

**Sermon for Reign of Christ/Christ the King Sunday**  
**Luke 23:33-43; Colossians 1:11-20; Jeremiah 23:1-6**

**Jeremiah 23:1-6**

<sup>1</sup>Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. <sup>2</sup>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.

<sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>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.

<sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>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.”

**Luke 23:33-43**

<sup>33</sup>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.

<sup>34</sup>Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

And they cast lots to divide his clothing. <sup>35</sup>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, his chosen one!” <sup>36</sup>The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, <sup>37</sup>and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”

<sup>38</sup>There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

<sup>39</sup>One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

<sup>40</sup>But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? <sup>41</sup>And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.”

<sup>42</sup>Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

<sup>43</sup>He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

### **Colossians 1:11-20**

<sup>11</sup>May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully <sup>12</sup>giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. <sup>13</sup>He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, <sup>14</sup>in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

<sup>15</sup>He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; <sup>16</sup>for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup>He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup>He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. <sup>19</sup>For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, <sup>20</sup>and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

### The Sermon

At an impossibly lonely spot called The Skull, where a victim of violence and rejection had been crucified—that is, affixed to a cross—an inscription on a plank placed above him told the truth.

The crucifiers played a game to decide how to divvy up his only remaining property, his clothing.

The people stood by and watched.

The leaders made snide remarks.

The soldiers mocked him, right to his beaten face.

One of the criminals next to him kept deriding him without mercy.

And the sign over his head told the truth: This is the King of the Jews.

I would submit to you that how you interpret the words in that inscription, and what they mean for your life, determines which of two possible realities shapes the way you live your life:

that “might makes right,” and bullies always win;

or that love makes right, and God is love, and God always wins; and when God wins, love wins; and when love wins, everybody wins.

I am sure you are not exactly dangling in suspense as to which side I’m going to come out on. But the litany of bullying episodes taking place right now demands that those who give their allegiance to Christ the King do some serious thinking about what we believe and what it leads us to say and to do.

And I won’t detail the litany, but anyone with access to information will have been hearing disturbing stories all over the place in the past few weeks.

A swastika painted on a transgender woman’s car in Denver;

Hispanic students in northwest Texas at a regional volleyball tournament being showered with the chant “Build that wall;”

a swastika spray-painted on a softball dugout in Wellsville, New York with the words, “Make America White Again;”

a Republican campaign headquarters in North Carolina firebombed;

a church in Indiana vandalized with Nazi graffiti and an anti-gay slur;

a Muslim student at the University of Michigan threatened by a man with a lighter who said he was going to set her on fire unless she removed her hijab;

a young Trump supporter attacked by students in Rockville, Maryland;

a high school in Minnesota, where students came in to find racist graffiti scrawled in a bathroom saying “Whites only,” “White America,” “Go back to Africa” and “Make America great again”;

episodes at Canisius College in New York; Oakland; Philadelphia; Durham;<sup>i</sup> Weaverville;

Meanwhile, there are the school girls still missing who were taken in Nigeria two years ago; journalists being assassinated in Moscow; refugees from Syria finding roadblocks all over the world, and the Syrians left behind to be bombed and brutalized without pity...

The litany demands that those of us who claim our place as subjects of Christ our King ask ourselves, seriously, what in our heart of hearts we really believe and are willing to stake our lives on and put our trust in:

that love makes right, and God is love, and when God wins, love wins; and when love wins, everybody wins?

Or that “might makes right”—which is to say that when might is in charge, “right” becomes irrelevant, and bullies always win?

When Jesus was 12 years old, he went to Jerusalem with his parents, as always, for Passover. Afterward, he stayed in Jerusalem, but they assumed he was in the large group of travelers and went a full day’s journey without knowing he’d stayed behind. When they couldn’t find him, they went all the way back to Jerusalem. It took them three days in Jerusalem—imagine the terror of those three days—before they finally found him in the Temple.

What goes through a parent’s mind? Our little boy adrift in a world teeming with humanity—and we can’t do a thing to protect him from bullies.

I wonder if the shepherds who came to Bethlehem on the night that Jesus was born had mentioned that the gathering of angels was not an ephemeral cloud of dainty harpists, but a multitude of the heavenly *host*—literally, an *army* of angels. How she must have prayed that that army was massed around him now.

