

## Sermon: Where Does It Come From?

Year C, Reign of Christ

[Jeremiah 23:1-6](#); [Luke 1:68-79](#); [Colossians 11:11-20](#); [Luke 23:33-43](#)

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*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.* (Luke 23:42) Where did that come from?

We are at *the place that is called The Skull* (Luke 23:33). It's outside the gates of Jerusalem. It's probably a hill that is shaped something like a skull. It's where political prisoners are put to death by the state. Crucifixion is a dreadful way to die, with the body finally failing from exhaustion and dehydration and unrelenting pain. All the cultures that intersect in Jerusalem, Jewish, Roman, Greek, have rites after death to show respect for the body and the person who has died. But none of the bodies that finally fail after crucifixion will receive any of those rites, unless some high powered leader allows it. So it is a place of humiliation, where a horrible death is made even more horrible by the knowledge that you have been set outside the bounds of human decency. You will be treated as meat, because even a dead animal would be burned or buried to prevent the spread of disease. Surely, as we stand at the place called The Skull, we are simply surrounded by the worst that humanity can do. In this place, all we can see and hear and smell is what happens when human beings decide to exercise absolute power over one another, with absolute conviction in their right to do so.

So where does that cry come from: *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom?*

There is nothing in that place that suggests that the Kingdom of God exists there or anywhere else or has ever existed or will ever exist.<sup>1</sup> There is nothing in the place which surrounds us that suggests that anything even vaguely deformed and broken as human being could have anything to do with the Kingdom of God. Could we be any further from Paradise, from the Kingdom of God?

From the center of that Godforsaken place, a criminal cries out, *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom* (Luke 23:42). To be crucified at all, that criminal had to commit his act in such a way that he threatened the political control of the Roman Empire over the community in Jerusalem. Or someone in charge had to feel threatened. So as you imagine the criminal, imagine someone who has frightened the authorities, not a simple beggar hungry enough to grab a loaf of pita bread from a market stall.

All that is in front of him is death. The unborn children or grandchildren to cuddle and scold are gone. Smelling the rain move over a dry field is gone. Sleeping in his beloved's arms another night is gone. All he has left is pain and death. Suffering is such an intimate act. Pain strips us of our dignity, our control. When we're in pain, we want to hide it and if we can't, we want only let those we fully trust see us that vulnerable.<sup>2</sup> When someone we love is in pain, we look away at times, not out of cowardice or shame, but because we want to give them as much dignity as they can have. But even that dignity is gone for the thief. All that is in front of him is death.

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick J. Willson, "Proper 29 (Reign of Christ), Homiletical Perspective, Luke 23:33-43" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY:Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 337.

<sup>2</sup> John W. Ehman, "Luke 23:1-49." *Interpretation* 52, no. 1 (1998): 74.

So where does it come from, that cry, *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom*. There is no hint of a kingdom. The act of crucifixion is designed to make sure that there is no “me” left for anyone to remember. And still he cries out, *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom*.

Part of what diminishes our belief in God is our inability to believe that other people deserve mercy.<sup>3</sup> We want Paradise to run on the rules we set up. We want the nice people, the right people, the people like us to get into Paradise. And yet, our rules, when well and thoughtfully executed, lead to the place called The Skull, where no threat to the nice people like us can be tolerated and all humanity is lost.

We have been walking with Jesus to the place called the Skull since June, since he set out from his home in Nazareth, chased by an angry mob (Luke 4:29). We have seen the Ten Lepers he healed (Luke 17:11-19), the woman who could not stand upright (Luke 13:10-17), the tax collector in the Temple (Luke 18:9-14), Zaccheus in Jericho (Luke 19:1-10). We have learned about Lazarus resting on Abraham’s bosom (Luke 16:14-31). We have heard about the lost coin in the corner (Luke 15:8-10). We have learned again and again Jesus’ lesson about everyone deserving mercy because we see ourselves in those stories. We know the isolation of the lepers, the distortion of the woman who could not stand upright, the sense of hopeless compromise the tax collector felt in taking on the job he did. We get that everyone deserves mercy because we see ourselves in all those damaged people out on the fringes of society that Jesus is constantly bringing together.

