

Savior, Redeemer, Friend

Jeremiah 23: 1-6, Colossians 1: 11-20

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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."

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.

Who is Jesus to you? Who was the Jesus of your childhood?

Perhaps you have seen the picture of the Laughing Jesus in my office which looks similar to the one in the vestry. When I was growing up, Laughing Jesus was on our dining room wall. He was there for every meal, every evening when we sat at the table to do our homework, or when we gathered to play board games as a family or with friends. Laughing Jesus was a constant presence and he was so much more.

As we learned the bible stories and lessons of Jesus' life, from his humble birth in a stable, the dismissal from his own hometown, Peter's denial three times, and the fleeing of the disciples, we learned how Jesus was rejected over and over again, yet coming home from church, there was Laughing Jesus looking over us.

As we learned of the holy family fleeing away from Herod's hatred, Jesus' angry flipping over of the moneychangers' tables, and his arrest, trial and crucifixion, we learned how Jesus was subjected to violence over and over again, yet coming home from church, there was Laughing Jesus looking over us.

As we learned about the miraculous Jesus who fed 5000 people with 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish, who walked on water, and who calmed the raging storm, we learned over and over again how Jesus was God-with-Us, and coming home from church, there was Laughing Jesus looking over us.

As we learned of Jesus welcoming the little children to come to him, the compassionate, loving Jesus who healed people from lives of incredible suffering and exclusion, and the faithful Jesus who taught us how to pray, Jesus was our Friend, welcoming us home from church, and always looking over us.

Laughing Jesus was a subtle, consistent, faithful reminder of who Jesus truly was. Yes, he endured hardship, rejection, poverty, and the ultimate pain and suffering, yet through it all he did not waiver from the good, the joy, the truth of being the Son of God. Jesus knew who he was, was confident in who he was, knowing that his life would have times of joy as well as anger, sadness, and concern, just as life does for all of us.

While we were learning stories and facts about our faith, the simple picture on our dining room wall continued to teach us, remind us, of the spirit of Jesus, the attitude, the approach, we were also called to have in our lives. All of us have times in our lives when we know rejection and violence in so many different ways, and we can turn to, trust in Jesus, to be a friend who carries us through those times. The hymn ‘What a Friend We Have in Jesus’ resonates within us. All of us have times when have experiences that we call miraculous, God-incidences, times of feeling God-With-Us, when we feel more deeply drawn to Jesus, our Savior and Redeemer.

Jesus as Savior, as Redeemer, as Friend, is the Jesus we celebrate today, on what is known traditionally as ‘Christ the King’ Sunday, or in inclusive language, it is becoming known as the ‘Reign of Christ.’ It is the day when we complete one liturgical year and prepare for the next, and we begin to walk into Advent. Lifting up Christ as King, as the One who reigns in the name of God, we are mindful that Christ became God incarnate, or in the words of Paul, the “image of the invisible God....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.”

The idea of royalty, of a king, is not an authority or leader within our culture as it continues to be in many parts of the world, yet it remains a religious, a theological, image we readily grasp.

‘Christ the King’ Sunday is a fairly new day in the liturgical year as it was just under 100 years ago that church leaders felt that such a day of proclamation would help to counter a growing secularism. The Scripture readings not only lead us to see the royalty of Christ, the One we crown with many crowns, but also the bleak prophetic times that cried out for a divine king, a just leader, a shepherd who would not abdicate the care of God’s own flock. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Sweden seems the most honest about the day as they refer to today as ‘the Sunday of Doom.’ As we gather here in worship, days before the joy of our Thanksgiving feast and then into the twinkling lights of Christmas, reading a Scripture lesson about the woe to be cast upon the earthly kings in the days of Jeremiah and then the blood of Jesus’ cross as he wore a crown of thorns certainly makes ‘Sunday of Doom’ an appropriate name.

Jeremiah prophesied in a time when many false prophets prophesied about a peace that was soon to emerge, a message that kings and other leaders wanted to have spread among the people so that they could continue on in the corrupt ways they had been enjoying at the expense of the people as they failed to uphold the law. They failed in their leadership, driving people away from the community, from faith, offering danger instead of peace. Jeremiah’s ‘woe’ was

not only a personal condemnation but also a divine curse. And Jeremiah offered the Lord's promise of a righteous Branch from the line of David to 'reign as a king and deal wisely,' and who would 'execute justice and righteousness in the land.' This prophetic promise is interpreted in Christianity as the foreshadowing of the coming of Christ, the Shepherd, the Messiah, the divine King, who will tenderly care for God's own flock with love, courage, justice, holiness and righteousness.

Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians in times not all that different than the time of Jeremiah. False teachers sought to undermine the growing Christian community, claiming that Jesus did not do the healings and the miracles that he did; denying that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, the One in whom God was pleased to dwell. Paul affirmed that Jesus was the One in whom 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. Paul countered the false teachings with reminders that they already shared in the inheritance of Christ's grace as he is the head of the body, the church, and this peace was made through the blood of his cross. As savior, as redeemer, abundant grace has been shed upon God's people.

As we lift up the Reign of Christ today, what does all this tell us now about living in our own time of deceptive promises, failed leaders and false teachings? As we celebrate Christ the King, as Savior, Redeemer and Friend today, what does all this tell us about ourselves? I believe Paul's words still resonate as encouragement, "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."

This is what we celebrate when we call Christ 'King' Savior, Redeemer and Friend, and celebrate his reign, that through Jesus Christ we are strengthened for all adversity, always giving joyful thanks and praise.

Laughing Jesus first taught me that lesson a long time ago, Jesus is our Savior, our Redeemer, our Friend. Amen.