

“God-with-Us” – Teresa Holden

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 46; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

Today is the final Sunday in the church calendar year. Next week, Advent begins, and we receive a fresh start by contemplating the wonder of Christ's birth. But today's Scriptures require us to go to a dark place, to remember moments of despair. Today is called "Christ the King" Sunday, a day that originated in the church calendar in November, 1925, not quite a decade after November 11, 1918, the date that the 1st World War ended. Despite widespread (and misplaced) optimism that the 1st World War was the "war to end all wars," this cataclysmic world event left great disillusionment in its wake. Nothing would ever be the same again, not only for people of that generation, but for all of the generations that followed. The enormous loss of life, and the brutal nature of the war caused many to feel a deep and unshakeable hopelessness. They questioned God's presence in the world. Christ the King Sunday originated to beckon people back to faith in Jesus. Our Scriptures help us to understand that no matter how dark and deep our sense of doubt, God is always reaching out to us. In him there is always hope, and the warmth of His love is always ready to touch the deep need in our soul, but we must choose to turn to Him. When we do, God will bless us with strength.

Luke 23 provides the perfect example of this truth. Our Lord and two criminals hang on crosses. Very little in this world could compare with the hopelessness of this truly horrible situation. In this brutally dramatic moment, Jesus asks God to forgive those who are killing Him, and He makes a promise to the second criminal, the one who isn't being sarcastic or mocking. For this man, this has to have been the worst moment of his life, but in it he finds the strength to be honest with himself and everyone else. Responding to the first, mocking criminal, he admits just how lost he is, especially in comparison to Jesus. He says, "We indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong."

Further, he recognizes that Jesus is the Son of God. He may not use the words redemption or atonement, or any of the right spiritual words, but he finds the faith to reach out to Jesus, saying: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus' response is exactly what He had been saying throughout His entire ministry; God will embrace the person who has a mustard seed of authentic faith. Life is over for this criminal, but Jesus assures him that their relationship is just starting, and they will be together in Paradise.

Brian McLaren points out that punishment by crucifixion was the action of Rome against people who were considered insurrectionists. They were a threat to society because they threatened to overthrow the social order or the government. How the criminals on either side of Jesus had done this is unclear, but Jesus' punishment by crucifixion is full of ironies. Jesus was a revolutionary whose ministry did revolutionize everything. Nothing after was ever the same. But, as McLaren says: "He doesn't follow the usual path of revolution: He leads a revolutionary

revolution – in a path of love, healing, justice and reconciliation.” Further, McLaren points out that Jesus uses the symbolism of the cross, which was the most horrible and brutal form of punishment in the world’s history, to make His own powerful statement, and that was this: “By hanging on the cross and speaking of forgiveness, Jesus shows that there is a greater power at work in the world than the power of domination: it’s the power of God’s saving and reconciling love.” God’s love is more powerful than any power in the world. When we understand the concept that God is with us, actively present in our lives, it should bring us strength and assurance.

Psalms 46 resonates with the theme that “God is with us.” It repetitively describes God as a refuge, or a place where we can go when we are afraid or lack confidence. The psalmist considers all sorts of calamities that could occur: earthquakes, tidal waves, typhoons, war, the failure of governments. We are familiar with these dangers, but we could also add a few more that also are relevant to our time: cancer, injuries, surgeries, bills, debt. All of these are day to day threats through which God says he will accompany us because “The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.” For us to realize God’s power in our lives, however, there is a requirement, and that is to “be still.” “Be still and know that I am God.” This suggests that we have to put aside all of the mental gymnastics, the internal turmoil, the negativity, the worry, concern and control we try to take over all of the situations that don’t seem to be working out exactly the way we would like for them to be. God tells us to “be still,” or stop being frantic and realize that God who made the world is in control of our own, little part of it. According to verse 5: “God is in the midst of [Greenville]; it [and we] shall not be moved; God will help when the morning dawns.”

In their book called, *Compassion*, Fathers McNeill, Morrison and Nouwen describe what it means to experience God as being (what they call) God-with-us. They say this means that God came, “to share our lives in solidarity. It does not mean that God solves our problems, shows us the way out of our confusion, or offers answers for our many questions. He might do all of that, but His solidarity consists in the fact that He is willing to enter with us into our problems, confusions, and questions.” Further they say, “The truly good news is that God is not a distant God, a God to be feared and avoided, a God of revenge, but a God who is moved by our pains and participates in the fullness of the human struggle.” When I worked as a counselor, one of the concepts I learned the most vividly was the fact that most growth takes place through struggle, and often pain accompanies struggle. Often, I wished that God could swoop in and take away from people the bad situation they were in, but I came to recognize that within the struggle, people learned important things about themselves. Rough edges were smoothed off; they became stronger, and if they were willing, they grew in their faith, and if they were willing, they grew in their faith.

This year’s Christ the King Sunday also coincides with a week in which Americans have remembered two sobering events: the 150th anniversary of the Gettysburg Address, and the 50th anniversary of President Kennedy’s assassination, both times of great turmoil and uncertainty for our country. I was three when President Kennedy was killed, and my first

memory in life is of his funeral. The only thing I truly remember is hearing Chopin's "Funeral March;" its deeply somber tones signaled to a three-year-old's brain that something very bad had happened. I sought footage this week of the funeral procession to show my American History class, and when I located it and heard the music again, I could remember precisely the family room of the house I grew up in and the feeling of complete fear that the song elicited from me.

My reason for showing my class scenes from the cortege (or funeral procession) that traveled first to the Capitol building where the President laid in state for a day, then to the White House on to St. Matthew's Cathedral and finally to Arlington Cemetery was to try to give them a sense of the enormity of the impact on the American people. Over a million people lined the route, amidst all of the familiar buildings that we associate with power and authority, and everyone was absolutely silent, except for quiet weeping. The whole country stopped. They grieved the fact that the mythical Camelot could not be restored. It was gone forever.

Our Scriptures for today provide a response to just such anguished moments. The world is a confusing place, and our role in it is not always clear. Finding God's path can be difficult, and it's very easy to get distracted by the demons in our own heads or the fear that at times grips our hearts. But in Colossians, Paul entreats us to keep our focus fixed on Jesus and to remember that the power of His love will strengthen and guide us. He said: "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 the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

I would like to conclude by sharing with you this Collect that I believe sums up the important themes from this day – let's pray: Almighty and merciful God, you break the power of evil and make all things new in your Son Jesus Christ, the King of the universe. May all in heaven and earth acclaim your glory and never cease to praise you. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever.