

The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.”

³⁶ The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar ³⁷ and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”

³⁸ There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

³⁹ One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”

⁴² Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.^[d]”

⁴³ Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”
(Luke 23:35-43)

See Your King

“Look on the bright side of life. See the silver-lining on the gloomy clouds. There’s a light at the end of the tunnel. There’s always a calm after the storm.” I know I’ve missed a few; you might have your own sayings you turn to and share whenever there is difficulty, frustration, or struggles. They sound nice and all. They mean well. It’s supposed to help! Here’s something better: See your King.

Admittedly he doesn’t look very kingly in Luke 23. Crowds used to follow him making it almost impossible to be near him. Now crowds stand at a distance watching, waiting, and seeing. Many don’t seem to say anything at all. Those who do make fun of the one who had come to save them. If they are even there at the crucifixion, all the disciples except John keep themselves far removed from their Teacher. Like sheep they scattered and ran.

Others were more than happy to let Jesus know where they stood. The religious leaders were having a hay day. The same temptation in the desert from the devil himself can be heard coming off from their own lips. It’s a challenge. It’s a temptation. Prove you are the Son of God. “If you are the Christ, the chosen, save yourself! He saved others, but he cannot save himself. If you are God’s Chosen One, prove it!” They should have known better.

The soldiers do what soldiers did at that time. The sign above his head said, “King of the Jews.” So, they treat him like a so-called king. The one who made water into wine, the best wine of the wedding, is offered sour wine. Don’t imagine this as pity from the soldiers. They couldn’t care less about another Jew being put on a cross to die. “We know you aren’t, but if you are the king, prove it.”

Luke brings us even closer to the cross. At first we hear both of the criminals join in with everyone else. One of them keeps it going: "Save yourself, if you can, but more importantly, save us." Don't think of this as an honest request. This was a desperate man who wanted to make someone as miserable as him. He had no trust that the one hanging in the middle would be able to do anything except die like him.

It's hard for us to look at Jesus as he hangs from that cross; yet Luke directs our eyes to him. Admittedly it's still hard to see the king today. As we draw near to Jesus' cross, where do you see yourself standing? Maybe it's with the bystander who says little and does even less. You feel your relationship with Jesus is between you and him ignoring the statement that you are making to your children, to your friends, to your spouse. Is that relationship all that important to you if you keep it to yourself? And if you don't seem to care, why should they?

Perhaps you see yourself standing next to those religious leaders. We seem to dare him to do something, prove that he is king, when we continue in that sin not taking God's judgment too seriously. You mock his forgiveness convincing yourself it's not a big deal if you fall into that sin again. You'll just say sorry and nothing can happen to you, right? Almost as if you are daring him to do something about it, but until he does, you may feel you can do what you want.

Or do you demand he prove that he is king another way? If you are the king, if you are God's chosen one, prove it: fix my marriage, fix my job, fix the children, fix my family relationships and issues with friends. If you are the king, prove it: fix the pain and the sickness and take them away from me and those I love. Fix the government so that it more aligns with what I feel is right. Fix this world so it's more comfortable for me. Fix my finances so that I can live the life I want to live and save up enough for later. If you are the king, prove it.

Or maybe you find yourself with the soldiers all too often acknowledging him as king with your lips. You do the right stuff and say the right things, but your heart is far from him. You go through the motions because you know what she wants and expects. That should count for something, right?

"Don't you fear God!" As the criminal hangs from that cross a much harder law drops onto him. He recognizes he is punished justly receiving back what he deserves for the thing he has done. But even more terrifying: he's about to stand before the Judge of All and he has no hope except suffering without end.

