

Westminster Sermon – Then and There
St. Andrew's Sunday, November 24, 2019
Scripture: Jeremiah 23:1-6, Luke 23:33-44
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On this Christ the King Sunday, our first scripture reading is Jeremiah 23:1-6. Written at the time of the Babylonian Exile around 587 BCE, the prophet conveys judgment, then and there, against the kings for the way they executed power. This is a lament and divine judgment on the abuse of power by those who were called to shepherd God's people. The prophet offers the hope that God will raise up shepherds, leaders, and kings in the future who will execute power with righteousness and justice. Hear now, God's Holy Word.

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. ² 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. ³ 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. ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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."

Following the bagpipes playing "Amazing Grace"

Some of us know the story of John Newton who wrote "Amazing Grace," probably in the year 1772. Following the death of his mother, he worked on slave ships with his father for several years. After experiencing a Christian conversion, Newton would eventually denounce the slave trade and became a prominent abolitionist. He would be an inspiration to Westminster's founders. He had come full circle on his spiritual journey when he wrote: *Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind, but now I see.* Today, Christians end a liturgical year and begin a new one. We return from whence we came in the celebration of amazing grace. We come to an unexpected place, then and there, here and now, again and again, and, in the unending circle of praise, we proclaim: *When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun. We've no less days to sing God's praise than when we first begun.* Amen.

In our second scripture reading, Luke 23:33-43, we read Luke's account of the paradox of the crucifixion and a King who exercises power with righteousness and justice, who absorbs the hostility of the world, who embraces the injustice of the cross, and who saves others by not saving himself. Listen to what the Spirit is saying.

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, 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 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." Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Amen.

Choral response: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

The title of the sermon: Then and There

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, we thank you for the longing within each of us to be remembered by you. May the mercy and justice of your kingdom prevail in the world here and now through those who lead with your power. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

It was seven years ago this past Mother’s Day that I received the gift of a book from Peter and our son Paul. The book, The Leader as a Mensch by Bruna Martinuzzi, is about leadership and becoming the kind of person other people want to follow. Peter and Paul gave this book to me because they are my best advocates and were encouraging me, then and there, on my long search for a call to lead a congregation such as Westminster.

In this brief and accessible book, Bruna outlines the guidelines for emotionally intelligent leadership. As she explains, a Mensch is a leader who inspires with integrity, confidence and character that motivates others to follow—not through persuasion or intimidation. Mensch is a German word meaning human being or person. It has no gender. In Yiddish a mensch is an upstanding individual, with admirable characteristics such as humility, authenticity, accountability, dependability, generosity, composure and appreciation. Her message on being a Mensch elaborates on the teaching of Rabbi Hillel: *“If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, who am I? If not now, when?”*

This approach to leadership is nothing new, according to Dr. Michael Freeman, who wrote the introduction to her book. In fact, it is prehistoric. One could say that the prophet Jeremiah was advocating for such leadership, then and there, expressing divine disappointment and judgment on the shepherds and kings who misused the power with which they were entrusted in the care of God’s children. The consequences for this abuse of power was costly for the Israelites who were exiled from their home. They endured their own cross of suffering and the death of a way of life. This loss transformed them and was followed by a resurrection in the return home, a new beginning and a second chance.

Before their exile, Jeremiah prophesied that God would raise up new leadership who would use their power for good. This was not meant to be a utopian messianic vision but practical guidelines on how power is exercised by leaders in the here and now.

When Jesus, the ultimate mensch, walked among us, he raised the bar on God’s understanding of power. As Quaker scholar Elton Trueblood wrote, “The historic Christian doctrine of the divinity of Christ does not simply mean that Jesus is like God. It is far more radical than that. It means that God is like Jesus.” In other words, Jesus is not merely to fit into the predetermined categories of God. Jesus’ life, ministry, death and resurrection are intended to transform those categories and bring us to a new evolutionary understanding of who God is.

We come to understand the true nature of Jesus’ Kingship in the mocking words of the scoffers—the religious leaders, the soldiers, and an unrepentant criminal. On the one hand, the repeated demand, “If you are the Messiah, save yourself!” functions as yet another temptation for Jesus. Just as the devil had earlier challenged Jesus three times and offered him a less painful option, so now Jesus is being invited to save himself and to avoid the cross. By his lack of response to the scoffers Jesus clearly remains steadfast in fulfilling God’s will and being true to

himself. (Texts for Preaching, Year C, Charles B. Cousar, pg. 607) *“If I am not for myself, who will be for me?”*

On the other hand, the words of the scoffers ironically pose the paradox of his kingly mission. Jesus is a Messiah who saves others only by not saving himself. He is resolutely committed to God’s plan, which includes betrayal, absorbing hostility that does not belong to him, and death. Only in the powerlessness of the cross can Jesus demonstrate the authority that ultimately rescues criminals, scoffers, and religious leaders. (Texts for Preaching, Year C, Charles B. Cousar, pg. 607) Refusing the voices of temptation, then and there, Jesus defines for us what sort of King he really is. *“If I am only for myself, who am I?”*

This means that the constituting event of the Christian faith is not a power play that follows the roles and logic of most of the power plays we know—retaliation, competition, cruelty, pettiness, self-protectiveness, and the like. (Texts for Preaching, Year C, Charles B. Cousar, pg. 607) Instead Jesus dares to trust the God who takes him to the cross and beyond...and forgives those who do not know what they are doing. *“If not now, when?”*

There is, perhaps, irony here that the religious authorities lead the cries for Jesus’ death, whereas the one person in the text who perceives the truth and dares to speak it is the second criminal being crucified alongside Jesus. He acknowledges that he justly deserves his punishment, in contrast to Jesus, who is righteous. Furthermore, he sees that Jesus will enter his kingly realm not by coming down from the cross, but by dying. His request, ‘Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom’ is a plea not to be forgotten. Yet, it is also a confession of faith and an indication that he understands the mystery of the gospel—that mocking, insults, floggings, and crucifixion lead to resurrection.

So the irony in this crucifixion reveals a divine irony that we see again and again in life. God uses the seemingly powerless to overcome the seemingly powerful. God chooses unlikely circumstances to demonstrate God’s power.

A life empowered by God is able to demonstrate self-control—is able to act from within—not react from without. A life empowered by God is able to live with dignity no matter what circumstances arise in this unpredictable world because that dignity does not come from this world. That dignity comes from the God who conquered death by dying on a cross and who offered forgiveness and kindness in the face of unspeakable cruelty and injustice, *then and there*.

When we feel overwhelmed by the circumstances in our lives or in our world ... when we feel hopeless and powerless... remember the God who remembers us. Remember, be strengthened, look to the hills, and respond with mercy, courage and kindness, *here and now*. Amen.