

A Life Worth Losing”
Colossians 1:11-20
Luke 23:33-43
Christ the King/C, November 21, 2004
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On the far away Island of Sala-ma-Sond,
Yertle the Turtle was king of the pond.
A nice little pond. It was clean. It was neat.
The water was warm. There was plenty to eat.
The turtles had everything turtles might need.
And they were all happy. Quite happy indeed.
They were until Yertle, the king of them all,
Decided the kingdom he ruled was too small.

So Yertle, the Turtle King, lifted his hand.
And Yertle, the Turtle King, gave a command.
He ordered nine turtles to swim to his stone.
And, using these turtles, he built a new throne.
He made each turtle stand on another one's back
And he piled them all up in a nine turtle stack.
And then Yertle climbed up. He sat down on the pile.
What a wonderful view! He could see 'most a mile!
"All mine!" Yertle cried. "Oh, the things I now rule!
I'm king of a cow! And I'm king of a mule!
I', king of a house! And, what's more, beyond that,
I'm king of a blueberry bush and a cat!
I'm Yertle the Turtle! Oh, marvelous me!
For I am the ruler of all that I see!"

For those of you who are not familiar with Dr. Seuss' masterpiece, Yertle decides that his perch is not high enough. So, he orders more turtles, at least 200 more. And, now his throne allows him to see for 40 miles. Still not enough. More turtles. He needs 5,607, he says, stacked all the way to heaven. Because even kids know that's what a king does. A king orders people around and sits on a throne and rules. A king is high and exalted. The king is the most important person. Everybody serves the king, does what the king wants, tries to make the king happy. If the king's not happy, nobody's happy.

Yertle the turtle made me think of a Disney film that came out a few years ago. It was called “The Emperor’s New Groove” and it is a similar story. Young Emperor Cuzco wants to take over a little village so he can build a theme park there for his own enjoyment. However, others close to Cuzco tire of his greedy, selfish behavior and turn him into a llama (actually a botched attempt at killing him). In one scene he tosses a poor old man from the palace for “disturbing his groove.” Even though we are not personally familiar with the monarchy, these images of kingship are very familiar to us. A king, the dictionary says, is one that is supreme and preeminent. If you are not a king, you are subservient to the king. The king serves no one. The king is served. Even kids know that.

This is a strange day. We call it “Christ the King Sunday.” It is the last day of the liturgical year. Next week when we gather we will light the first Advent candles will prepare again for Christ’s birth. Today however, we hear the story of Christ’s death. It is the portion of Luke’s gospel that was heard on Good Friday, when we remember the journey Christ made to the cross, the painful and humiliating journey toward his own death. Why then would we hear it again today? This story was selected to remind us of Christ’s humanity, his purpose, what his life meant, why he came to live among us and how we are to live when he is gone. This is the story of a different kind of kingship. Jesus is mocked by the political authorities, a sign hangs over his head proclaiming him “King of the Jews,” a title no one really accepted. One thief chides him to use his kingly powers to get them off the hook. However, the thief on the other cross, like so many characters in Luke’s gospel, knows something others do not.

The other thief somehow recognizes who Jesus is. He asks Jesus not to save him from the cross, for he knows that unlike Jesus, he deserves this punishment. This man asks only that Jesus remembers him when he comes into his kingdom, his true kingdom, that place where Jesus will live and reign forever, beyond the bounds of this earthly existence. He knows that this is not the end, there is more, and there is more to come. Even as this man hangs near death, he has the courage to reach out to Jesus in ways his closest friends and family could not. Jesus will remember and he will love this man into whatever lies beyond.

This story as confounding as it may seem is all about love. Isn’t that what Jesus is about any way? It contrasts the deep hurt and pain that humanity is capable of inflicting on each other, with a profound love and healing

presence that Jesus embodied until his dying breath. He asks God to forgive the people for they do not know what they have done. He does not ask God to keep him from this death. He does not ask God to change things, but simply to forgive those who have carried out this deed. He goes to his death loving and caring for others and praying for their salvation.

This is some kind of palace, this dusty hill adorned with three crosses. It is not at all what we would expect, it is much more than his followers, grief stricken and angry, could even comprehend. Jesus does not use his power to save himself, even though many taunt him to do so. He does not use his power to bring retribution to others, he does not support a revolt on the part of his followers. He quietly and compassionately submits to the will of God knowing that the power, the true power, will manifest itself in the resurrection, in the life beyond death, in the power of love that can transform all things.

By this time in Luke's Gospel, we shouldn't be surprised at reversals of this kind. Jesus may be king, but that kingship is unlike any other we have ever experienced. If we have been following the story with any kind of care through these last few months, we've seen this coming all along. One preacher comments that "Luke has been getting us ready ever since Jesus' mother sang a song when she learned she was going to have a baby. You remember what she sang about her boy who would become king. He will scatter the proud. He will bring down the powerful from their thrones. The lowly he will lift up. He will fill those who are hungry, and he will empty those who are full." It sounded like nonsense at the time, but here we are, at the end of the journey seeing it all come to fruition.

Jesus did everything backwards. The last shall be first, give up your life to have it. He hung around with the wrong crowd. He blessed those who were poor and hungry and weeping, and had only words of woe for those who were rich and full and self-satisfied. He believed in forgiving those who had wronged him, praying for his enemies, turning the other cheek, walking a mile in another person's shoes. He touched those who were unclean and loved those who were not worthy of other's love. He welcomed home the estranged son and healed the outsider. He did everything a king would never do. He tried to teach his disciples that the way of service is the way of life, that the way up is down. He lived this way, he died this way and he knows that we will do the same in his name.

Rev. Mark Sargent says, “this king rules by suffering, vulnerable love, not by domination. This king teaches us to the very end that God’s power is made perfect in weakness. This king teaches us that God chooses what is foolish to shame what the world thinks is wise. This king teaches us that God chooses what is weak to shame what the world thinks is strong. You and I are pointed today to the truth that, as far as God is concerned, what happened that day at the place called The Skull is what is really powerful, what is really wise, what is really strong. Jesus had tried to let his disciples in on that the first time he told them about his death. ‘if you want to save your life, you will lose it. If you lose your life for my sake, you will save it.’”

It is not so strange that this is where we end up, on this last day of the liturgical year. This is the place where the fullness of God was many known to us, a place of ending and new beginnings. He gave up his life willingly knowing that he would never die, but dwell forever in the hearts of his beloved. There is a part of us that wants Jesus to be a different kind of king, the kind of king we know and understand. That is not who Jesus is. He is not the successor in a long line of monarchs from King Solomon to Yertle. He is Jesus, in whom we live and breath and have our being. In him and through him the world will be different. The poor will be rich and the lame will be made whole. Mark Sargent comments that “truth is, we are confounded by [Christ’s] kingship, because we are enamored with unforgiveness, impressed by our religiosity, seduced by power, deluded by our self-importance, smitten by our wisdom, infatuated with our strength.” Do we really want a king like Jesus? To say “yes” to that question is an expensive response indeed because if Jesus is that kind of king, then you and I, says Sargent are that kind of subject.

So here we stand, ready to begin the journey again, hoping to learn something new about this Jesus, praying to be transformed by his love, yearning to be changed through his forgiveness. Take some time in the coming days to contemplate the full story. Before we say good bye to Luke, open to his gospel and reacquaint yourself with the story, from start to finish in all its confounding glory. Jesus came so that we might have life, and abundant life, perhaps even a confounding life. The way before us may not always be clear, we might not always understand why we do the things we do or why Jesus did the things we did. But, when we get it, when we reach out to Christ, he will always reach back and promise to us a place in his kingdom. May it be so. Amen