Eighteen years later, he was baptized, and immediately went into the wilderness to be tested. When the tempter had finished every test, he departed from Jesus until an opportune time.

Jesus began teaching in all the synagogues, and was praised by everyone. When he came to his hometown, at first they were all amazed and impressed. But when his message went beyond gracious pleasantries, and challenged them, the welcome was over. They drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which Nazareth was built, to hurl him off.

Last April, my colleagues and I went to the probable site of that event in Israel, and for the first time I was struck by the fear and the horror of that passage. Just a few minutes earlier, they had been saying, “Hey, isn’t this Joseph’s son?” They knew him; they knew his family. And he was a young man, 30 years old. And now they are taking him to a hill to throw him off. It’s not like a movie, where you cut from one scene to another. They had to physically take him and walk him up to that cliff.

The same people who knew his Mom and Dad and had admired his gracious words had with almost no effort been absorbed by a mob mentality. His hometown people instantly became bullies, and minute by minute, they took the time to march him up to what they intended to be his killing.

Luke doesn’t try to explain how Jesus ended up being able to pass through the midst of them and go on his way. But the very next thing he did was go to Capernaum, where in the synagogue was a man who was being bullied by the spirit of an unclean demon; and Jesus intervened, and stood up to the bully, who came out of the man without having done him any harm.

Later some people brought a paralyzed man on a bed, and because of the crowd around Jesus, they had to go up to the roof to lower the man down on his bed, and when Jesus saw their faith, he said, “Friend, your sins are forgiven you.”

And some scribes and Pharisees were there and said, “Hey, hey, wait a second; what are you doing? You can’t do that.” But Jesus was more powerful than the theological bullies who didn’t want to hear him handing out forgiveness and healing.

Some time after that he went to a village not far from Nazareth called Nain, and as he came near the gate of the town, they were carrying out a man who had died. He was his mother’s only son and she had no one else. And Jesus had compassion for her, and he said, “Don’t cry.” And he touched the platform on which they were carrying the man who had died, and everybody stood still, and he said, “Young

man, I say to you, rise!” And the man sat up, and started to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.

And I wonder if even death itself was a bully, whose bullying Jesus will not tolerate?

He told a story about a traveler who had been going from Jerusalem to Jericho, and a bunch of bullies stopped him, took everything he had, beat him, and left him half dead. And Jesus told the people listening to his story that a Samaritan, the last person they would ever believe, was the only one who looked after the victim—even though two others had had the chance if they had wanted to. And not only that, but the Samaritan took noble, loving care of that victim of bullies. He showed incredible hospitality.

The moral of the story had to do with who among the three was more of a neighbor. But the polar opposite of those bullies—cruelly hurting and heartlessly taking from a vulnerable person—is the Samaritan, compassionately giving his own time and money and effort and love to bring healing and restoration to someone else—someone who historically would not want to have anything to do with that Samaritan.

When Jesus was just outside Jerusalem, word came to him that the bully in Jerusalem, Herod, wanted to kill him. And Jesus said, You tell that fox for me that I’m healing and curing, and I’m going to finish my work.

And I’m on my way.

What does it mean for your life to say that Jesus is sovereign over your life—your decisions, your actions, your words, your prayers?

Having arrived in Jerusalem, the bullies and the mob mentality have brought him to a lonely spot called The Skull.

One of the criminals derided Jesus, but the other one rebuked the first, saying, “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.”

And Jesus, crucified with the guilty, crucified by bullies, crucified for all, said to him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

He stood up to bullies. He intervened when people were bullied.

To be bullied is to feel profoundly hopeless, and very much afraid.

You may have heard the story that unfolded this week when a 17-year-old in Chandler, Arizona named Jamal Hinton received a group text message on his cell phone that read, "Thanksgiving dinner is at my house on Nov. 24 at 3:00 P.M. Let me know if you're coming. Hope to see you all. Of course that includes Justin and Amanda."

Something about that message, including those last two names, didn't sound right, so Jamal wrote a quick message back asking who was contacting him.

Back came the response: "Your grandma."

He wrote back, "Grandma? Can I have a picture?"

She wrote, "Of who?" He wrote, "You lol [laughing out loud]."

