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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, November 13, 2022
23rd Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 33/Year C

First Reading: Malachi 4:1-2a

Second Reading: 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Gospel Reading: Luke 21:5-19

Sermon Title: “Great Expectations”

Theme

Jeremiah’s promise of the execution of “justice and righteousness in the land” finds ironic fulfillment in the execution of Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews. It appears utterly contradictory that a king should be crucified with a criminal. This victory appears for all the world as humiliating defeat. Yet through the gate of death Jesus opens the door to paradise.

Texts:

First Reading: Jeremiah 23:1-6

¹Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. ²Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. ³Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. ⁴I 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, says the LORD.

⁵The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”

Second Reading: Colossians 1:11-20

¹¹May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Gospel: Luke 23:33-43

³³When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴[[Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”]] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!” ³⁶The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, ³⁷and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” ³⁸There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴²Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” ⁴³He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Sermon

“Great Expectations.” That title came to me from my childhood. I had to read Charles Dickens's “Great Expectations” in high school. I didn’t like the story because the setting is that dark and bleak era of English history, the early 1800’s when the disparity between the *have’s* and the *have not’s*; the rich and the poor was far greater than it is today. Dickens wrote other stories which are more famous for their screen adaptations; “A Christmas Carol”, and “Oliver Twist,” but they too are dark and dreary.

The story, “Great Expectations” may not have anything to do with today’s Gospel Reading. I don’t remember much about the book except that it is about the life of one young orphan boy, Pip, and his life growing into adulthood and a series of *great expectations* that came his way.

As I see it, the Gospel Reading is also about *great expectations*; humanity’s *great expectations* of God.

Here on the last Sunday of the liturgical year, on Christ the King Sunday, on the Eve of the celebration of Advent, we find Jesus in the unenviable position of being nailed to the cross.

Ironic, don’t you think, that on this day, Christ the King Sunday, we should find Jesus nailed to the cross? The cross is no place for a king! Crosses are for criminals; criminals of the worst sort; murderers, rapists, and insurrectionists. Jesus was none of those. He is the Lord! Our king! And yet there he is.

The infamous “they” in the story were filled with *great expectations*:

- *They* (Romans and the Jewish authorities) didn't want anything to do with Jesus, so they crucified him.
- *They* (the religious leaders and the others who came to watch the macabre spectacle) scoffed at him saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!"
- *They* (the Roman soldiers) mocked him saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"

- *They* (those same Roman soldiers) intended to insult him by putting an inscription over him that said, "This is the King of the Jews."
- *They* (the other criminals – at least the unrepentant one) derided him by saying "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

The unaccounted for *they*, are all the others Jesus had ministered to; the poor, the crippled, the widowed, the hungry, the despised, and the sinners. Where were they? I suspect they had *great expectations* too. "If he wants to be our messiah then it's time he acts like one" – and of course, by that, they meant to act like what they expected their Messiah to act like. Where are they, well, they may not be the most outspoken detractors of Jesus in this scene but they certainly didn't come to his defense, did they?

Great expectations. All those mentioned, except for the Romans, would have been delighted with Jesus as the real and rightful Messiah had he simply met their *great expectations*. But Jesus let everyone down.

And so today, on Christ the King Sunday, the editors of the lectionary have proven that they have a sense of humor. On Christ the King Sunday we find Jesus, not on a throne like we would expect a king to be, but rather ... on a cross, the last place we would ever expect a king to be.

What about our *great expectations*?

I think it says something about the radical love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. It says something about God's view of the whole creation and our limited view of our existence within creation.



Speaking of God's view, this famous painting by Salvador Dalí is entitled "Christ of St. John of the Cross." The unique thing about this picture is that it is Christ on the cross but from God's perspective.

From Jesus' place nailed to a cross, he illustrated the love of God, a love that is so strong (listen to me carefully) a love that is so strong, that Jesus allowed himself to be nailed to the cross and stayed there until the life ran out of him.



(What did he say?) Yea, listen to me again. If Jesus is who *we* believe him to be, the Son of God, both divine and human, the one who had the power over life and death for Lazarus and others in scripture, if he truly is who we believe him to be, then he truly did have the power to pop those nails out of his hands and feet and come down off of that cross, and maybe fire lightning bolts out of his eyes or something equally fantastic, to prove his strength and get even, and have the last word with all those who stood beneath him that day and made fun of him. That would have been better right? That would be meeting our *great expectations*.

