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Remember Your Baptism

November 20, 2016

"Paradise"

Jeremiah 23:1-6 Luke 23:33-43 Colossians 1:11-20

PRAYER OF PRAISE

O God of enduring compassion and mercy, your dominion is unending. We live by your grace, assured of your love. We praise you for Jesus, who taught how to honor you; we are awed by your Spirit, who guides and sustains us. We come into your presence to learn your will for us, to worship and adore you as we abide under your rule and reign.

INTRODUCTION TO JEREMIAH 23:1-6

Jeremiah writes of a time when those who were ruling over the people were not caring for them. They were bad shepherds. He looked to a time when a Good Shepherd would come, a King would come to rule over them and to care for them. Hear the word of God from Jeremiah 23:1-6

INTRODUCTION TO LUKE 23:33-43

There was a time when Israel had no king. They relied on prophets like Moses and Samuel to talk with God and to lead them. When they arrived in their Promised Land they began to notice the kingdoms around them. They began to want to be like the other nations. They asked for a king. Be careful what you ask for. God gave them Saul who started out well, but devolved into a madman throwing spears at a musician that had been sent to calm his troubled spirit.

That musician, David, was anointed by Samuel to be the next king, but even though he was a man after God's own heart, he was no paragon of virtue. He arranged for one of his soldiers to be killed on the front lines because the King had impregnated that soldier's wife. Of the kings that succeeded David, more were bad than good, causing the prophets and the people to wonder if having a King was such a good idea.

This morning we are going to read about a very different kind of king. This King had no wife. This king had no children, no heirs. He had no throne, no palaces. Indeed, during his public ministry he had no place of his own to lay his head. He was a homeless wanderer dependent on the kindness of others. Hear the word of God from Luke 23:33-43

Let us pray. Lord open our eyes to see your truth. Open our ears to hear your voice. Open our minds to receive your word. In the name of Jesus we pray.

Will the children come forward to share a song with us this morning before we pass the peace.

Anytime the phone rings at 4 a.m. it's always unnerving. Very rarely is it good news. Two years ago Peggelene Bartels got just such a phone call.

The call she got was from her uncle back in her homeland of Ghana in West Africa. He informed her that her other uncle, who had ruled as king of the small fishing village of Otuam, had died. But the call Peggy ultimately answered wasn't just some sad family news. It was life changing. The village elders had anointed her as the successor to her uncle. Peggy had been chosen to be the village's new King.

Peggie Bartels had moved to the U.S. in the 1970's, and had become a naturalized US citizen. She lived just outside Washington, D.C., where she worked as a secretary at Ghana's embassy. This is hardly the usual training ground for royalty. But she was convinced by the conviction she heard in the voices that chose her to rule. During the selection process the village elders had been astonished when, after Peggy's name was mentioned, the ritual libations being poured out began to smoke and vaporize. They did the ritual three times. Three times they got the same answer: The village's new ruler was to be "King Peggy."

Sovereignty didn't come with a lot of perks. "King Peggy" wasn't whisked away to some diamond-studded palace. Instead she had to save and scrimp and scrounge for enough funds to get herself back to Ghana and to pay for the expected grand send-off required for her deceased uncle, the former king. It took her two years before she could return to her village and provide the proper royal burial. She also was faced with renovating a very run-down royal palace.

King Peggy also confronted opposition because she was a woman, and because she was an outsider. This was not the way "things had always been done." When defending the legitimacy of her election, King Peggy held up her communities own rules to her dissenters: "I'm in the State, I'm a woman, and in the rituals with the ancestors you chose me in the name of God, so shut up and sit down."

"King Peggy" was not what most of the Otuam villagers expected as their new, duly-anointed, king. She didn't come from the established elite power circle. She was a she. She was an outsider—even though she came from their village.

Some of her first acts were unpopular — like dismantling a "good-old boys" inner circle that had mishandled the appropriations of fishing fees. She is now actively raising funds to construct the first high school in the village and is making sure that for the first time the school welcomes girls as well as boys who want to continue their education beyond the ninth grade. Long live King Peggy!

This is "Christ the King" Sunday in the Church calendar. It is the day when Christians celebrate and commemorate the once-and-for-all uniqueness of OUR "king," Jesus the Christ, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Son of God, Savior, Redeemer the one who was rejected, tried and convicted, crucified as a criminal, refusing to even save himself. 1

In the gospel lesson, the term is overlaid with heavy irony. It is Jesus' executioners, the Roman soldiers, who use the term, "king," in their mocking taunt: "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself." The clear implication is that if Jesus is a king, then kingship doesn't mean much. Even the inscription written over his head, "This is the King of the Jews," is clearly meant as a final insult to this one who wears a crown, not of gold and precious gems, but of thorns, and whose throne is not a stately seat of power, but a rough wooden cross on which he is hung up to die. So much for all would-be royal pretenders!

Kingship is the center around which the charges against Jesus are brought to Pilate. "Are you the king of the Jews?" Pilate asks. Hours later, Pilate gives his own sarcastic affirmation in the legally required statement of charges placed on the cross: "This is the King of the Jews."

Jesus began his ministry with the Sermon on the Mount. On this Friday afternoon, the afternoon we have come to call Good Friday, Jesus preached his last sermon—the Sermon on the Hill—the hill of Golgotha the place of the skull—cruelly crucified between two thieves.

Not everybody who takes up a life of crime is all that smart. Sometimes movies or television glorify criminals. They make them appear sophisticated, even cool. Most criminals do not fall in that category. Michael E. Hodgin tells of pair of robbers who entered a record shop nervously waving pistols.. The first one shouted, "Nobody move!" When his partner moved, the first bandit was startled and shot him.