She wrote back, "Yes, I'm here at work," and up onto the screen of Jamal's phone appeared a freshly taken photograph of grandma.

He took a picture of himself on his own phone, and sent it back to her to verify the message he sent with it, which was: "You not my grandma."

The picture Jamal was looking at on his phone was of a youthfully mature white woman working in a cubicle in Mesa, Arizona. The picture she was looking at was a 17-year-old African-American man sitting in a classroom wearing earbuds under his hat.

There was a momentary pause, and then Jamal wrote again:

"Can I still get a plate tho?"

And she wrote back: "Of course you can. That's what grandma's do...feed everyone."

That's how you do it. Two strangers welcoming each other.

As these things do, this ended up making all the national news outlets, who spent a giddy day last week—still raw from a rotten election season that seemed to go on for about half a century, and in the wake of which fearful people all over the place are trying to out-bully one another—showing the next picture in the series between Jamal and the young grandma (who is trying to protect her privacy), which is the two of them, when they met last Tuesday night.

And now we have learned that Jamal’s whole family has accepted “Grandma’s” invitation to come over for Thanksgiving dinner.

I was reminded that there was a similar mix-up in the news last year when a couple accidentally group-texted some other strangers the announcement of their newborn baby, and two of the people who had received that text from strangers went to the hospital with presents for the baby. Two years ago, I didn’t realize this was worth mentioning, but after the past couple of years in this country, it is: the family in the hospital was white, and those strangers were two young black men, bringing goodness and love and kindness—and a present for the baby.

That’s on our side of the world. On the other side of the world, there was an incident several months ago when a bus in Kenya carrying about 100 people was stopped by Islamic terrorists, who ordered the Muslim passengers to come out and separate themselves from the Christians, against whom the terrorists were going to open fire.

And the Muslim passengers, mostly women, said to those bullies that they were not going to do that.

They gave the Christian women their hijabs, and they helped others hide behind bags in the bus, and when the terrorists came into the bus, the Muslim women said, “Either you kill us all or you leave us alone.”

They left them alone.<sup>ii</sup>

This is a day for reflecting on the sovereignty of Jesus Christ and what it leads you to do and to be.

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, to reign as king, and he shall execute justice and righteousness. And the name by which he will be called is “The LORD is our righteousness.”

You shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture, you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and have not attended to them—I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. I will raise up shepherds over my people who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD.

Everybody knows you're not supposed to be a bully.

Everybody knows you're supposed to stand up for people who are being bullied.

You don't need an advanced theological degree, and no political party has a corner on this information.

Don't bully people. Show hospitality to the stranger in your midst.

And may you be made strong  
with all the strength that comes from his glorious power,  
and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience,  
while joyfully giving thanks to God,  
who has enabled you to share in the inheritance  
of the saints in the light,  
who has rescued us from the power of darkness  
and transferred us into the kingdom of God's beloved Son,  
in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

"Today," he said to the criminal with whom and for whom he was crucified,  
"Today, you will be with me in Paradise."

"Go out into the world in peace. Have courage. Hold fast to what is good.  
Return no one evil for evil.  
Strengthen the faint-hearted, support the weak, help the suffering.  
Honor all people. Love and serve the Lord your God,  
rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit."<sup>iii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup>Most of the preceding information can be found in Holly Yan, Kristina Sgueglia and Kylie Walker, “‘Make America White Again’: Hate speech and crimes post-election,” CNN, updated 7:49 AM ET, November 19, 2016 ([cnn.com/2016/11/10/us/post-election-hate-crimes-and-fears-trnd/index.html](http://cnn.com/2016/11/10/us/post-election-hate-crimes-and-fears-trnd/index.html)).

<sup>ii</sup>AnnieRose Ramos, “Muslims shield Christians when Al-Shabaab attacks bus in Kenya.” [www.cnn.com/2015/12/22/africa/kenya-bus-attack-al-shabaab-muslimchristians/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/22/africa/kenya-bus-attack-al-shabaab-muslimchristians/index.html)

<sup>iii</sup>This is a traditional charge to the congregation formed from I Cor 16:13; II Tim 2:1; Eph 6:10; I Thess 5:13-22; and I Peter 2:17.