

Sermon (11/20/16, Luke 23: 33-43):

So, in the wake of the Presidential campaign we have all recently barely survived, I've been thinking about some of the things the candidates did to impress people and it's made me wonder if there might something to be learned from them. Here are a few things I've come up with.

First, background music. Almost all of the campaign stops had background music so I'm thinking that some sort of soundtrack, maybe even playing in the background while I preach, could do wonders. Not just any kind of music, either, but music specifically tailored to the theme of the day. Yes, a good soundtrack would be great.

Second, I think a good fog machine might liven things up. It was pretty impressive when I saw candidates walking onto a stage with wisps of fog swirling about their feet. Maybe some fog hovering close to the floor while the choir and I process to the front would really kick things up a notch.

Third, a trap door. No, not a trap door in front of the pulpit which Peter could operate remotely when he's had enough of the sermon but a trap door with a platform that rises up from below. Yes, I know, none of the candidates tried this one but I've seen it done in the theater and it's pretty impressive so I couldn't resist throwing it into the mix. Just imagine what it would be like to have me levitating out of the floor or maybe the organ rising into the air as Kathy played. Add a little smoke from a fog machine and, well, let's just say 'wow!'

Of course, we could also use some fancy lighting. Good lighting was imperative for a lot of those campaign stops. It really seemed to stir up the crowd. Maybe even lights wired to move with the music being played by the organ would do the trick. Great stuff, right?

And speaking of Music, I think we could use a fancy new sound system and maybe some high tech gadgetry. I mean wouldn't it be cool to have a big background scene with a flickering candle glowing in the night while we sang 'This Little Light of Mine'. Way cool, right?

It does seem, after all, that this is what it takes to get people's attention these days. More and more, we seem to like this kind of stuff

that impresses, dazzles, and causes the hair on our arms to stand on end. In fact, it feels like churches don't stand much of a chance these days up against the likes of this kind of competition. Having some guy standing in a pulpit in a dress just doesn't seem to do it. Being entertained by some dude armed with little more than a bulletin and a mediocre message being delivered over a temperamental sound system just isn't all that impressive, no matter how you cut it.

Okay, so maybe every now and again, even the church has its moments like on those special occasions when the sanctuary is full, the music shakes the rafters, and a bunch of royal looking personalities process down the aisle with their own smoke machines, aka incensors. Yes, those moments can be kind of thrilling but they don't happen very often, especially in our tradition. In fact, if there was ever a day when it would be appropriate, today would surely be it. It's the last Sunday in the church calendar known as 'Reign of Christ' or 'Christ the King' Sunday. Pope Pius XI instituted it way back in 1925 when he became fearful that people were losing their appreciation of Christ as King even in the public realm. As more and more non-Christian Dictators rose to power in Europe and as more and more people seemed less enchanted by the idea of Jesus as Lord, Pope Pius hoped that this annual liturgical focus would provide a bit of a counterpoint. It didn't work out so well back then and we aren't doing much better these days.

Christ the King Sunday. Reign of Christ Sunday. Sounds pretty exciting, doesn't it? A good Sunday for a little Pomp and Circumstance. A good Sunday to break out the incense. A good Sunday for those heart pumping, soul stirring royal hymns like the one we just sang at the beginning of the service, *Come, Christians, Join to Sing*. I bet singing that along with watching me and the choir process down the aisles really left you kind of breathless right?

Okay, maybe not so much. In fact, maybe you found it a little disturbing when we went from that to Luke's telling of Jesus' crucifixion followed by the hymn, *Oh Sacred Head Now Wounded*. One is even tempted to think that someone made a grievous error. This is the kind of stuff we save for Good Friday not Reign of Christ Sunday! Where's the

glory? The pageantry? The no holds bar grandeur?

Someone once said that maybe the best proof we have of God is that if *we* were to invent God we surely would have never come up with Jesus. Jesus seems to defy all the conventions and expectations we have of what makes Royalty royal. He seems to mess up all our preconceived notions of what we think God needs to be in order to save this limping creation of ours. Almost everything about Jesus surprises us, even today. If we were God, Jesus is surely not the one we would send to clean up and redeem creation.

Almost everything about Jesus seems to prove the point. Even the Apostles, the ones who seemed to know Jesus best, didn't get it. Remember that scene where James and John asked Jesus to grant them seats of honor on Jesus right and left side when Jesus came into his glory? In response, Jesus asked them if they were ready to drink the cup he had to drink. Guess what that cup was and guess who ended up occupying those seats or, in this case, crosses? Two criminals!

In some ways, especially when we consider what we came here looking for, it's more than a little disappointing. Multiply that disappointment by a thousand and we can begin to sense how Jesus' followers felt. Even though Jesus had warned them that this is what royalty does in God's kingdom, they didn't get it.

So don't be afraid to feel that disappointment. We aren't the first nor will we be the last. In fact, use it to better understand what that day must have been like for those who first witnessed their Savior suffer such a humiliating and horrible death. Use it to help you become better aware of the trap they and we tend to fall into when we assume that the norms of this life apply equally to the norms God is supposed to operate under. Let that disappointment provoke questions in you-hard questions, probing questions, honest questions. As good as a feeling as we might get from all that glitters, dazzles, and conquers with might and power, what is it about this Jesus, so vulnerable, so humble, so alone, that keeps drawing us back?

