

## Get Ready to See Your King!

A sermon on Luke 23:35-43

It doesn't make a whole lot of sense, does it?!?! We've been building up throughout the entire Church Year, and now we're finally here, the last Sunday of the End Times. It's time for a celebration, right?!? This is Christ the King Sunday, and yet we have this text looking at Jesus in his darkest moment, on the cross. Definitely not the same picture Jeremiah painted of Jesus, as our Shepherd, our wise King, the LORD our Righteousness. Certainly doesn't seem compatible with the supreme ruler over all creation Paul described in Colossians. And yet, on this Christ the King Sunday, I encourage you, Get Ready to See Your King!

Get ready to see your King? You probably think I'm joking. Not Jesus. Not here. Now maybe if I was talking about the beginning of that fateful week, Palm Sunday. Jesus riding into Jerusalem in a great procession. People throwing down their cloaks for his donkey to ride on. The waving of palm branches while people, young and old, were shouting at the top of their voices, "HOSANNA! Hosanna in the highest!!!"

But only days later, on a remote hill called Calvary, the man to your left, beaten, bruised, forlorn, that is no King. No, he's the lowest of the low, the scum of the earth, a worthless criminal. And now he's suffering the most excruciating death imaginable, being nailed to a cross.

It's nice to have the company.

You see, Jesus wasn't the only one up there. Matthew, in his gospel, tells us, "Two robbers were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left."

Have you ever imagined yourself right in midst of this tragedy, seeing, hearing, feeling, experiencing? Well, for a moment, I want you to be there. Step into the shoes of one of the robbers hanging beside Jesus.

A large crowd has gathered, quite a bit larger than what you'd normally expect for an event like this. Not that you've ever hung on a cross before, but you wouldn't expect large crowds in attendance at such a gruesome killing. You'd think they could find entertainment elsewhere.

But they're not here for you. And thankfully so. They're there for the one in the middle, for this Jesus, and they definitely aren't his biggest fans. It seems like the soldiers barely finish putting up his cross when you hear a single voice from the middle of the mob, "Ha! The Son of God?!? Then come down!"

Another person, one you recognize to be a Pharisee, pipes in, "Oh, the 'Chosen One!' Save yourself!"

Your gut wrenches as a Jewish leader standing nearby sneers as the crowd roars with laughter, "He saved others; let him save himself IF he truly is the Christ of God."

Why do they mock this man? You twist your head to get a glimpse of this guy, his reaction, and you notice the writing above his head: "This is the King of the Jews." You finally understand their taunts.

This Jesus is certainly no king. Even you can see that. And you're not even aware of the other events of the past 24 hours: Jesus arrested, deserted by his followers, denied by his dearest friend, put on trial in the middle of the night, falsely accused and convicted, slapped, spit on, mocked as a "king," and that's not even the worst. When the people had the choice of setting Jesus or Barabbas, a known serial killer, free, they unanimously chose Barabbas. Ouch!

The point of their ridicule is clear. They weren't saying Jesus saved others, no, quite the opposite. Jesus couldn't save anyone because he couldn't even save himself from this humiliating death on a cross.

Their taunts seem to be contagious. Pretty soon, the entire crowd starts making fun of this man, including the Roman soldiers. And then, something completely unexpected. You hear a bloodcurdling cry from the other side of Jesus, from the other criminal. There is pure hatred in his voice. "Yeah, aren't you the Christ? Save yourself, and then save us from these awful trees!" Wow, the audacity of that guy! He's hanging on a cross, being punished for his heinous crimes, just like you. He's suffering a slow and painful death, just like you. He's at a point where he SHOULD be making his final amends with God, but instead he's slinging mud at the guy next to him?! Unbelievable.

And Jesus' reaction? You see the tears forming in his eyes. Every stinging jab seems to be sucking the life out of him little by little. And yet, silence. He says nothing.

Your mind screams at him, "Why do you take this??? You're a dead man. You have nothing to lose. Defend yourself!" A question races through your mind, the same question Pilate had asked only hours earlier, "What crime has this man committed?"

But as quickly as the question enters your mind, it's replaced by the realization of the futility of your own situation. "This pain and torment I'm suffering on my own cross is unbearable. I'm hours away from my own death, and I have the gates of Hades awaiting my arrival. If this Jesus is really who everyone says he claims to be, then he really should save himself, and me. But why doesn't he? Or, better yet...where was he when I robbed the market and killed three merchants while trying to escape? Why didn't he stop me? Where was he when I had lustful thoughts about my neighbor's wife? Why didn't he keep me from taking God's name in vain and from telling vicious lies about my friends? Why didn't he prevent me from sinning?"

