

Sermon
St. Mary's Nanoose
November 20, 2016.
Luke 23:33-43

As a child growing up in Vancouver, whenever our family went to the PNE, we went to the exhibits and never to PlayLand where all the exciting rides were. So when I was a teenager and had money of my own to spend, I finally found myself at PlayLand with my friends. Excited and nervous, I turned to them for guidance. "Start with the big rollercoaster," they suggested, "It's scary but a lot of fun." I bought my ticket. Watching the people on the ride as we waited in line, my heart started to pound. "Where's the least scary place to sit?" I asked. "In the front car," my boyfriend replied, keeping a straight face. "That way you can see where you're going," he assured me. A minute into the ride, I was convinced I was going to die. My friends were screaming and laughing. I was only screaming. I put my head down as far as I could considering all the straps holding me tightly in place and found myself praying. "God, if you get me off this ride alive, I promise I'll never go on a ride like this again." Now the thing you need to know is that I wasn't raised in a religious home and I had never prayed before. I'm not sure I'd even heard a person pray before. But natural as all get out, there I was praying. And lo and behold, when the train pulled into the station, I was still alive. I could hardly walk; my friends had to hold me up, but I was alive. They laughed and laughed at me.

But I had a secret. And I was alive! The Lord works in mysterious ways.

There's nothing like the threat of death to wake us up.

Take our reading today from Luke. From the outside, it looked like an ordinary day in Roman-occupied Jerusalem. As was the practice, common criminals and a rabble-rouser were being executed for their crimes in the manner of the day – crucifixion. Some of the observers of the horrific act knew this was no ordinary day – those of Jesus' friends and family who were brave enough to be observers. But for the criminals who were being crucified on Jesus' left and on his right, something was unusual. Here was a man being taunted and tortured for the crime of being a leader seen as threatening the peace of the land. And this person spends not one breath denying the charges and taunts of those around him. Through waves of pain, Jesus forgives, saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing," and later reassures, "Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

One of the criminals is able, through his own agony, to recognize that this "king of the Jews" is no ordinary person. Somehow his ears and eyes are opened and he recognizes the holy personage of Jesus.

Why does one of the criminals wake up, and the other not? What makes the one recognize Jesus and the other one go to his death, mocking him?

These are important questions for us to ask on this last Sunday

of the Church year; the feast day of Christ the King. Because we end this liturgical year recognizing the unusual leadership of Jesus and the end of his time here on earth. And we are about to enter the waiting period leading up to his equally unusual arrival on earth as a helpless vulnerable newborn. It's difficult to recognize holiness in such vulnerability when our culture values power and might. Christ the King as a man hanging from a cross and the Son of God as a tiny baby? These are counter-intuitive images of God. It's so mysterious and unexpected.

The unexpected birth and death of Jesus challenge the assumptions that keep us asleep, and unaware of the presence of God in our midst, right here, right now. For instance, the Jews of Jesus' day, who were waiting for the Messiah, were waiting for the kind of leadership we expect of great kings: the ability to smash the enemy, rid the state of corruption and fear, and create stability and peace on earth. With these expectations and assumptions in mind, people were unable to see the kind of revolutionary leadership Jesus exemplified – leadership that called people to look at how real change occurs. Not as an outside event, where might is right. But as an inside event, where each person is called to conversion; to truth, to responsibility (the ability to respond). Where there is a Divine flow, not of our own making and where power exists in relationship with that Divine Power.

Jesus is pretty clear – the kingdom of God is not going to come about through some external event. The kingdom of God is coming

about all the time as each person opens their heart, as each person learns how to forgive, as each person enters more and more deeply into the mystery of love.

What other leader promises to free us? What other leader can journey with each of us as we open our heart to God?

Our world will only change through the conversion of individuals who are committed to doing their part to bring about the kingdom of God. So the kingdom of God does not come about as a top down structure but as a heart up relationship.

Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Today we celebrate "Christ the King," an ironic and deeply true reality. Jesus has shown us through his life and death that only love transcends all violence, control and death. Only love and relationship with God go anywhere that creates lasting change.

Whenever we are up against doubt, fear, despair, hate, division, if we can open our eyes, ears and hearts, we are promised that in our time of trial there is One who has been there before us, who suffers along with us, and who promises us, that should we choose to throw in our lot with love, with God, with mystery, that we will be changed into that likeness of God that is our birthright and we will live into a day we cannot now imagine.

And in community with others who are willing to wake up, to acknowledge suffering and respond to it, we can create the kind of environment where God can do more than we can ask or imagine.

So this morning, come to the table, and share the meal that brings life and love into the world. Receive the body and blood of the One who is always and faithfully with us, forgiving and reassuring us.

Amen.