

Bible Study
Proper 29, Year C
November 20, 2016

[RCL] Jeremiah 23:1-6; Canticle 16; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

Jeremiah 23:1-6

In this passage, Jeremiah was writing during a time of conflict and fear. Nations were at war and invading each other, and Judah as a nation was right in the middle of it all. Jeremiah's message, however, was directed not at other nations but at the monarchy of Judah, the southern kingdom of what once was a united Israel. The kings of Judah, according to Jeremiah, were harming the people with their policies and with their lack of reverence for God.

Jeremiah and God tell the kings that this harmful behavior will not be allowed to go on forever and that God will intervene to set things right. The people scattered by war will be brought home. The people confused will find guidance. Jeremiah writes that God "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" (23:4). In other words, God will raise up leaders who are real leaders, God will raise up shepherds who are true shepherds, and God will raise up kings who are good kings. Jeremiah turned his attention not on the nations threatening Judah but rather on the monarchy of Judah.

- In the midst of conflict, what makes it hard for us to look at ourselves and see our own role and mistakes in the conflict?
- What are the qualities of a good leader? A good member of Congress? A good governor? A good priest? A good bishop?
- Most importantly, what are the qualities of a disciple of Christ?

Canticle 16 (Luke 1:68-79), Song of Zechariah

The Song of Zechariah has traditionally been said or sung at Morning Prayer for hundreds of years. It has a very hopeful feeling at the beginning that sets a wonderful tone for the day ahead. God has come to the people and set them free! God has promised to show mercy to us and set us free from the hands of enemies, and finally the mighty savior has been raised up for us. We are free to worship God without fear, and we are free to be holy and righteous all the days of our life. Sweet freedom!

The second part of this canticle suddenly shifts to "you." Who is being addressed? The canticle is addressing John the Baptist, who has just been born.

John the Baptist's father is praising God and telling his infant son of the joys and dangers of the road ahead. John will go before the Lord and give people the knowledge of salvation and the forgiveness of their sins. John will be a prophet. Being called a prophet is a bittersweet thing, however. The life of a prophet is hard, for it means speaking the truth as a humble servant of God and often being rejected. John the Baptist leads people to repentance, but he lives in the wilderness and is imprisoned and executed by Herod.

- When we sing or say this canticle together, we remind ourselves that God has raised up salvation for us in Christ, but we also remind ourselves that this is not an easy road. God saves us and sets us free, but we must walk in God's way.
- How can you live like John the Baptist and live his message today?
- How do you experience the freedom given by God, a freedom that frees you to worship God and to be holy and righteous?

Colossians 1:11-20

In this letter there is an explanation of what Christ has done for us, and it explains how we should act in the world to live out Christ's salvation. This passage contains a hymn to Christ starting at verse 15, "He is the image of the invisible God," and going until verse 20, "by making peace through the blood of his cross" (The People's New Testament Commentary, p. 627). Can you imagine singing it? Try setting the text to a tune you know: a traditional hymn, chanting, or a contemporary song. The text seems less like a "lecture" on who Christ is, as if it were just listing a bunch of facts about Christ that we need to memorize.

Now the text rejoices: Christ is the image of the invisible God! All things were created through him and for him, and through Christ all things in heaven and on earth may be reconciled to God through the peacemaking of the cross!

That is definitely a hymn of praise. It conveys a strong message, and it helps us to be more joyful in how we give thanks. All these facts about Christ lead us to be joyful and to be strengthened for the journey.

- What are some of your favorite hymns? How do you feel when singing them? Do you sing them when you are stressed, angry, sad, hurt? Try writing out the text of a hymn to see what it teaches you and what gospel truth it proclaims.
- Try writing a hymn like this one. What do you love most about Christ? How do you know Christ in your own experience? What images or stories from Scripture come to mind when contemplating Christ?

Luke 23:33-43

On this last Sunday after Pentecost we are reading the story of Christ's crucifixion, and we are calling today "Christ the King Sunday." What are we saying about Christ as a king by reading about the crucifixion today? What is being said about kingship?

First, there is the sign that was nailed to the cross: "This is the King of the Jews." Rome did not do this as a confession of faith. They were showing through a brutal act what happens to the leaders of nations who stand in their way, and they were showing what would happen to anyone who stood up against them. Ironically, Rome is only partly right. This is the King of the Jews, but this is also the King of the Gentiles (and thus King of the Romans, and the Greeks, and the Persians – and everyone else).

Second, this is a king whose characteristics are not agreed upon. One of the criminals mocks him, and the other defends him. Some mock him as a Messiah while others confess him as the Messiah. Compare the image of Christ in the Book of Revelation, as the conquering hero coming in glory, to the image of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, as the suffering Messiah. These different images of Jesus show that his kingship is not like earthly kingship in its pomp and extravagance but is still kingship in its power.

Third, what does Jesus say from the cross? “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,” and “Truly, I tell you, you will be with me in Paradise.” This is a king who does not seek vengeance but reconciliation. (See Colossians 1:11-20, the epistle reading for today.) This king does not tell Rome, “What you’ve done to me, I will do to you,” but rather asks that they be forgiven. Instead of condemning the thief who mocks him, Jesus turns to the thief who recognizes Jesus’ innocence and gives him a promise of hope and peace.

- What qualities from your list of leadership qualities for today’s Jeremiah reading are shown here in Jesus?
- What images of Christ in the New Testament or church tradition speak most to you? What images do not speak to you? What can you learn from both sets of images?
- How does one forgive such injustice and brutality? How can reconciliation and hope be brought to a world in need?

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