

## **Jesus, remember me**

Luke 23:33-43

November 24, 2013

When does the new year begin? According to the calendar, the new year begins on January 1st. But does January 1st feel like a beginning to you? It feels like the middle to me, the middle of winter in the middle of the year.

Labor Day feels more like the beginning. Summer winds down and we gear up, for a new school year or a new church year. We come back from wherever summer has taken us and we get back to business. We begin a new year -- autumn leading to winter, and winter to spring, and then another summer.

When does the Christian year begin? We do have a Christian calendar. Not the Gregorian calendar marking the twelve months of the year, not the calendar dictated by the pace of work and play and changing seasons, but a Christian calendar, marking the year Sunday by Sunday, a calendar of days and seasons designed to allow us to retell and relive Jesus' story, which is now our story, too, so as Jesus' people, as followers of Jesus, we may remember who we are and where we are going.

So when does the Christian year begin? Next Sunday! The first Sunday of Advent is the beginning of the new Christian year, which means that this Sunday, today, is the last Sunday, the climactic Sunday, of the year about to be completed. Let me lead you quickly through the Christian year, from the beginning, back to today ...

The Christian year, the retelling of the story of Jesus, begins with Advent. Not with Jesus' birth, but with anticipation and expectation, with waiting and longing, waiting and longing and hoping for a king to come to us, a king who will rule with righteousness and justice, a king who will bring peace to land and to people, to our land and our people and to all lands and all peoples, a king who will be called Immanuel, because he will be the sign that God is with us.

Advent culminates with Christmas, the celebration of Jesus' birth, the fulfillment of our waiting and longing and hoping: "Unto us a child is born! Unto us a son is given! And he will be our king!"

From Christmas, we move into the season of Epiphany, a season of light and of revelation. Epiphany reminds us each year how Jesus, in his words and by his deeds, shines God's light into our dark world. We hear again and see again how Jesus reveals, in his words and by his deeds and through his humanity,

who God is and what God is like: "No one has ever seen God, but the only Son, Jesus, he has made him known."

From Epiphany, we move into the season of Lent. Lent is about struggle, Jesus' struggle and our struggle too with the powers of this world, visible and invisible. During Lent, we follow Jesus down a road filled with terror and with grief, the road that leads to Jerusalem, the road that leads to the cross: "In Jesus Christ, the light has come into the world, but people love the darkness, rather than the light." And so they killed him!

They killed him. They were threatened by him, so they killed him. They crucified our king. We crucified our king! Humanity shares the blame. We killed our Savior, the one for whom we had waited so long. The king is dead, and the powers of this world win. The king is dead, and we all lose.

Or so we thought, but Good Friday is not the end of the story! On Easter morning comes astonishing news: "He is not here; he has been raised!" This is the high point of the story, the end that comes in the middle, the end that is the beginning, a new beginning for all of us.

The resurrection of Jesus proves the power of Jesus' message and Jesus' way. The resurrection of Jesus is victory, of life over death, of love over apathy and pride, of hope over despair, of grace over sin. The resurrection of Jesus proves that God is God, bringing new life to Jesus, to us, and to all of creation. The power that raised Jesus from death is now -- now! -- at work in us and among us.

And we know it because God's Spirit is the proof. God's Spirit is God's breath, even now breathing new life into tired bodies and empty souls. Pentecost comes at the end of the Easter season, celebrating God's gift of his Spirit to us: "This is what I will do in the last days, God says. I will pour out my Spirit, on everyone."

God is with us. Because God's Holy Spirit is in us and among us, we know that God is with us, even though we cannot see him, even though Jesus does not walk now among us. God is with us, and God's Spirit brings the church into being, calling us, gifting us, empowering us, blessing us, binding us together.

Pentecost marks the beginning of the last and longest season of the church year, lasting some seven months, sometimes called "Ordinary Time." That might seem a rather unfortunate title, unless we remember that because of Jesus, because of his life and death and resurrection, and because of his continuing presence among us, through his Spirit, through word and bread

and wine, the business of being his people, of following him, of being his body in this world, is now our ordinary business!

