

November 20, 2016

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Psalm 46

Colossians 1:11-20

Luke 23:33-43

Today is the last Sunday of Pentecost and it is the day that we celebrate Christ as King. Every Sunday since last May 15 which was Pentecost, we have been walking with Jesus through the gospel of Luke as Jesus made his way to his ultimate destination and the culmination of his mission on earth in Jerusalem. On this journey, Jesus was baptized by his cousin, John the Baptist and then spent 40 days in the wilderness being tempted by Satan before he began his ministry. His ministry was a revelation of the God who loves us. Jesus taught and he preached and he performed miracles and he healed. He modelled communication with God to us in his periodic withdrawals to spend time alone in prayer. He embraced the forgotten ones and the ones who were condemned by the world. He gave hope to the desperate and he fed the hungry. He challenged the religious leaders of his day and their misconceptions of what God was expecting of them. And all the while he knew where it would all end. All the while he knew that the last objective of his ministry would be hanging on a cross between two thieves in the place known as the Skull outside the gates of Jerusalem. And he went there obediently to build a bridge for us so that we could make our way to the kingdom of God. During his time on earth, Jesus had given us glimpses of that kingdom. He gave us a foretaste of the banquet that awaits us. God has prepared a feast for us. He sent Jesus into the world to show us what that would be like and to issue an invitation to us. What will we do with that invitation? It's an invitation to which we need to respond.....as the French tell us, Repondez s'il vous plait.....RSVP.....please respond to the invitation. Jesus told his followers, "In my Father's house are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you."

The story that we heard this morning in the gospel of Luke certainly doesn't sound like a tale about a king. It is anything but majestic. It's gruesome. It's heartbreaking. They divided up his clothes and mocked him. People stood by watching and the leaders scoffed at him. To those who knew Jesus who were also watching, this must have been a nightmare. Can you imagine standing by helplessly watching someone you love in such pain and torture? And yet, Jesus continued his ministry even from the cross. He asked God to forgive them because they didn't know what they were doing. Surely his followers standing there at the foot of the cross must have been thinking to themselves.....this can't possibly be right! This is all wrong!! How could this happen? Where is God? Why doesn't God do something about this?

And all of us have been in that horrible position at some points in our life. All of us have experienced a situation that just can't be right. It might be the loss of a job and the frantic fear of having no income. It might be the death of someone close and dear to us. It might be a disabling illness of someone we love that consumes our days and our nights and fills us with worry. It might be a natural disaster that destroys our home. The list of catastrophes that have or might befall us is pretty extensive. And it is in those times that we wonder how God could have let this happen. It is in those moments that we cry out in pain and disbelief that God has allowed this. And it is also in those most painful moments, that we are the most aware of God....even if it is expressed in our anger. When our hearts are broken wide open, God moves in. When complacency and our sense of independence actually create a gulf between us and God, that gulf is bridged by Christ the King. He is the one who knows our anguish. He's the one who knows what we suffer. He's the one fully acquainted not only with our humanity, but with our anguish. He's been there. He's experienced a broken heart.

Jesus is the one who showed us glimpses of God's kingdom and then hung on the cross between two thieves to make it possible for us to be able to enter that kingdom. And the way Jesus responded to those two thieves also tells us something about the nature and character of God and the mission of Jesus which was to offer salvation to everyone.....to extend that invitation from God to all of humanity.....to be saved.....to have a place at the table at the heavenly feast.

Each of the two thieves spoke to Jesus. One of them kept deriding him. He asked Jesus, "Aren't you the Messiah?" Even in his derision and disbelief, he had some sense of maybe who Jesus was. And he begged him.....if you are the Messiah, save yourself and save us!! What a very human thing to say. What a very human thing to do. He was begging Jesus to save him.....to save all three of them hanging there together. He didn't realize that by remaining on that cross, Jesus was in fact saving all of them.....and all of us. The other criminal had a much better sense of who Jesus was, although he may not have understood the significance of what Jesus was doing. Who would have under those circumstances? The other criminal rebuked the first one and pointed out that they were getting what they deserved.....but Jesus was innocent. The second criminal didn't repent for his sins, but he did recognize who Jesus was. He knew that Jesus was on his way to the Kingdom of God that he had preached about and he asked only to be remembered. Jesus immediately granted his request....."today you will be with me in Paradise." Do you ever wonder what ever happened to the first criminal? Was he invited, too? He didn't repent, but neither did the second criminal although he did take responsibility for the situation in which he found himself. Jesus came to save all of humanity. He asks only that you reply to the invitation to come to the kingdom. Salvation is the most fantastic gift any of us have ever received and, yet, so many people never open the package. And so many people never RSVP to the invitation.

PAUSE

Our adult formation class is studying St. Paul's letter to the Romans. We are discovering the nature and character of God and we are finding out about God's righteousness.....his dependability, his reliability, and his desire to be in right relationship with us and to get us in right relationship with him. We learned this morning about God's relationship with Abraham and the covenant that the two of them had. And we learned that the covenant with God is not based on whether or not Abraham had done what God asked him to do to seal the covenant. The covenant between God and Abraham was based solely on Abraham's faith in God and his willingness to trust God in the face of what seemed to be something completely impossible. Abraham was willing to trust God even when things didn't look right. He trusted that God would keep God's promise to him to give him descendants that would number more than the stars in the heavens even though he and Sarah were much too old to have children.

Our willingness to trust God even when things don't look right is an indication of our faith. That faith itself is a gift from God and when we use it, we become stronger and our faith grows. When we answer God's invitation to be reconciled to God, God proves that he is steadfast and reliable. That invitation to all of us to be in right relationship with God and to be in right relationship with each other was made possible through the life, ministry and obedience of Jesus Christ.....obedience that included death on the cross. Jesus is the one who brought all things into creation and who continues to create. Jesus is the King of Creation. This is indeed a good time to pause and honor him as Christ the King. Jesus issues the invitation and then provides the way back to God. Answering that invitation is all that we have to do. This is one invitation that we don't want to neglect to RSVP.

The feast table is prepared. The doors are open. Our heavenly Father awaits.....thanks to Christ the King.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.