

Today

What would you say if you were asked to name the most important day? Would you think about your personal life or that of your family? Would it be a significant day in the church year or a national event? Would you think of a time in the past or the future?

In Luke's gospel the ministry of Jesus begins on the Sabbath day in the synagogue in Nazareth. He reads the familiar words from the prophet Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captive and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then Jesus says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

In this first sermon, Jesus does not imply that he is going to be a king like King David with lots of power. He does not indicate he is going to be a king like King Solomon with lots of wealth. He does not suggest that he is going to be a military leader like Joshua. Rather, Jesus chooses Isaiah 61, suggesting that he is to be a servant – one who cares for and heals the poor, the blind, the lame and the maimed – one who is anointed to be a king like no other.

Our passage this morning marks the end of the ministry of Jesus as recounted by Luke. The actual process of crucifying Jesus merits just a passing sentence, "...there they crucified him." Jesus is mocked with the appellation, "King of the Jews." Challenged to do exactly what the devil tempted him to do in the desert immediately following his baptism. Do you remember how the devil took Jesus to Jerusalem, placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, *He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you, and On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.*" Do you remember Jesus answering him by saying that we are not to put the Lord our God to the test?

At the cross the leaders, the soldiers and the criminals all say, "Save yourself!" But Jesus knows what kind of king he is – knows that he is a humble servant first – knows that he will not put God to the test but that salvation will come as God desires. His final words in this crucifixion scene are, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

I think that the most important day is **today**. Author Robert Monroe wrote, "This is the most important day of your life, because it is now. Yesterday is then, tomorrow is when. This day is now."

As fascinated as I am by time travel novels and movies I recognize that there is no way to go back and redo events from the past. I know that I cannot fast forward to the future and get to some anticipated activity immediately. In fact last week we

were reminded that **God holds the future**. Our hope lies in how we live today, confident that as we follow Christ we participate in the future that God has already envisioned.

Today as we observe Reign of Christ Sunday, we have a Jesus who seems most un-kingly. He's mocked, beaten, suffering, harassed, murdered. Is Jesus king? Yes, but not the one we expect. He is anointed to be a king like no other. There was a king of the Jews at the time – Herod – a king who may have been unpopular among Galileans, but who had done some pretty good business on behalf of Rome and Jerusalem, a king who was properly ruthless and self-protective in his political dealings. He was the "rightful" king – a king who is nothing like Jesus.

The interaction between Jesus and the criminals captures my attention. One criminal derides Jesus, saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" Seems a reasonable idea in fact since Jesus is king – the one people call God's son – but his comments are a way of speaking lightly about sacred things – of diminishing who Jesus is rather than lifting him up. He's missing the point, or ignoring it, not seeing or refusing to see the situation before him for what it really is.

The second criminal seems able to recognize who Jesus is. By his own admission he is not a perfect person – he recognizes his own faults, and Jesus' innocence. And he sees something more, knows something about Jesus as king – knows something about salvation because he says, "Jesus, remember me **when** you come into your kingdom." Not **if**, but **when**. And Jesus answers, "...today you will be with me in paradise." Jesus speaks of a present and right-now paradise just as at the beginning of his ministry when he says that the scripture is fulfilled **today**. Jesus has been preaching about God's kingdom, God's reign – being at hand – already present. In his last words to the criminal he confirms it – paradise is now – if we see it – as we participate in it and seek to usher it in. Paradise is for today.

Throughout the passage we hear the word "save" – it is on everyone's lips but not in their hearts. What does it mean to be saved? What would it have meant for Jesus to save himself? Would he save himself by calling down the angels to take him away from the suffering on the cross? Would he be saving himself if he claimed the charges against him were false, and went back to Galilee? Jesus would not have been saving himself, but destroying himself had he done these things. His constant message to anyone who would listen was to love God and love neighbor. He taught a way of peace that radically urged a complete change of lifestyle for those who truly wanted to be disciples. What would it mean, then, to abandon it all for his own personal safety? A true leader must walk the walk – must practice what he preaches. Jesus did just that – offering us a model and a hope for salvation.

So what does this Reign of Christ Sunday mean for us? What do we take away with us on this last Sunday in the Christian Year? First and foremost, we find grounding for our lives. It is Christ who is our king. As Christians, we have our home base already established for us, the foundation of our being. Christ the king. Christ who reigns. When we remember where our center is, who our center is, we aren't so easily distracted by the other things that want to claim our attention and allegiance. We know who we are and whose we are. Who leads us in the decisions we make, in the paths we choose, in the lives we live.

Second, we are reminded again about what it means to be saved. Our own salvation doesn't always mean our personal safety, or a place reserved for us in the clouds of heaven. Jesus taught that the way to save your life was to lose it. And he did just that. Sometimes, the only way to be saved is the hard way – by giving ourselves up. Perhaps we don't need to suffer the death that Christ suffered, but we can seek to live as Christ lived, to do as he taught. The paradox is that by putting others first, by caring for our neighbors, by loving others, we save ourselves in the best way possible. I read this quote from theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in the obituaries this week: *nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love.*

And finally, take heart. We don't have to wait to experience the paradise that the second criminal asks Jesus about. The popular Christian musician Brian Doerksen performed at Glad Tidings Church last Sunday night and Steve and I attended the concert. One song that resonated with me had these lyrics:

*Today I choose to follow you
Today I choose to give my 'yes' to you
Today I choose to hear your voice and live
Today I choose to follow you*

*As for me and my house we will serve you
As for me and my house we will spend our lives on you*

*Wonderful Counselor, Everlasting Father
Eternal King, Lord of Hosts
Willingly we follow*

Jesus is named "Eternal King" – the one we willing follow – the one we serve – the one we give our "yes" to. When is Jesus king? When will we follow, serve and affirm him? Today...

"Today," Jesus says. Today, we can enter paradise. Here-and-now, we can experience God's kingdom made present on earth, the good news made manifest among us. We are called to point to the reality of Jesus' kingship in the here and now, not to point to it as some oft-promised reward for our perseverance. Rejoice! God is here, right now, in this very place. Rejoice! Christ is reigning over us. Jesus, remember us, when you come into your kingdom. **Amen.**