

## “King of the Hill”

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Text: Luke 23:33-43

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I want you to try a little exercise with me. I want you to either jot down or remember in your mind what comes to mind when I say a particular word – not just the first thing, maybe three or four associations with the word. The word is “KING.” Take just a moment to bring up some mental images connected with that word.

How many of you thought of a particular person whose name is King? Perhaps you thought of Martin Luther King or Stephen King or Billie Jean King or Larry King. Maybe you thought of Elvis – the King of Rock and Roll, King George of England, or King Henry the 8th – or King David or Solomon Herod. Maybe you’ve endured all those commercials from a particular fast food restaurant and have seen all you want to of the always smiling Burger King. What about Yul Brynner in “The King and I” or King Arthur in “Camelot”? Perhaps the word takes you back to a really old television show such as “Sky King” or a more recent one like “King of the Hill.” Or perhaps your thoughts are along the lines of a game like King of the Mountain or King of the Hill.

Anyone think of Jesus as King? We have a literal King of the Hill today in our passage from the gospel of Luke. The hill is the place called the “Skull.” Luke doesn’t use the Aramaic “Golgotha” or “Calvary” in Latin – but tradition has placed it on a hill, because crucifixions were usually placed in highly visible locations. Now this text seems more appropriate for Holy Week than Thanksgiving Week. This is the last Sunday of the season of Pentecost and the Sunday before Advent, and as such it is Christ the King Sunday, the day in the liturgical year when we give special emphasis to Jesus Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, to borrow a phrase from the Book of Revelation. The feast of Christ the King began in 1925 to celebrate the kingdom of Christ as a way of combating the destructive forces of this age.

So since our theme today is the reign of Christ, perhaps we can search for signs of His sovereignty or His kingship in our scripture lesson. Now we normally think of an earthly king as possessing power. But Jesus impaled on a cross, is powerless, even to move. A king has a domain – a physical space. Jesus, suspended, cannot even touch the ground. A king has subjects, Jesus has torturers and hecklers. A king has authoritative speech; Jesus is silent. What’s more, the whole course of events contradicts any idea of kingship here. The people held an election and Jesus lost.

To be sure, the word “king” flies around Him, but only as the punchline of a joke. The nameplate they’ve nailed over him is a cartoon caption: “King of the Jews.” Religion’s rulers are laughing. “If He is the Anointed!” The empire’s troops are laughing, “If you are the King! . . .” Even one of the emperor’s victims who is dying with Him joins in the joke. “You are the Anointed?” All three voices – the voice of religion, the voice of the empire, the voice of the empire’s victims – are roaring with laughter at the prospect of a king so powerless He can’t save Himself. “If He is the Anointed, let Him save Himself. “If He is the Anointed, let Him save Himself,” says religion. “Save yourself,” says the empire. “Save yourself and us!” says the empire’s victims.

The incongruity is even more striking if we look back at the beginning of Luke’s gospel. The very first mention of a “kingdom” in Luke is from an angel: “He will reign forever . . . of his kingdom there will be no end,” Gabriel says to Mary. But now – in chapter 23 – it looks as if that kingdom, if it ever really was one, has come to a screaming end. But then a strange thing happens. Someone at the place of the Skull turns to Jesus and says, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.” It’s interesting that in all of Luke’s gospel, only three characters actually say “kingdom.” Gabriel says it first – Jesus says it over and over, and then when Jesus will say it no more, a dying convict does. On one side of the stories and teachings of Jesus about a Kingdom, an angel says it; on the other side, an evildoer speaks. “His kingdom,” says the angel, speaking for God. “Your kingdom,” says the evildoer, speaking for us.

Christ the King. Many of us have trouble with that image. We’re certainly eager when we make a public confession of faith to say that we believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and that we accept Him as Savior. We want to be rescued from our sins – we want and need a Savior – someone to save us. We want Jesus as Savior. But it gets a lot more challenging when we add to that affirmation that we accept Jesus as Lord, which is another way of saying Jesus is King. From my perspective, the difficulty stems from two realities. The first reality is that having a king is not something with which we have any experience. We are citizens and not subjects. Our system of government is one of checks and balances – where the executive, legislative, and judicial branches share power. No one individual has the power to lord something over us.

Paying allegiance to a monarch isn't what we're about. In fact, it was defiance of a king which helped bring our country into being. Which leads me to the second reality. We don't want a king! We value our freedoms – our right to make choices. Most of us don't want someone telling us what to think or how to live – not the government, not our work, not our Church. We want to be in charge – we want to be on top of the heap – king of the hill. We don't want a king unless the king is us! We want to give allegiance or devotion to whatever or whomever we choose. Our desire to control our own destinies is so strong that we can echo the sentiment of the theme song to the show "Malcolm in the Middle":

You're not the boss of me now,  
You're not the boss of me now,  
You're not the boss of me now,  
And you're not so big.