"Only two logical explanations. One, God doesn't care about me, or two, he can't save me, just like Jesus. Weak, frail, incapable of saving anyone."

And suddenly, those taunts of the crowd start sounding better and better. "He is no king. He is no God." And you're right back where you started, a horrible sinner, on your own cross, preparing to meet your doom. "So why not get my punch in before I go?!?"

So, you open your mouth, all ready to blast Jesus. Before you get the chance, you hear a voice, "Don't you fear God, since you are under the same sentence?"

As you look around, you finally realize, much to your surprise, that the voice was yours. This isn't a taunt toward Jesus. No, it's a rebuke to the other guy on a cross, the other criminal. And you go on,

“We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done NOTHING wrong.”

Whoa, come back to reality. Where did that come from? How did the criminal come to that realization? What did he see in Jesus? He saw the same person Isaiah did when he wrote, “He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted.”

But he also saw the grace of God in Jesus. His God-given faith recognized who it was who was hanging there next to him. This was no criminal. The true criminals were surrounding Jesus, on the other crosses, in the crowd, walking by. The true criminals are you and I, whose countless sins nailed Jesus to the cross. The criminal knew he deserved what he was getting. But Jesus, he was the innocent one. To everyone else, he seemed like a weak and beaten villain. Even God, Jesus’ own Father, abandoned him as the biggest loser in the history of the world. But that one criminal saw Jesus for who he truly was, the victorious and triumphant King. He saw him as the only one who could pay for all of his crimes, all of his sins.

When he did finally speak to Jesus, he didn’t have a taunt like all the other cutting words thrown at him. The criminal merely said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Do you understand what he was asking Jesus, what he was asking his King? He wasn’t just asking Jesus to think about him when he was sitting on his throne in heaven, as if Jesus would maybe give him even just a drop of water to quench his thirst while he was suffering torment in hell. He was asking Jesus to remember him by showering his mercy and grace on him. The robber was confessing his sins and asking for his King’s pardon and his peace of forgiveness.

And Jesus’ answer to him was far better than anything the criminal could have hoped for: Prepare to meet your doom alright! “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” Such comforting words, not from a frail and fragile human, but from an almighty and compassionate God!

“I tell you the truth” – There was complete certainty in Jesus’ promise. It was already as good as done.

“Today” – The criminal wouldn’t have to wait long to receive his reward. At his very moment of death, heaven was his.

“You will be with me in paradise” – What do you think came to the mind of the criminal when he heard ‘paradise?’ In all likelihood, he probably thought back to the original paradise, the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve, after creation, living in perfection, in a garden full of bliss, peace, no sin. And that’s exactly what Jesus promised the man: peace with God, no more sin, perfection in heaven. You can probably imagine how the criminal must have looked as his entire burden of sin and guilt was lifted off his shoulders.

It’s not hard to imagine being the thief on the cross because, really, you and I are that thief on the cross. At least, that’s the punishment we deserve, a horrible sinner’s death. We are the weak and fragile

humans, the losers, incapable of saving ourselves. But the guy in the middle, Jesus, the one everyone else thought was weak, was anything but that. That cross, meant to bring him shame, scorn, and death, that cross was the sign of his victory over sin, death, and the devil. Hours later, his triumphant cry “It is finished” showed his work was complete. Our almighty King won us forgiveness for all our sins.

And three days later, Jesus fully displayed his majesty and splendor when he rose from the grave. And his reward? A crown of glory and a heavenly throne ruling over all creation.

What about you and me? What do we have to look forward to? “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” Our paradise will be much greater than anything we could imagine, even better than the Garden of Eden, better because we’ll be living with our loving King forever in heaven.

Christ the King Sunday. A perfect conclusion to the End Times. It’s not a time to fear our own final end, but it’s a time to rejoice over our Lord’s abounding forgiveness and everlasting love. Not a time to lament our weaknesses, but a time to trust in our powerful King’s victory, a time to look forward to heaven. So Christians, be ready. I warn you, the end is coming. But prepare to meet your doom? No. Not anymore. No, Prepare to Meet Your King in Paradise! Amen.