

King of the Hill
A Sermon for Every Sunday
Christ the King Sunday, 2022
Luke 23:33-43

When I was a kid, we used to play a game on the school playground called “King of the Hill.” You’ve probably played it before. Some people call it “King of the Mountain,” or “King of the Castle,” but for us it was always “King of the Hill” and this is how we played it. Somebody would climb up on a mound of dirt at one corner of the playground and shout: “I’m King of the Hill!” which was an invitation to everyone else to come and try to push him off. Kids would come running across the playground, whooping and yelling, and—especially in winter, when we were wearing heavy coats that provided lots of padding—it was just good, clean fun. Whoever was on top at any given time was the King of the Hill and usually it didn’t last very long, but it was wonderful when you were up there. For a few seconds at least you were master of all you surveyed.

But let’s put it in perspective. It was a playground game. You might come home and tell your Mom and Dad that you got to be king of the hill for a little while that day but you probably wouldn’t see it in the next morning’s newspaper. No front-page articles announcing: “Local boy becomes king of the hill!” And when I was playing the game, it was on a playground at some elementary school in Boone County, West Virginia, which is hardly the center of the universe. Other than the few kids who had played the game with me that day, nobody knew or cared that for one brief, shining moment I had been king.

It’s not all that different, really, from the story we find in today’s Gospel reading. Today is the last Sunday on the calendar of the Christian year. Next week we start all over again, with the first Sunday of Advent, when we start looking forward to the coming of Christ. But here at the end of Year C (as they call it) we have spent months and months looking at the life and ministry of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. We have listened to him teach and preach. We have watched him heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, and cast out demons. We are at the place, finally, where we can sum up all we know about him, and the way we usually sum things up here at the end of the Christian year is to crown him king, is to say that through what we have seen and heard in these last twelve months we have come to believe what the New Testament boldly affirms: that Jesus really is the “king of kings and lord of lords” (1 Tim. 6:15; Rev. 17:14; Rev. 19:16). So it seems a little odd that the text selected for Christ the King Sunday is this one from Luke 23, where Jesus doesn’t look much like a king at all.

Luke says that Jesus and a couple of convicted criminals were marched out of the city of Jerusalem to the place of the Skull, where they were crucified. It wouldn’t have been all that unusual in that time and place. Crucifixion was the way the Roman government dealt with troublemakers, usually hanging them up on crosses along the roads leading into town where they would die a slow and painful death, and serve as a reminder to the masses that you don’t mess around with Rome. This “place of the Skull” where they took Jesus was probably somewhere just outside the city gate, a pile of dirt or rock littered with the skulls and bones of others who had been executed there. Luke says they crucified Jesus, by which he means they nailed him to a

cross and hung him up to die, along with these two others, one on his left and one on his right, and someone, maybe one of the soldiers, hung a sign over his head that read: “This is the King of the Jews.”

Apparently, it was the custom to hang over the head of the one who being crucified the charge for which he had been condemned to death. On either side of Jesus were those men who were dying for the crimes they had committed. I’m guessing that they had signs over their heads, too, and probably those signs said something like “murderer” or “thief.” I don’t know what other crimes were punishable by death in those days, but the crime with which Jesus was charged was the crime of insurrection. In the vast Roman Empire, ruled by Caesar Tiberius at that time, there could be only one king. When the religious authorities brought Jesus to Pontius Pilate, asking him to deal with this troublemaker, they said that he was calling himself a king, and that couldn’t be. So the sign over his head that read, “This is the king of the Jews,” was there to tell anyone who might be looking: “This is what the Roman Empire does to people who try to make themselves king. There can be no king but Caesar.”

But that’s not why the chief priests and elders had trouble with Jesus. It wasn’t because he called himself king. They didn’t have any loyalty to Caesar. Their problem with Jesus was blasphemy: that through what he did and said he was “making himself equal to God,” and according to their Law anyone who did that must be put to death (Lev. 24:16). In this Gospel they say, “If you are the Messiah (that is, God’s anointed one), tell us.” And Jesus says, “If I tell you, you will not believe, and if I question you, you will not answer. But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God.” And then all of them asked, “Are you, then, the Son of God?” And Jesus answered, “You say that I am.” And for them that settles it: “What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips!” (Luke 22:71).

So, the religious authorities wanted him dead because he claimed to be not only the Messiah, the Son of David, but also the Son of God. The Romans wanted him dead because any claim to be king was a threat to the sovereignty of the Roman emperor. In the end it was the Romans who actually nailed him to the cross, but the charge hung over his head could be read both ways: “This is the King of the Jews” it said, meaning, “This is what we Jews do with blasphemers who claim to be the Messiah, and this is what we Romans do with insurrectionists who claim to be king.” Either way, it seems odd to choose this passage for Christ the King Sunday, when it is so clear that claiming to be king can get you killed.