We have been walking with Jesus to the place called the Skull since June and we have seen all those people. And we know Jesus is right that everyone deserves mercy because we see ourselves in all those flung aside people. But we have to keep learning the lesson, again and again and again, because, in our heart of hearts, we know that if we had 100 sheep and found one missing we probably would not leave the 99 and go off in search of the one that was AWOL (Luke 15:1-7). We have to keep hearing the lesson again and again and again because we keep pointing out to our kids all the sinful people they should be better than, just as the Pharisee did in the Temple (Luke 18:9-14). We make sure the lepers stay well away from the edges of our communities, because they are addicts or Muslims or immigrants. They chose their path, we say, and they have to live with the consequences. We get out of bed every Sunday morning to worship God together and hear the stories of Jesus told again because while we want to be the guy that puts the injured man in the ditch on his donkey (Luke 10:25-37), we know we spend a lot of our time figuring out how to ignore what’s happening on the other side of the street as we pass by on the way to the rest of our lives.

We get here every Sunday morning in part because we need a booster shot to help inoculate us against the demands of the rulers of this world. We feel something we suspect is like the Kingdom of God when we finally work on that song we’ve been hearing in our head, or get a Pinterest worthy shot of our latest creation or the garden is finally put to bed for the winter. We tell ourselves that these brushes with the Kingdom are enough because we need to spend most of our time making sure we do what it takes to be the nice, right people who get a guaranteed pass into Paradise following the rules that the powers of this world have laid out.

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<sup>3</sup> Nancy Lynne Westfield, “Proper 29 (Reign of Christ), Pastoral Perspective, Luke 23:33-43” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY:Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 334.

As we walked with Jesus to Jerusalem all this summer and fall, we did keep seeing ourselves in the people he spoke to and spoke of. And we kept seeing ourselves in the people who turned them away. What we didn't notice was how many of them there were until Jesus went out of his way to point them out. They were everywhere. Every town. Every road in between towns. In the middle of nowhere, someone would pop up. But until Jesus pointed them out, we didn't notice them. Or if we did, we kept going, stepping aside to give them plenty of room. They were sheep that had become separated from their flock.

And until Jesus got ahold of us, we were sheep that were being led astray by the powers of this world. That is what Jeremiah's oracle is about. *Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD.* (Jeremiah 23:1) We didn't even know we were being scattered and destroyed. We were just following the shepherds we thought we were supposed to be following. God sees the shepherds letting God's sheep get lost and promises to send a true shepherd who will remember that the sheep, all the sheep, belong to God, and, by the way, so does the land the sheep and the shepherds are on. However much the shepherds like to think they own the land and control the rain and the grass that allow the sheep to thrive. God promises to send a shepherd that will help all the sheep thrive, not just the nice, right, unthreatening ones.

So here we are, at the place called The Skull. Full of pain and suffering, the worst that humans can do to others in plain sight. Three of God's sheep being destroyed before our eyes by the shepherds who were supposed to care for them. Jesus is in tremendous pain which we know because we have felt pain in our own bodies. Not as much as he is in, because for him too, the only thing he has left in this world is pain and death. But we recognize his pain because we too have felt it. Like the criminal's pain, Jesus' pain is making him vulnerable, tearing away his dignity, tearing away his control.

We hear a cry, *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.* Where does that come from? We know exactly where that comes from. It comes from the darkness we carry inside us every day. It comes from the doubts and fears that sap our resolve and drive us to make destructive decisions about what to do and who to have in our lives. It comes in response to our bone deep knowledge that no matter how many people love us, our children, our spouses, our friends and church family, work colleagues and neighbors, we are alone. We do not need to be at the place called The Skull to know the darkness that cry comes from.

Jesus has been answering that cry the whole way to Jerusalem. The powers of this world ignore the darkness or use it as a weapon to destroy and scatter God's sheep. Jesus has shown again and again that we all cry out to each other in same words, *remember me.* Jesus has shown us how to respond to that cry all along this journey. Bring the sheep together, make sure there is space for everyone in the community. Stick together. Care for each other.

This whole journey has been headed to the seat of political power. This whole journey has confronted the political powers that sought to destroy and scatter God's sheep by reuniting them in their brokenness and darkness with each other. This whole journey has been building up an understanding of what the kingdom of God looks like. When we look for a king, we will never go to a place called The Skull. We will never look down into the depths of brutality that humans can wreak on one another. Yet that is where Jesus is when he reveals the power and wisdom of God confronting the politics of the world,<sup>4</sup> when he offers his final act of ministry.

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<sup>4</sup>Eugene C. Kreider, "The politics of God: the way to the cross." *Word & World* 6, no. 4 (1986): 461.

Before the cry is even in the air over the place called The Skull, Jesus has offered forgiveness. In his vulnerability, in his pain, he hears the cry one last time, *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom*. He replied, *Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise*. (Luke 23:43)