Jesus hung on a cross between two thieves, according to Matthew and Mark. Luke doesn't specify their crimes. He simply calls them criminals. According to Luke one of the criminals joined in the mob that was mocking Jesus. He hurled insults at the Master. One of those insults particularly stung: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other thief had a better grasp of what was happening there. He rebuked his colleague in crime.

Jesus was dispensing God's grace even up to his dying breath. To the thief on the cross, God's grace prevails, even to the last hour, even to the last moment. When the thief says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus' response is swift and direct. "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

When we hear the word Paradise we might picture something like the picture on the screen—a vacation spot with our feet in the sand and an ocean view. Jesus has something even better in mind.

Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus had preached the grace of God creatively and powerfully. The thief, in his repentance, calls upon Jesus to make those promises good. Jesus does.

I believe this one scene graphically illustrates Jesus' purpose and ministry. It illustrates the purpose of Jesus' coming, to sacrifice himself and to dispense God's grace. Grace is a free gift given to those who will receive it. It is not something given as a reward for services rendered or wages for labor offered. The thief on the cross was not in a position to earn the grace for which he asked. He couldn't say to the Roman soldiers, "Excuse me, could you take me down from the cross so I can go do some good deeds to deserve the grace for which I'm asking?" He asked and he received.

By contrast there is another thief who does not ask. He joins the others who have been mocking Jesus. That thief is the poster child for those who refuse to ask for grace. There are some like him still with us. They are those who can't bring themselves to ask for a free gift. They want to earn their salvation and try really hard to do so...but always fall short, bitter and resolved to revile rather than receive.

The thief who asks admits his own guilt, acknowledges Jesus' kingly state by his request. He begs to be remembered in whatever future awaits them. By his asking, he is begging a gift only a king over the next life has any authority to give. Still there are others like the other thief who revile rather than receive.

Alexander McClaren has observed that on Calvary there were two thieves crucified with Jesus. One thief was saved so that no man need despair, but only one, so that no man might presume.

The Archbishop of Paris once stood in the pulpit of Notre Dame Cathedral. He was there to preach a sermon, and his sermon was built around a single story. Thirty years earlier, he told, there were three young tourists who had come into this very cathedral. All of the young men were rough, rude, and cynical persons, who thought that all religion was a racket. Two of these men dared a third to go into the confessional box and make a made-up confession to the priest. The two bet that the third young man did not have the nerve to do as they dared.

The third young man went into the confessional box and tried to fool the priest. But the priest knew that what the young man was saying was a lie. There was a tone of arrogance in the young man's voice - which could not go without notice. After hearing the confession, the priest told the young man his penance. The priest said, "Very well, my son. Every confession requires a penance, and this is yours. I ask you to go into the chapel, stand before the crucifix, look into the face of the crucified Christ and say, 'All this you did for me, and I don't give a damn!' "

The young man staggered out of the confessional to his friends, bragging that he had done as they dared. The other two young men insisted that he finish the performance by doing the penance. This young man made his way into the chapel, stood before the crucifix, looked up into the face of Christ and began, "All this you did for me and I ... I ... I don't ... I don't give a" At this point in the

story, the archbishop leaned over the pulpit and said, "That young man was this man who stands before you to preach."²

That's the miracle of the cross. When we begin to understand the love on the cross, we want to change our relationship with God. We cannot remain the same, anymore. We want God at the center of our lives, again. We want to join in the chorus, "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom."

I started off by saying that we would look at a different kind of King in Jesus. For each country that still has a monarchy there can only be one monarch at a time. King Peggy was called upon when she least expected it. The one who reigns is the one who wears the crown.

Jesus' coronation took place on that hill. His crown was made of thorns. His throne was the cross that was lifted high. His title was a hastily made sign tacked above his head that said, "King of the Jews."

Jesus was a king, but he had no earthly heirs. No one CAN succeed him because he didn't die long enough for another coronation. He returned to life in 3 days. There never will be anyone to succeed him. He only has followers who receive him. Every one who receives him as their Lord and Savior becomes heir to all that Jesus has to offer. He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords, and the Savior of sinners who reach out and ask, (sing it 2 or 3 times till the congregation joins in)

"Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom."

He is the savior of all who would take up their crosses daily and follow him and in so doing "Crown Him" as their King. Those who do can claim the same promise that the thief claimed that day and be assured of their place in ... Paradise.

Let's pray. Lord, we come with thanksgiving for your mighty care. You do not draw apart from your people, but through Christ choose to dwell in our midst. We give thanks that he became the servant of all humanity and stooped to the needs of the lowly and humble. In him we have assurance that you hear us when we pray, grieve with us when we are afflicted, mourn with us when we mourn the loss of loved ones.

We pray for those who govern us in society. Give to them a sense of your compassion and care. Keep them from setting themselves apart from the needs of those whom they serve, and endow them with patience and wisdom to work for the well-being of all.

Jesus we give you thanks. Thank you for taking our sins upon you. Thank you for the gift of grace to forgive our sins. Thank you for the power to turn away from sin so we won't have as many to forgive or as many repeat offenses. Thank you for the crown of thorns you wore, our nails of need that fastened you to your

throne, the spear of spite that pierced your side, the sign of scorn that mockingly proclaimed you King of the Jews. Not only are you their King but you are our king, our Lord, our savior, our God Amen.

- 1 ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., Leonard Sweet Commentary, by Leonard Sweet.
- 2 ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc. , ChristianGlobe Illustrations, by King Duncan.