

Title: God Loves You – FPC Franklin (*Christ the King Sunday*)

Text: Luke 23:33-43

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You would think — well, wouldn't you? — that if the church gives us *Christ the King Sunday*, the lectionary will bring out the royal pageantry. Something big. Something bright. Something with trumpets you can hear from three counties over, angels shimmering like sunlight off the water. You'd imagine a throne—high, gleaming, gold enough to blind you. Something where we could lean back and say, “Yes. That's a King if I ever saw one.”

But Luke does not do that. The church doesn't do that. And from what I can tell, God—our loving Abba God never does that.

Instead, the lectionary takes us up a hill. Not a holy one, not a beautiful one. The lectionary offers us Luke's version of the crucified Christ at Golgotha, “the Place of the Skull,” where hope typically goes to die. And up there, instead of a throne, a cross dug into the dirt. Instead of an honor guard, soldiers rolling dice over the clothes of a dying man. Instead of courtiers, criminals. Instead of cheering crowds, only mockery.

And Luke whispers: “*Behold... your King.*”

Now you may have had in mind velvet robes, rubies flashing, gold crowns. But the coronation we get? We read of stripped garments and a crown of thorns. We are offered a scepter shaped like a nail, and the royal decree spoken through cracked lips: “Father, forgive them.”

We encounter an odd coronation. But maybe the Kingdom was always going to be strange.

Why would the lectionary bring us here, *at this scene*, of all places, to celebrate Christ's reign?

Maybe because we keep looking for God in places too high, and God keeps meeting us in places too low. Maybe because earthly kings climb up to rule, but Jesus descends to love. Maybe because we look for crowns where they gleam, and God hides the crown where the desperate dare to look—all these ponderings for a strange coronation of a person expected to be our King.

There's a word that shows up in this text: *basileus*, “king.” That's Caesar's word. Empire's word. Power's word. And the soldiers spit it out in mockery: “If you are the *basileus* of the Jews...” The sign above Jesus' head repeats it in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew as if every language, every nation, every set of eyes must look at this strange King and reckon with Him.

A King who rules not by exerting power, but by absorbing pain. Not by forcing obedience, but by forgiving enemies. Not by crushing Rome, but by crushing death. This is not the King we expected. But this man, Jesus, is the King we needed.

Craddock once told a story—quietly, the way he did—about a family out on a Saturday drive. Windows down, snacks melting, radio humming. Perfect day. And suddenly the children shout, “Stop, daddy! There's a kitten by the road!”

Dad keeps driving. You can almost hear him: “Probably belongs to someone... probably sick... we don’t need any more pets...” But children are persistent. And loud. Eventually, he turns around.

There it is—a ragged little kitten. And when he reaches down to pick it up, the kitten scratches him. Badly. You can imagine the impulse that goes through him. But instead, he takes off his jacket, wraps the trembling creature, and brings it home.

Later that night, when the kitten curls up on his chest, purring and safe, he looks at the scratches on his arm and chuckles. Had the kitten become more lovable since five hours earlier? No. The father didn’t rescue it because it was lovable. He rescued it because *he* was loving. Goodness bends downward toward weakness.

And I don’t know about you, but every time God reaches toward me—with grace or forgiveness—something in me scratches. Something in me resists. Something in me panics. Yet God doesn’t fling me away. God wraps me in grace, carries me home, and stays close until I quiet down enough to rest. This is what our King is like.

Christ the King Sunday sits between two parentheses in our faith: Bethlehem on one side—God becoming fragile flesh. Golgotha, on the other hand, God offering that flesh away. Birth and death; manger and cross. The whole drama of God-with-us unfolds inside those parentheses. And God holds it all together until light begins to leak through the cracks.

There’s another story, from Florida, about a boy in a hospital bed. An alligator had taken hold of his legs. A friend comes to visit—wide-eyed at the stitches—and the boy explains how his mother came running. Fiercely, wildly, with a strength she didn’t know she had. The gator had him by the legs, but she had him by the arms, and she would not let go.

His friend stares at the deep wounds and stitches on his legs. But that was not what the injured boy focused on. Our boy says, “You should see my arms. That’s where my mom was holding me. She was NOT going to let me go.”

And sometimes, if you want to know what love looks like, you have to look at the wounds. Not just ours, but we need to look to God’s scars. In the resurrection stories, the disciples don’t recognize Jesus by His face or His voice. They know Him by His scars.

Our lectionary writers and Luke want us to remember that we worship a wounded King. A King who stands between us and every death that comes for us. A King who hangs between thieves and calls it a throne. A King who takes our fear, our sin, our scratching difficult nature, and holds on anyway.

And it’s one of those thieves who gives us the prayer of the day. It’s not long. Not polished. Not a prayer you’d frame and hang on the wall. Just a few words, whispered through pain. He says, “Jesus, remember me.” That’s it. That’s the whole prayer.

No promises. No bargains. No “I’ll do better.” Just a man with nothing left in his pockets and nothing left in his life, asking not to be forgotten. “Jesus... remember me.”

And if you say it slowly, you can feel the meaning stretching out. In Scripture, “remember” never means mental recall. Remember means *act. Save. Claim.* When God remembers Noah, the

waters recede. When God remembers Hannah, a child is born. When God remembers God's covenant, the people are set free.

"Jesus, remember me" means: Jesus hold me, Jesus claim me, and Jesus don't let me be lost.

And Jesus answers with a promise larger than the prayer can hold: "Today you will be with me in paradise."

A thief asks for memory. The King gives him eternity. A sinner asks for a moment. The King gives him a home. A dying man asks not to be lost. The King dies beside him so that he can be found. We sometimes think the thief's prayer is small. But maybe it is big. Perhaps it is every prayer. Perhaps it is the prayer of every soul that knows its own fragility:

Jesus, remember me. Remember me when I fail. Remember me when I'm afraid. Remember me when I scratch at the very hand that tries to save me. Remember me when I am not lovable, only loved. Yes, Jesus, remember me.

Years ago, after the tragic school shooting in West Paducah, a mother lost her son. In her grief, she discovered that one of his organs, his heart, had gone to a Methodist pastor. She asked to meet him. They talked, prayed, and remembered her boy. Before leaving, she asked so quietly, "May I place my ear to your chest? I want to hear my son's heartbeat. One more time, I want to hear him."

The Methodist pastor agreed, and in a moment too tender to describe, she listened.

I sometimes wonder if God does the same with us. I wonder if our Abba God leans in close, listening for the heartbeat of the Son and listening to our hearts to hear Christ in us—the rhythm of mercy, courage, and forgiveness. Our Abba is not listening for perfection—just resemblance because Christ the King is not a King of palaces, but of hearts. Jesus is not a King of armies, but of compassion. Jesus is not a King who forces, but a King who remembers.

And maybe the whole Christian life is learning to hear, beneath our noise and despite our fear and scratching, the steady heartbeat of God's love inside us.

So here we are, Christ the King Sunday, standing again at Golgotha. Our lectionary writers were right! As we come to the cross at this year's end, we see our King who would not let us go. We remember and hear every wound, every regret, every claw mark, every trembling place inside us, the King whispers again:

God loves you. God loves you. God loves you.

And if you're not sure what to pray, our prayer, which is the thief's little prayer. The one big enough to hold the whole gospel: **"Jesus... remember me."**

And Christ the King replies: "I will. I will remember. I always will. Now go—feed my sheep." Amen.