, of the crucifixion and the nativity and the ministry and the advent of Christ on the last day. In the life of faith, we can know so little with certainty.

But in this moment, we have before us the undeniable truth that the reign of Christ does not begin with a birth, nor does it end in death. Christ is Lord in the manger and on the cross. Christ is King of the penitent who turn to him in hope, and of the single lost sheep who has wandered far from the flock. The Prince of Peace is our refuge and our strength though the earth be moved and though the mountains be toppled into the depths of the sea. We stand here, on the brink, at the turning point of seasons and the changing of the world. The one who is before all things, and in whom all things hold together, the head of the church is before us in all his humble splendor. What does one utter, in the throne room of the Most High? Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom. The response from the cross is the same as the response from the throne of glory. Truly I tell you, today you will be with me.