And when you put this scene in perspective it becomes almost pitiful, doesn’t it? Here are three men dying on a dusty hill in some far corner of the Roman Empire. And not only are they dying, they are being put to death—executed as criminals. One of them has a sign over his head reading, “This is the King of the Jews,” but it’s easy to see that the sign is meant as a joke. Nobody thinks he’s a king. The religious authorities taunt him saying, ““He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!” The soldiers come next, mocking him and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” And one of the criminals who was hanging there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” But the other criminal—the so-called “good thief”—rebuked the first one by 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.” Who knows why he said it? Maybe he figured that under the circumstances it couldn’t hurt. But Jesus, who by this point can hardly lift his thorn-crowned head, receives the request as if he were the last true king of Israel and says, “Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

I would guess that this story didn’t make it into the next day’s newspaper. In the context of the sprawling Roman Empire a few more crucifixions here or there were no more newsworthy than a children’s game on a school playground. It didn’t matter what the sign over Jesus’ head had read the day before. For a few, agonizing hours he might have been the king of Skull hill, but now he was a corpse in a borrowed tomb. Within a few days his life and death would pass out of the memory of the people and they would move on, looking for their Messiah in someone else. Except for this one little thing: according to our best and most reliable sources Jesus didn’t stay dead. “On the third day,” as we say, “he rose,” and that changed everything.

I know that some people don’t believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus. It’s not something we have personal experience with and from a purely scientific point of view it’s impossible. But if something like resurrection hadn’t happened, do you think you would be listening to this sermon? Do you think there would be an estimated two billion Christians around the world? Don’t you think that Peter, James and John and the others would have just moved on, shrugging their shoulders and saying, as those two disciples did on the road to Emmaus, “We had hoped that he would be the one to redeem Israel.” We had hoped—past tense—but not anymore. But something happened. Those two disciples on the road to Emmaus encountered the risen Christ. And then so did Peter and James and John and all the others. The word began to get out that Jesus, who had been put to death on a cross, was alive again, and suddenly this story was the story everybody was talking about. So that some fifty years later, when Luke got ready to write, they were still talking, and he could take down almost word for word their recollections of what had happened.

One of the stories they told was this one, about what happened on that awful Friday when Jesus was crucified. They told how a sign had been hung over his head that read “King of the Jews.” At the time it seemed like a cruel joke, a way of mocking him, but now, looking back, they could see that the sign was more true than the person who hung it there could have imagined: Jesus was the King of the Jews. And those religious authorities, those soldiers, and that bad thief who kept saying “If you are a king then save yourself”? Well, he was, and looking back the church could see it. And that good thief who said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”? Well, who knows what he was really thinking, but I believe that Jesus was as good as his word, and that no one has ever been more surprised to stroll through the gates of Paradise than that astonished thief.

If you believe that Jesus was as good as his word then you can see how this pitiful scene from Luke 23 is transformed by your faith. That derelict on the cross with the cockeyed crown of thorns on his head really does become, in your eyes, the king of kings and lord of lords. The sign over his head reads true, and the things people are saying about him—even though they mean to mock him—are also true: he is a king. But you can’t blame them, can you? They make

the assumption most of us would, that if you had power you would use it to save yourself. Most kings would. But not this one. The surprising thing about Jesus is that he uses his power not to save himself but to save others. And let me ask you: if you could choose between a king who would use his power to save himself and a king who would use his power to save you, which one would you choose?

Back in 1984 I went to the polling place to cast my vote for president. That was the year Walter Mondale was running against the incumbent, Ronald Reagan. I was 25 years old, I had just started seminary, I was out to change the world. To tell you the truth I hadn't paid a lot of attention to the presidential campaign and as I made my way to the polling place, I found that I didn't have strong feelings about either candidate. I've never had a lot of interest in politics, never pinned all my hopes on any elected official. I stood in that voting booth for a long time, looking at those two names, and finally I chose the third option: I wrote in a name, and the name I wrote in was my dad's. When I told people about it later, I told them that, honestly, I couldn't think of anyone who would make a better president. No offense to those two candidates who were running but I knew my dad, I knew he was good and kind and wise. And I also knew this, that if it ever came right down to it my dad would lay down his life for me, and that's the kind of president you would want, isn't it?

"If you are a king," the religious authorities said to Jesus, "then save yourself." "If you are a king," the soldiers said, "then save yourself." "If you are a king," the other thief said, "then save yourself." But Jesus turned out to be the kind of king who cared more about saving others than saving himself, and so he hung there on that cross, under that sign, until his work was done. I don't know what kind of king you want, but if I could choose, I would choose a king like that.

—Jim Somerville, 2022