Ordinary Time, the season of Pentecost, is the season of being church, of reminding ourselves of what it means to be church, which is why during this season we talk about things like the fruits of the Spirit, as we did last year, or the distinctive marks of the followers of Jesus, as we did this year. The season of Pentecost is a season of living and growing and being, which is why we mark it with the color green. We are living and growing and being together, doing God's will on earth as it is done in heaven, expectantly waiting and longing and living for the day when God's kingdom will come.

The Christian year ends as it begins, with waiting and longing, only the waiting and longing at the end is different than at the beginning, because the Christian year ends with this affirmation: Christ is king! Christ is king ... now!

The Christian year ends today, on the Sunday called Reign of Christ Sunday, or, in some traditions, Christ the King Sunday. Today we declare: Christ is king! Jesus Christ is king! Is it so? Do you see it? Do you see him? Do you recognize him?

He did. One of the men who was executed alongside Jesus did: "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom."

It was a remarkable thing to say. Everybody else was either mocking Jesus, making fun of that preposterous claim that he was the King of the Jews, or watching, silently watching. But this man spoke up. He did not remain silent, quietly bearing his own suffering, preserving whatever dignity he had left by dying bravely and stoically and quietly. No, he spoke up. He spoke up for Jesus, challenging the other criminal who mocked Jesus, too, even as he himself hung dying.

And he spoke to Jesus, calling him ... king! He saw the man Jesus, hanging from a cross as he was, but he saw not a fellow criminal or just another unfortunate soul or just another victim of the empire, but a king. And he asked, not to be saved, there, on the spot, but just to be remembered: "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom."

And Jesus' answer? "I promise you that today you will be in Paradise with me!"

"When? Today!

When will Jesus remember him? Today!

When will Jesus come into his kingdom? Today!

Not someday, but today. Not then, but now. Jesus is king. Jesus is the king of the Jews, but not only of the Jews. Jesus is the king of all people, of all nations. Jesus is ruler over any and all authority and power. Jesus is king over all creation. Jesus is Lord!

Jesus is Lord. Jesus is king. Is it so? Do you see it? Do you see him? Do you recognize him?

What do you expect to see? How do you recognize a king? What does a king do?

What did the scoffers and mockers expect a king to do? To save himself, to exercise his authority, to take command, to impose his will, to get what he wants, to get done what he wants done by make other people do it. The scoffers and mockers expected any king, who was really a king, to act "kingly," like the kings, like the emperors, they knew.

But how does a kings act "kingly?" How does a righteous king act "kingly?" A righteous king, the psalm says, is "like rain on the fields, like showers falling on the land," good for the land, good for the people. A righteous king is the servant of the people, good for them and good to them, using whatever power and authority and strength and wisdom he may have to preserve and protect and promote their welfare. A righteous king saves the people, not himself. He doesn't get other people to do what he wants. He does himself what other people, his people, need.

Jesus is a righteous king. Jesus is the righteous king. And he acts most "kingly" when? Where? Here. In this moment. Hanging on a cross. Giving himself for the sake of the people. Dying for their sake. Dying for our sake.

Here. In this moment. Hanging on a cross. Making peace with his own body. Making peace not by escalating the battle, not by taking on the powers of this world, visible and invisible, but giving himself up to them, doing what God wants by giving the powers what they want. They wanted his life, and he gave them his life! And when he did, when Jesus, the righteous king, freely offered his own life to them, to the world for the sake of the world, evil did not win. Evil lost. Evil was overcome, overwhelmed, utterly defeated ... by love!

Do you see it? Do you see him? Do you recognize him now?

Jesus is ... wherever his followers, wherever you and I, are doing what he does. Serving, not dictating. Loving, not judging. Giving, not taking. Making peace, not fighting battles. Obeying God, not obeying the ways of this world or the impulses of our own hearts.

Jesus is king, and when we see him, when we acknowledge him as our king, we are already citizens, not of this world, but of the world to come. We pray, "Thy kingdom come," but we live as if it were already here. Because, when we do, it is ...