

Three Chopt Presbyterian Church
Aaron J. White, Seminary Intern, preaching
November 25, 2007
11:00 a.m. Transcript

Christ the King Sunday

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Jeremiah 23:1-6

¹ Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. ² 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. ³ 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. ⁴ 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.

⁵ 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. ⁶ 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."

NEW TESTAMENT LESSON

Luke 23:33-43

³³ 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. [[³⁴ Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."]] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵ 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!" ³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, ³⁷ and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸ There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear GOD, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" ⁴¹ And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³ He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

SERMON

Remember Me?

Aaron White

Just before his death on Christmas Day in 1977, the first comedic king of Hollywood, Charlie Chaplin, was lying in bed while a priest attended to him. The priest

prayed, "May the Lord have mercy on your soul." Chaplin replied, "Why not? After all, it belongs to him." Believe it or not, these are reported as the last words Charlie Chaplin spoke before dying. I can't imagine that there was anything more fitting for him than to go out with one last joke.

The famous last words that are recorded for various historical figures can reveal some very interesting things about their speakers. Sometimes, the speaker uses these last words to take a final jab at his or her adversaries. This was the case in 1790 when the Marquis de Favras read his own death sentence on his way to the gallows. Upon finishing, he looked to the court clerk and said, "I see that you have made three spelling mistakes."

Other speakers have offered a patriotic maxim which lives on after they are gone. Although I can't always recall the name of Nathan Hale, I know well his final words, "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country." Today, Hale's words continue to inspire the members of our nation's armed forces.

Still others use their last words to reveal some personal revelation that they have had about what awaits them on the other side of death. Such is the case with an unnamed criminal who is forever remembered for his last request: "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom."

Now, we know virtually nothing about this criminal. The gospel writer doesn't tell us his name, what his crime was, or even if he and the other criminal had previously known each other. In fact, all that we do know about him comes to us from his own words.

When he reprimands his fellow criminal for his disdainful challenge to Jesus, we learn that, although this man is himself a criminal, he is also one who fears GOD. He reveals his own fear when he asks the other criminal how it is that he is not fearful for his own sake. We also learn that this second criminal admits his culpability in the face of the crimes for which he has been convicted. In confessing his guilt, as well as that of the other criminal, he believes that they are getting what they deserve in their executions. By comparison, he recognizes Jesus to be a righteous man, who has been unjustly condemned.

Because he is able to confess his own guilt, as well as Jesus' innocence, we must believe that this criminal enjoys the privilege of a right perspective. Despite the pain of crucifixion, the second criminal is able to maintain clarity that eludes virtually everyone else. In his clarity, he can see that Jesus is King and that his death is not a failure to demonstrate power. Rather, it is the means of faith by which he is ascending to his throne.

Knowing all this, the second criminal realizes that, as he faces his own death, he has been given a unique opportunity to gain favor with his King. He seizes the moment and boldly makes his request to be remembered favorably by Jesus when he takes his seat in his kingdom. In response to the request, Jesus recognizes this man's sincerity and does not put him to any further test of loyalty. Instead, Jesus confirms the criminal's understanding and demonstrates his own authority by assuring the man that, on that very day, they would be together in paradise.

As the Gospel writer of Luke reveals the truth that this second criminal has a correct understanding of Jesus' kingship, he also makes sure that we don't miss out on the sad irony of the statements made by each of Jesus' persecutors. In turn, each is

allowed to reveal the shared folly. First, the leaders of Jerusalem step forward, followed by the soldiers. Finally, the first of the condemned criminals ridicules Jesus from his own place on a cross. In each verbal assault, a common “*if...then*” temptation is issued:

Jesus, *if* you are “GOD’s chosen one,” *then* “save yourself.”

Jesus, *if* you are “the King of the Jews,” *then* “save yourself.”

Jesus, *if* you are “the Messiah of GOD,” *then* “save yourself and us.”

With each temptation, the one who challenges Jesus unknowingly bears witness to the truth about Jesus’ authority, for he truly is King.

At the same time, these challengers show their own failure to understand how this authority is being demonstrated before their own eyes. Because they are blinded to the truth, none of Jesus’ tempters actually expects him to demonstrate his authority, as they carelessly “scoff at,” “mock,” and “deride” him. The irony of this story grows out of their ignorance. For what they don’t know is that Jesus is no stranger to temptation.

The gospel writer has already revealed to us that Jesus had previously faced three other “*if...then*” temptations from Satan at the beginning of his ministry. And now, just as then, Jesus resists temptation to demonstrate his power and authority, in order that he might not be sidetracked from his true obligations as king. Even there on the cross, Jesus continues his work. While he denies the temptation to save himself, Jesus demonstrates faith in his Father, as he uses his authority to call upon GOD to forgive all those who are responsible for his crucifixion.

And yet, knowing that Jesus demonstrates his authority through his ability to resist temptation doesn’t necessarily make it any easier for us to bear witness to his death. I can imagine what it must have been like to be one of Jesus’ followers in the midst of that crowd, silently watching these events unfold. I want to be faithful. I want to believe that this all must take place. But inside me there is still an aching pain. I want to cry out, “GOD, there must be another way!” But before I do, I am answered by a voice, which says, “This is the only way.”

I can hear this same voice sometimes when I read C. S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. This first book in Lewis’ Chronicles of Narnia introduces us to an account of how Jesus might have gone about his work of saving another fantastic world. In this respect, the stories are not a metaphor or an allegory. Instead, they are a fictitious vision, in which Jesus actually is the “great Lion” Aslan. At one crucial point in the story, sisters Susan and Lucy watch from the bushes as Aslan willingly sacrifices himself in order to save their brother Edmund. As Aslan marches up the hill toward his death, amidst all manner of abhorrent creatures, the narrator remarks that, “had the Lion chosen, one of [his] paws could have been the death of them all.” As he is bound and muzzled, “one bite from his jaws would have cost two or three of them their hands.”

But Aslan does not swipe his paw or snap his jaws. Instead, the two girls watch as the minions of the evil White Witch subdue him and ridicule him, torture and humiliate him. And finally, the girls must turn away, as they cannot stand to bear witness, as Aslan is cruelly slaughtered before them. In their confusion, Susan and Lucy must ask themselves why the “great Lion,” who is supposed to save the land of Narnia, did not even save himself.

Likewise, we find ourselves struggling to understand why Jesus, who is supposed to be our Savior, did not come down from the cross. Surely this can't be the way things were supposed to be. *If Jesus is King, then* why must he die, in order to save us? But in asking such questions, we must use caution, as we are not far off from finding ourselves among those who would try to tempt Jesus down from the cross. Our "*if...then*" questions can easily turn into "*if...then*" challenges. Difficult though it may be, we have to allow Jesus not to save himself. It's the only way.

In accepting Jesus as our King, we must also willingly submit ourselves to him, as loyal subjects. We do this through the lives we live as Christians each day. It's tempting to challenge GOD:

If You want peace in the world, GOD, then grant us victory over our enemies.

If You want Your church to grow, GOD, then bring believers to us.

If You want me to believe in You, GOD, then give me all that I ask of You.

But as faithful subjects of our Lord Jesus, we must rebuke temptations when they arise. In doing so, we can gain a right perception of Jesus, who loves all who come under his reign.

Brothers and sisters, as we go out into the world, let us accept the love and protection that Jesus offers us, and let us look for the ways in which we can faithfully witness to the truth that Jesus *does* remember us. And as we look toward the kingdom that is to come, let us live out lives that boldly call upon our Lord to favorably remember us as his loyal subjects. For we know that whenever we make this request, Jesus will not deny us.