

We the Kings

Last Saturday, I presented a dear friend for holy orders in the Washington National Cathedral. With its soaring ceilings and majestic proportions, the cathedral could not have been a more transcendent and fitting place for the sacrament of ordination. The Bishop of the Diocese of Washington ordained my friend, along with five others, to the diaconate, and indeed, the occasion proved spectacular. The full house, the enormous building, and the ceremony and weightiness of the liturgy underscored that this day was an important day in the life of the church, indeed.

Less than twenty-four hours later, many of those same people found themselves standing outside of the Episcopal Church of Our Savior in Silver Spring, Maryland, only a few miles away. On the back of a banner publicizing the heavily Latino congregation's Spanish-language service were the words "Trump Nation. Whites Only." The same words appeared on the brick wall in the parish's memorial garden. The Sunday morning services continued, and by the afternoon, the Bishop and many Episcopal clergy and parishioners had made their way to this congregation to show their support. Quickly the Our Savior parishioners and the community responded by enveloping the vandalized sign with new signs reading "Love Wins." Dozens of people took sidewalk chalk to the streets to write messages of welcome. In her address, the Bishop called upon the President-Elect and his supporters to distance themselves from such violence and hate and urged the congregation and Christians to seek peace rather than retaliation, to remember that love always is stronger than hate. That evening, Washington news and Facebook feeds exploded with reports of these events. "Love Wins" was the message plastered everywhere.

If we had to choose what God's kingdom on Earth looks like, many of us would probably like to choose the ordination service on Saturday, with its atmosphere triumphant and celebratory. The following day's mood of humility and somberness and determination seems far less grand. Would not the new deacons have rather posed for photographs with family and friends in their new silk stoles than scrubbed a church's brick walls to remove graffiti? Would not congregations prefer services full of hugs and gorgeous music and delectable reception treats to services marked by tears and news cameras?

Since we know Jesus, we know that the latter circumstance is where we are beckoned. That is not to say that Jesus never shows up in those magical, impressive moments--he did, after all, wow crowds by healing and raising from the dead--but the image of Jesus that dominates is the Unlikely Savior. The story we receive from our gospel authors is of a little boy so poor and unimportant that he was relegated to a manger. He dies as did other enemies to the state: a tremendously painful and humiliating death by crucifixion. He even shared the spotlight with several others. When he does receive special recognition, it is only in a mocking and paradoxical way. The sign hanging above him on the cross makes clear his powerlessness: what king would prove so lacking in influence that he would be left to die with other criminals? He is not even left with his clothes; the people take everything from him. This is not the way most of us would imagine the story, and in fact, is an argument for its veracity: the gospel writers tell it, not because it is what happened.

Notice too who apprehends and reveals Jesus' true identity: another criminal. One of the earliest witnesses was not an important religious official or teacher or other influencer but a screw-up, one rejected by the world. God crafts a kingship utterly unlikely any fairy tale.

Here ends our church year, with Jesus' departure from earthly life. Next week we enter the Advent season and begin a new calendar year, anticipating Jesus' arrival. The culmination of Advent and Christmas and Epiphany and Lent and Easter and Pentecost comes now, and as our readings so deliberately tell us, everything hinges upon Jesus and the example he lives behind. He is the basis for our church communities; his actions show us what justice and mercy and peace and love look like; his words to the Creator God "Forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" make clear that Jesus has wholeheartedly accepted humanity, evil, shortcomings, faults, and all.

Today is a day where we could dwell upon all that is wrong with this world--how terrible human beings are, and how little we deserve God's grace. That is part of the story, to be sure, but that is not where we are supposed to end up. Jesus' absolution gives us permission--rather, the charge--to take the gift of his life and continue doing his work. That is what Our Savior chose to do last week. Instead of meeting hatred with more hatred, or retreating into the corners of their church walls and admitting defeat, they voiced the pain and evil present in their midst but ultimately championed love. Sidewalk chalk and homemade signs were not exactly refined or distinguished, but they were the tools the church had on hand, and God showed up in their resourcefulness. Such is the deep irony of the Savior we call Jesus: the power and glory comes from meekness.

Some days when we choose to follow Christ Our King, we may make the news because the course of events will be heart-wrenching and timely and serendipitously in the spotlight, but we receive invitations to exercise our power through assuming postures of humility every day. We can bite back our retort when our spouse makes a snarky comment and choose to talk about the real issue instead of picking a fight. We can continue to open our homes to that difficult-to-please mother or daughter-in-law over the holidays and refuse to let some snide remarks dampen our spirits. We can search for the best in every single person because we believe, deep down,

that God's light shines in even the darkest of personalities. We can complete even the most menial of service-related tasks without bitterness or arrogance with the certainty that God calls us to look beyond ourselves, to the littlest, the most ignored, and the meekest among us.

God calls us to a very different kind of kingship--or queenship!--to build a kingdom like no other. Grasp this power lightly and hold this charge dearly.

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. 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. 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. 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.

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. 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."

Canticle 16

The Song of Zechariah *Benedictus Dominus Deus*

Luke 1: 68-79

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel; *
he has come to his people and set them free.

He has raised up for us a mighty savior, *
born of the house of his servant David.
Through his holy prophets he promised of old,
that he would save us from our enemies, *
from the hands of all who hate us.
He promised to show mercy to our fathers *
and to remember his holy covenant.
This was the oath he swore to our father Abraham, *
to set us free from the hands of our enemies,
Free to worship him without fear, *
holy and righteous in his sight
all the days of our life.
You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, *
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,
To give people knowledge of salvation *
by the forgiveness of their sins.
In the tender compassion of our God *
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, *
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: *
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.

Colossians 1:11-20

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.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 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. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 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. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 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.

Luke 23:33-43

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. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. The people stood by, watching Jesus on the cross; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for 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." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."