

## Luke 23: 33-43 “From the Cross to Paradise”

Before moving to the Gospel reading this morning, I invite you to linger with the words of the psalmist we just heard, the image of God as our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. This psalm is an affirmation of faith spoken in the voice of “WE,” deeply rooted in ancient Near Eastern concepts of the relationships among humans, God, and the natural world. With the theme of God’s presence in Jerusalem, the world beyond the city is envisioned as a chaotic place, with earthquake and floods; God alone is the refuge. In contrast to the roaring waters outside the city walls, the river within the walls, “whose streams make glad the city of God” gives life and inspires joy.

On this last Sunday of our church year, we have gathered in this house of God, to take refuge from the chaos of our personal lives, the roaring waters of our world in tumult. Mindful of the suffering of the world this morning, let us turn to the Good News that gives life and inspires joy.

Luke 23: 33-43

We often hear the metaphor “Life is a journey.” When we were born, we are set on the journey of life. Along this journey, we make friends and lose some, have successes and failures, encounter hardships and learn some lessons, experiencing the beauty as well as ugliness of it all, and joys as well as sorrows throughout it all, to taste life in its full flavor. If we measure this life in how we experience time, it’s a linear journey, from the cradle to the grave, as they say.

Jesus lived an earthly, linear life, too. He was born of Mary, lived among his people, teaching and healing, as we’ve seen him do on his journey toward Jerusalem, following him as Luke the gospel writer as our guide. We have seen, too, how his life lived in full obedience to God’s command of love, compassion,

and mercy, earned him enemies along the way. And that Way of Jesus has led him to where we find him today, on the cross.

And it is from that cross, in the last moments of his linear life on earth, Jesus shows us that this gift of life God has given each one of us is more than a mere linear travel through time, from the cradle to the grave. Christ, in his infinite mercy, carries us with him from the Cross to Paradise. This is the message of the Reign of Christ Sunday, traditionally known also as the Christ the King Sunday.

On this last Sunday of the Christian year, we are presented with Christ our Lord hanging on the cross. No more travel narratives, no more parables, no more talks of apocalyptic future, but Luke has us in this singular moment, compelling us to pause and ponder what it means for us to call this man on the cross our Lord and Savior, as we stand together with those who were gazing at Jesus on the cross.

Something is being revealed on this cross that is hidden from those who, directly or indirectly, had a hand in crucifying Jesus. The religious leaders scoffed at him, saying “let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, the Chosen One” and the Roman soldiers mocked him saying “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” Even one of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him, saying, “save yourself and us!”

At the very moment he was facing his own death, at the depth of humiliation and suffering on the cross, Jesus was living a reality that was hidden from those who were causing his suffering. Jesus prayed to God “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” They had no idea, Jesus was interceding for their

salvation even as they spoke, literally, the words of mockery, telling him to save himself. Jesus chose to save not himself but them. “

Bless those who curse you; pray for those who abuse you.” Jesus had taught the disciples. Obedient till the end to the radical love of God for all creation, Jesus remained innocent, and those who scoffed at him remained ignorant. With the power of his innocence, upholding the saving Love of God for all creation, Jesus saves the ignorant, the captives of sin, and they don’t even know it.

But there was one who caught on: the other criminal who hung on a cross besides Jesus. This one realized there was something very wrong with this picture, where an innocent man was being crucified along with them, self-acknowledged criminals. He says, “this man did nothing wrong” but literally the expression said, “this man did nothing ‘out of place,’” recognizing that what was happening to Jesus was “out of place.”

Not only that, he also saw that the world was about to turn. He recognized Jesus belonged to the kingdom where nothing was out of place, and this world would have to turn upside down if his kingdom was to come. So, he asks Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom, the world as should be. Calling Jesus by his name, this criminal acknowledged Jesus as Christ, the Messiah, God’s Chosen One; he was ready to hear Jesus’s words of assurance, that he would indeed be with Jesus in Paradise on that very day. He was saved from the ignorance that kept others in the state of “not knowing what they were doing.”

Breaking into the linear journey of our earthly lives, Jesus came not only to show us how to live in sync with God’s life-giving way, but also to show how this linear life of ours is enfolded in God’s eternal realm. At the end of the Christian year,

gazing at Jesus on the cross, we are standing on the threshold of our earthly linear life and our life in God's eternal realm, in the reign of the crucified Christ.

The gospel writer Luke wants us to see in this Jesus the Messiah, God's Chosen One, Christ the King that rules over much more than a limited time and space in human history. In today's short passage, Luke includes many references to the messianic interpretation in the Hebrew Scriptures, especially in Psalms: the executioners dividing Jesus's clothes, the role of the religious leaders, the offering of sour wine... to show who Jesus was and how his death is connected to both his life and the saving acts of God in the story of the people of Israel.

Jesus was born to live his linear life on earth, entering into the lives of God's children in a particular corner of God's created world at a particular time in history. And yet, Jesus is an embodiment of a much larger presence, larger than the land of Palestine where he walked, larger than the Jewish tradition out of which he came and in which he remained, and even larger than the Christian Church, who as the body of Christ carries on Christ's work in the world.

Today, we will read another Scripture passage as our affirmation of faith. It is from the Letter to the Colossians. It starts "Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation," and concludes "in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross." Christ's rule over all people. Described as "the firstborn of all creation," Christ WAS, even before humans were created. Christ belongs not to a particular people but rather to all people.

It is this God we encounter in Psalm 46, which Barbara read for us this morning. Psalm 46 is an affirmation of faith in God who says “Be still and know that I am God” when our linear life on earth is in tumult, promising to help us and be our refuge. The Lord of hosts is with us.

And this God with Us is Jesus our Emmanuel, who is beyond time and space, and yet holds each one of us and all creation here and now. Next Sunday is the First Sunday of Advent. We begin our faith journey again a new church year, yet it is not a mere repeat of yet another year. The journey of our earthly life may be linear but not our faith journey, for it is a dynamic encounter with God, who invites us to live in the Reign of Christ, with him in Paradise, each and every day.