

Christ the King + November 20, 2016
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit
Luke 23:33-43
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And so here we are, at the end of the road, at the conclusion of the great Travel Narrative in Luke. Do you remember when we began the journey in back in Luke's 9th chapter, when Jesus set out for Jerusalem? We're told from the outset of the journey it is all part of God's plan, because we hear in Luke 9:51, "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem."

The next 10 chapters establish the larger theme of Luke's Gospel, which is the coming of the fullness of salvation to ALL people, especially those on the margins of life. What a rich journey it has been! We've come to know Jesus as the one proclaiming the kingdom of God through many colorful parables that challenged us and redefined the way the world works. We also learned that Jesus is the one who must suffer rejection and be killed to fulfill God's purpose. And so here we are at Golgotha, the place called the Skull, the place of Jesus' crucifixion. Is this where we expected to be on Christ the King Sunday?

The truth is, we couldn't be anywhere else. For here we see our Lord and Savior in all his beauty. The word "beauty" is impossible to define because it depends on subjective judgments. We can probably all agree about a beautiful sunset, but beyond that it's mostly a matter of personal preference. And here we have our Savior on the cross. Imagine what he looks like. How is that "beautiful?"

There are a few things we can say about true beauty, that which is more than skin deep. True beauty points us toward a deeper truth. For example, we grasp something as beautiful when it communicates a reality that is beyond that of the physical world. The beauty of a sunset,

for example, lies not only in the combination of brilliant hues, the way they streak across the sky, the way the colors are kaleidoscopically transformed minute by minute, but more in what it says about God and God's handiwork in creation. A beautiful melody uses the elements of music—phrases, pitches, arching lines—to communicate how the Holy Spirit has enlivened the composer's creative imagination and given God a way to speak through that person using this language of music that is beyond words. A beautiful pirouette tells us that the dancer has reached into her God-given abilities to use the miracle that is the physical body to communicate something noble about the human condition.

And the beauty of Jesus at his crucifixion is the surpassing love of his act—dying that we might live, giving his life that we might receive the full measure of God's forgiveness as Jesus takes all our sin onto himself and carries the weight, the terrible weight, of our transgressions. Beautiful Savior!

So here we are on the hill called "the Skull" because it rises above the city so that people can easily see what's happening there and be deterred from committing their own criminal acts. What do we see there on Golgotha? Luke spares us details of the crucifixion itself, but he does draw us into what happens immediately after. Here we encounter three categories of people, in diminishing status, mocking Jesus—first religious leaders, then Roman soldiers, then a common criminal. They all want to humiliate him. They all hurl basically the same insult at him: "You say you can save the world, but you can't even save yourself!" They make fun of the very titles that identify Jesus' mission—Messiah of God, King of the Jews.

Lest you say, "Oh, those terrible people," stop and think for a minute. How quick we so often are to condemn others before we bother to learn the full story in a given situation! How tempted we are to turn people's own words against them when they don't fit our agenda. We

do this because we are afraid of that which we don't understand. Humiliating others makes us feel superior and gives us the illusion of control over them. The religious leaders felt threatened by Jesus. The soldiers saw him as a troublemaker. And all the first criminal could see was that the Savior of the world refused to save him.

There has been great unrest in the aftermath of the election. For many people, the outcome has opened the floodgates to various kinds of fear. These people include our sisters and brothers across town at Parroquia San Jose, some of whom probably have friends or relatives living here without proper documentation. Naturally, they fear for their futures if immigration laws are tightened.

There on Golgotha, the religious leaders, soldiers, and the first criminal were afraid of Jesus and what his ministry meant. It threatened everything they understood about the world and their place in it. Their response was to dismiss him with mockery. Is that the way that that we, as Christians, are called to deal with people or forces that arouse our fears, however well-founded or not those fears may be?

Let us consider instead a response that affirms Jesus Christ and the new life he gives, not a response that the devil—who loves making a mockery of things—might be pleased with.

First, it's important to know that God's judgment will fall on all people in the right way at the right time. Jeremiah tells us that in our first reading: "See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all arrogant and evildoers will be stubble." People always get what they deserve, sooner or later. Then remember that just as Jesus is the image of the unseen God, as we heard in Colossians 1, each human being is created in God's image and worthy of honor and respect.

Then, with God as your refuge and strength, stand up for what you believe in. Remember back in Luke 12, on the journey to Jerusalem, when Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth,

and how I wish it were already kindled”? As followers of Christ, we are called to advocate boldly for that which testifies to the surpassing love of our Lord and Savior and the abundant life he brings. Advocate for justice! Advocate for truth!

So with the aftermath of the election in mind, and the possibility of a shifting landscape of public policy, here are a few ideas:

- If you're worried about climate change, alter your eating, drinking, and energy consumption habits to live more sustainably, and encourage others to do the same.
- If you are a non-Muslim who's worried about Islamophobia, fight misinformation by reading the Quran and learning more about Islam. You might even start a study group.
- If you're worried about the freedom of the press, pay for journalism, real journalism, by subscribing to reputable newspapers online or in print, instead of getting your news from Facebook, because a lot of what looks like news there is actually fabricated.

This same strategy can be applied to every issue that now has people living in fear.

And if you witness instances of mockery and purposeful humiliation, speak up like the second criminal did. For as he said, aren't we all under the same sentence of condemnation? Sin tempts us at every step. Like the Apostle Paul, we do things we know we shouldn't, but we can't help ourselves. All we can do is continue to confess before God what we have done, be amazed to once again to find ourselves forgiven, and receive God's mercy and grace with a grateful heart.

If you open your heart to this way of being, you'll find it's the easiest thing you've ever done. And the reward could not be greater, for we hear our Beautiful Savior whisper in our ear, "Today, you will be with me in paradise."

AMEN.