Don't you fear God? You can hide it from other people and even lie to yourself. God knows and he is just. You can go through the motions and convince others. But God knows. You can mock his forgiveness continuing in that sin. But God will not be mocked. Who are we to demand he prove anything to us? We are like the

grass of the field that is here one moment and the next gone. Look at the promises you have broken and the half-truths you have said to save yourself and your own reputation. Look at how you have hurt your spouse and done damage to your children with the words from your mouth. Look at the grudges you hold and the forgiveness you hold back. Look at how you have used, abused, and misused your neighbor because even the good works we do are stained with less-than-pure motivation. You did it because you knew the right person was watching...you did it because you knew you could get something out of it...you did it because it made you feel good about yourself...Look at who you are by nature: objects of wrath and slaves to sin so that even the love you want to give you fail at some point. There's no place in heaven for sinners. And that is what we are by nature. We are no more worthy of God's gracious, loving hand than that criminal on the cross.

Yes, admittedly, Jesus does not look king-like on that cross. His crown is thorns piercing his skull. His throne is an altar of sacrifice, an instrument of death, the cross. He has no royal robes but is if not completely naked, almost. He has not royal entourage or people praising him. Even God himself will forsake and abandon him. But what does the criminal see? In the midst of his suffering and under the burden of his own sin and the Law's demands the criminal looks and sees one who is so different. He doesn't yell curses on those who nailed him to the cross. Instead, he hears the simple good news, "Father, forgive them." In that prayer the criminal hears the hope that there is forgiveness of sins and in faith he reaches out: **"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."** The criminal makes no demands of his king. How could he? He has nothing to offer him. Remember me, he says. Not take me. Not save me right now. He trusts that if only this Jesus remembers him, it will in some way be okay.

And how does Jesus respond? He doesn't say, "Yes, you are right! You deserve every ounce of this suffering. Don't think I forgot what you said earlier. You must suffer more to make up for what you did. You need to show me that you really love me." Of course not. Instead, Jesus says, "Today, you will be with me in paradise." Today, he's telling the man, right now, your sins are forgiven. Today, you are God's child. Today, you have place waiting for you in heaven. Today, I'm not just going to remember you but will bring you to be with me forever.

Only the King could make a promise like that and mean it. Only the King secure in his own victory willingly endures this cross and all its shame. Only the King who knows that he is in complete control of this situation and what the outcome will be would allow himself to be there. It is not weakness that kept Jesus on that cross. No, it is the strength of his love that he stays. No one forced Jesus there to begin with. Yes, the Father gave Jesus up for us all. At the same time, Jesus willingly faces the cross so that we might call him Savior and he would be our Lord. Only

the King can set his life down to pick up again. And with that he wins the victory over death so the King promises: "Today, you will be with me in paradise."

See your king whose precious blood is worth more than all the silver and gold of the world because with it he has paid your debt of sin you owe. See your king as you approach his cross where his precious blood pours down and over you washing you every sin. See your king who says to you, "Today, paradise and life is yours. Today, you are washed with water and the word. Today, I stand by you before my Father proud to call you who I chose from before the creation of the world as my own. Today, I have washed you of every sin that you have done and that has been done against you. Every obvious sin and sin you readily confess. Every sin that you don't know, see, or feel. Every less-than-pure motivation of your works and stain of sin on what you've done, it's all washed clean. Today, you are without spot, wrinkle, or any blemish of sin. Today, no accusation can be brought against you. Today, your sins are forgiven and eternal life is already yours." And when it comes to call you from this world, Jesus will not be bringing a sinner with him. He will bring one whose sin has been washed away and is sinless in God's sight.

In the midst of your suffering, frustrations, and annoyances, in the midst of all the worries and anxieties that attack you, look to your king on the cross. There is your hope. He came to save you from so much more and assures you: it is finished. Jesus lives. He's done it all for you. It's not just cutesy phrase or wishful dream; because your king Jesus lived, died, and rose again for you we know without doubt he is going to take care of us today.

As the church year ends and we see more things begin, put your hope and trust not in the ones who hold the ruling positions and places of authority in this world. See your king whose kingdom is not of this world but he rules in your heart. See your king is not a distant king who holds you far off. He's here in the Word that is spoken. He's here baptizing souls and bringing more into his kingdom. He's here giving you his body and blood in the Lord's Supper. See your King and show him at home as you have your family devotions. Show him as you love and serve each other. Look out from yourself and through the suffering and struggle in your life to see your king in all his glory. Amen.