Most of us want to be in charge, we want to be the boss – to set our own agenda – to decide where to spend our time, energy, devotion, and dollars without outside help. The problem with you and I being in charge is that we – or I'll speak for myself here – I end up with misplaced priorities, with misguided loyalties, and with a propensity to sin.

You have heard me quote Dietrich Bonhoeffer probably 343 times. Remember Bonhoeffer said, "Our hearts have room for only one all embracing devotion; we can only cleave to one Lord." If we have a Lord other than Jesus Christ – if our all-embracing devotion is for someone or something other than Jesus Christ, we are guilty of idolatry. It's that simple. Whatever it is to which we give primary allegiance – sports, leisure, money, power, status, sex, fame, religiosity, piety – whatever it is – if Christ is taking a backseat, then we are not being faithful to our confession of Jesus as Lord, Jesus as King.

But what kind of a kingdom? What kind of king can boast of being born in a royal apartment surrounded by straw, animals, and wide-eyed shepherds? What kind of king lists on his resumé a royal education consisting of a refugee flight, a mother's wise counsel, a carpenter's shop, and a village school? What sort of king recruits for his kingdom the likes of fishermen and tax collectors, little children, and half-breed Samaritans, prostitutes, and beggars. And can you imagine him using edicts such as:

Be happy if you are poor, yours is the kingdom of God.  
Be happy if you are hungry, you shall be satisfied.  
Be happy if you mourn your losses, you shall be comforted.  
Be happy if you are merciful, you shall receive mercy.  
Be happy if you are sincere, you shall see God.  
Be happy if you are a peacemaker, you shall be called the children of God.

An old Jewish folktale speaks of the kingdom that God offers us: not the kingdom of power and success and individual achievement, but the kind of love and connection and compassion which Jesus lived and died for. There once was a poor man who grew weary of the corruption and hatred that he saw every day. He was tired of the constant injustice that his people experienced, and the loneliness of his isolated living. His family and friends listened as he spoke passionately of his desire for a city where justice was honored and where personal wholeness could be found. Night after night he dreamed of a city where heaven touched earth.

One day he announced that he could wait no longer. He packed a meager meal, kissed his wife and children, and set out in search of the magical city of his dreams. He walked all day and just before the sunset, he found a place to sleep just off the road, in a forest. He ate his sandwich, said his prayers and smoothed the earth where he would lie. Just before he went to sleep, he placed his shoes in the center of the path, pointing in the direction he would continue the next day.

That night a sly fellow was walking the same path and discovered the traveler's shoes. Unable to resist a practical joke, he turned the shoes around, pointing them in the direction from which the man had come.

Early the next morning the traveler arose, said his prayers, ate what remained of the food he had brought, and started his journey by walking in

the direction his shoes pointed. He walked all day long, and just before sunset he saw the heavenly city off in the distance. It wasn't as large as he had expected, and it looked strangely familiar. He entered a street that looked much like his own, knocked on a familiar door, greeted the family – who turned out to be his family – and lived happily ever after in the heavenly city of his dreams.

The Kingdom, of which we are a part, is not somewhere else. It is here – where we live – in our own hearts. It is not found away from conflict and confusion, failure and need. It is found where our lives are broken, wherever our heads are hanging in shame and sadness, wherever our hunger is deepest. If we can admit that we're not King of the Hill, that we can't make ourselves whole again by ourselves, if we ask Jesus to remember us and include us as partners in His kingdom, then we will be able to move toward a wholeness made stronger by our scars. If you remember only one thing from this sermon, I want it to be this question. Who is King of the Hill in your life? Who's number one? When you open up your checkbook register, and see where you've spent your dollars, what is it that you most honor?

Perhaps Advent is a time to kick something off the hill and replace it with Christ the King. Will we be ready to welcome the King during this Advent season? Or will we be so consumed with making arrangements and cleaning and planning, and decorating, and wrapping and mailing and eating, and buying, that we'll not even notice Christ coming to us, probably in ways that we would not expect.

You know, it's kind of scary – for if we embrace that cuddly Christ child, we also have to be ready to welcome and serve that Christ who is the King; those swaddling clothes will one day be replaced by a crown of thorns. It would be a lot easier if we could just leave Him in the manger, a lot less demanding for us. As someone has written: "If His Majesty, an earthly King should of his own friendly accord himself invite, and say "I'll be your guest tomorrow night," how we should stir ourselves, call and command all hands to work! "Let no man idle stand . . ." But at the coming of the King of Heaven, all's set at six and seven: we wallow in our sin, Christ cannot find a chamber in the inn. We entertain Him always like a stranger, and, as at first, still lodge Him in a manger.

Let us pray: King Jesus, we want this Advent season to be different. We once again want to find a place for you in our lives – we want you to be number one. Come into our hearts, Lord Jesus. Come in today, come in to stay, come into our hearts, King Jesus. Amen.

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