But if he would have done that, then we would still have the problem of our sinfulness and be subject to judgment before our righteous God. You see we forget that someone has to cover the cost of our sinfulness because we certainly cannot. God cannot bare to look at us, as sinful as we are, so how could God ever have perfect communion with us, God's creation, in eternity? The answer is, God can't. And that was unacceptable to our loving God. Something had to be done. And Jesus on the cross is God's final answer.

We can learn a lot about the true nature of God and the true nature of humanity in this story can't we? Because the story hasn't changed much. Even within the fellowship of the church, the hardest thing for Christians to do is to imitate the one we call the Lord of our lives and the model of the godly life.

We get our feelings hurt and rather than follow Jesus's instructions and go to that person to restore that relationship as Jesus instructed, we get angry and talk about them behind their backs and gossip and get other people upset. We don't give people the benefit of the doubt. Rather, we easily condemn and judge. In our upset, our pride gets in our way and if we were wronged we play the victim card, if we are the offender we won't ask for forgiveness. Am I right? Isn't this how we are?

One of the hardest lessons in scripture is the one that precedes our reading for today. Just several verses earlier Jesus was before Pilate, then Herod, and then Pilate again *and he refused to defend himself!* Man, I hate that part of the story! And I'll tell you why I hate it. I want to defend myself and my actions. I hate it

when people misunderstand something I say or do or worse yet, completely get it wrong! Or people hear about something I allegedly said or did and don't come to me and get clarification, especially when I hear about it long afterward – sometimes years later. My sinful self wants to straighten things out, you know what I mean, “Let me straighten you out on that issue.” Maybe you can relate. Maybe you think that would be the right thing to do too.

But when I look to the example of Jesus, standing before Pilate and Herod, and later hanging from the cross, I remind myself that *he* is lord of my life - not the devil, the one who is behind getting even and setting the record straight and defending myself. I have to remind myself that I play for an audience of one. And while I admit I am not always right in everything I say and do, I am still forgiven. And if others can't accept that then whose problem is that? It's not mine.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

“*Great Expectations.*” I have *great expectations* of you. I expect you to pray for me as the spiritual leader of this congregation. I expect you to respect me for my work's sake as the called and ordained minister of the church of Christ living out that call by his authority - you said you would at my installation ten years ago. I expect you to be changed by my proclamation of the Gospel.

And you have *great expectations* of me. You expect me to be an example of faithful service and holy living. You expect me to proclaim the Gospel of your salvation. You expect me to be there for you when you need me, and I intend to be – that's what I promised twenty-five years ago when I was ordained.

And I hope you have *great expectations* of each other. I hope each of us understands that we are all sinners, far from the example of Jesus, and that each of us needs a savior. Yea, we all get caught up in our own deals. We offend and get offended. That is human nature. I wish we weren't like that but we are.

But when we give each other the benefit of the doubt, forgive each other, and treat each other with love, grace, and mercy, well then we are illustrating that we understand a God revealed in a king who hanged on a cross and used some of his last breaths to appeal to his heavenly Father in saying, “forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Today is the last Sunday of the church year. Next week we celebrate the season of Advent, that season in which we look back at a time when God saw the brokenness of his creation and yet loved us so much that God chose to save us by giving us his Son to die in our place. God had *great expectations* for his Son, and his Son met those *great expectations* on the cross.

But the season of Advent has a dual purpose. In Advent, we also look forward to God's Son's promised return which reminds me of a little cartoon I saw one time of a long-robed prophet-like guy carrying a sign that said, "God is coming soon, and boy is he ticked." In a reverse kind of way, it erroneously illustrates the point I am trying to make. We haven't learned our lessons very well. We are still sinners in need of a savior.

And we have one. And out of great love, he will return to gather the faithful and take them with himself to live with his Father forever.



The good news is that in Christ we can have *great expectations* of our Lord Jesus - in fact, greater expectations than coming down off that ugly cross. He exceeded all human expectations when he came out of that tomb! And when he returns he will be joyful for he will take the faithful, sinners though we are, and lead us to our eternal home.

Advent is a season of preparation for his return. So let us do that and begin with the way we treat each other.

Prayer

Almighty and merciful God, by his suffering, death, and resurrection, your son Jesus proved he is qualified to be king of all creation. He did not meet our expectations, for we could never have conceived of a love so great as he demonstrated on the cross. As we prepare to enter into the season of Advent help us to love you and each other and all that you have created so that when he returns he might find this world ready to receive him as our king. We pray this in his name. Amen