From the beginning of Jesus' life, born in a stink laden animal's stall to two peasant parents, it's made clear that Jesus was not going to be the kind of top down, powerful, royal strongman we tend to look for. He was

not born with a sword in his hand and a powerful army to back him up. What people wanted was a King who would fix everything *for* them and what they got, what we get is a Savior who saves by grace and by showing us how to be the kind of people we were created to be.

Almost as if to emphasize the point, today's text is filled with voices around the cross trying to provoke Jesus to be the kind of King they thought he needed to be.

The soldiers, charged with the detail of carrying out the sentence placed on Jesus, laughed as they offered him sour wine saying, 'If you are a King, why don't you save yourself?' I wonder if somewhere deep beneath all that mocking, they secretly hoped Jesus would reach the point of saying, 'enough is enough'.

The Temple leaders scoffed at Jesus saying something similar. 'Some King you are who can't even save yourself!'

Even one of the criminals mocked Jesus, trying to egg Jesus on to save himself and the others who were suffering with him.

What's really interesting, however, is that there is one person in this story who gets it. It's the most unlikely of people which seems to be par for the course for Jesus. It's the second criminal hung on the other side of Jesus.

Some have surmised that this criminal must have met Jesus sometime before, given how well he seemed to know Jesus. Others have suggested this criminal and Jesus got to know each other while in Pilate's prison. It's all conjecture, though. None the less, this criminal, this one suffering the same horrific humiliation Jesus was undergoing, knew exactly what kind of King Jesus was. Unlike all the other voices, he never asked Jesus to buck up and act kingly. He made no mention that Jesus should somehow command the cross to loosen its grip and set him free. 'Jesus,' He simply said, 'today, when you come into your kingdom, will you remember me?'

Jesus will you remember me? Not, Jesus will you save me, rescue me, smite all those Roman nasties doing this horrible thing. Not even Jesus will you at least do the Kingly sort of thing by saving yourself?! No, just Jesus will you remember me?

Somehow this criminal knew that Jesus' remembrance of him would be enough. Somehow he understood what kind of King Jesus really was...the vulnerable King who understood what it's like to be humiliated and beaten down.

How many here have ever felt humiliated? Well, this King knows exactly what that's like unlike so many supposedly powerful others who have come and gone.

How many of you here have ever felt upset, maybe even angry because God seemed so silent and distant just when you needed God the most? Well, this King knows exactly what that's like.

How many of you have ever been afraid, really afraid for your life, for those you love, about tomorrow, about whether you'd survive until that next paycheck? Well, this King gets that.

'Jesus, remember me.' Remember this moment, this suffering, this fear, this humiliation, this brokenness, this way of life so many of us humans live and endure. Remember this moment when the world resisted the King they needed demanding instead the King they wanted. Remember this horrible mess, this graceless creation, this selfish way of mortal thinking, this cold hearted chaos that seems to have won the day. Most of all, Jesus please just remember me.

Somehow this criminal knew that when God remembers, salvation follows.

'And God remembered Noah and the wild animals...' We are told and in that remembering God protected and secured the future for Noah and his tiny boat.

'And God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob...' We're told and in that remembering the Hebrew people's journey towards freedom from slavery began.

'And God remembered Hannah...' We're told and she conceived and bore a son who would become a great prophet.

This criminal, of all people, understood that with Jesus his redeeming power comes not as a result of scoffing, mocking, or provoking but by way of remembering what it's like to be mortal and consequently how much we mortals need, above all else, a Savior not another palace to house

another power hungry King. All of which causes me to wonder if that's the real reason why we never seem to tire of singing,

Let every creature rise with song; honor and praise to Christ belong; angels descend with songs again, and earth repeat the loud amen!' (Jesus shall Reign!)

And so, truly, beloved sisters and brothers, to Jesus alone be all the glory! Amen.

Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

Leader: Let us pray...

Great King of all that is and ever will be, we lift our praise and thanksgiving to you. We give you thanks for your insistence to be the King we need even when we balk and resist because you are not the King we want. We give you thanks for your unending efforts to bring out the best in us even when our worst is so prevalent. We give you thanks for your enduring patience even when we mock your ways because we are convinced that we know better.

We come to you this day, O Lord, well aware of our need for a Savior. Despite our best attempts to do otherwise, we often find ourselves quickly lining up behind those with big promises and flashy façades. In the end, despair and sorrow is the only thing that rules the day. Come, this day, O Jesus, and be the Savior we need not the King we want.

Risen Jesus, you understand us well and know what it's like to be us, and so we ask you to remember us. Remember us in our mess. Remember us in our suffering. Remember us in our confusion. Remember us and save us even when that saving is from ourselves. Come, this day, O Jesus, and be the Savior we need not the King we want.

We pray this day, O Lord, for those who especially need the assurances of a Savior – for those who have done wrong and find no grace even from themselves; for those who seek power in all the wrong places and in all the wrong ways; for those who live in fear of forces that seem so strong and overwhelming; for those who feel crushed by the weight of life's humiliation.

Come, this day, O Jesus, and be the Savior we need not the King we want.

We pray this day, O Lord, for those who are ill, suffering, and filled with hopelessness. We pray for refuges and for those who

have made them refuges. We pray for those who suffer from poverty and lack of access to basic necessities. We pray for those who weep for their children and loved ones because they feel so helpless to care for them, protect them, and save them. Come, this day, O Jesus and be the Savior we need not the King we want.

We pray this day, O Lord, for these things we now lift up to you in our silence or aloud....

Come, this day, O Jesus and be the Savior we need not the King we want. We pray this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray saying...

All: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.