

Sermon: The End in the Beginning**Scripture: Luke 23:33-44****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: November 20th, 2016**

Really? This is the reading for Thanksgiving Sunday, to send us forth into the holidays? Really? We haven't had enough bad news lately that we have to come to church and hear the crucifixion account? I thought this was supposed to be about giving thanks and being grateful, you know "we gather together, beside us to guide us" and "Come ye thankful people" and you go all Good Friday on us?? Whaaaat?

In case that's what you are thinking, I just want to be clear, that I didn't exactly choose this for us. It's the scripture we are given for this Sunday, not because it is Thanksgiving Sunday but because it is the last Sunday of the church year, what is called in our tradition Christ the King or the Reign of Christ Sunday. Next week, the first Sunday of Advent, is the first Sunday on the Christian calendar and the cycle of readings begin with the promises of the coming Christ. But on this final Sunday, our lectionary always rolls out the crucifixion story. It's just that we preachers often go looking for other passages to replace it so we can preach on something that won't seem quite so out of step with where we are as a culture in the ramping up of the holidays. But being out of step with the surrounding culture that is ramping up for the holidays, is probably where the church should be.

Ultimately the story of the crucifixion placed here on the Sunday before Thanksgiving does make sense because, according to the church, the crucifixion is fundamentally meant to elicit a response from us of

thanks giving for the amazing magnitude of God's grace. John Newton, the writer of Amazing Grace who was once a slave trader and had a conversion experience, said at the end of his life with a heart overwhelmed by God's love: "although my memory is fading there are two things that I remember clearly – that I am a great sinner and Christ is a great savior."

That is what the crucifixion of Jesus leads us to - an acknowledgement of God's grace and forgiveness that is offered freely out of love. The image of Christ on the cross between the two thieves at the place they called the Skull, dying in agony, is – strangely enough - our image for the invisible God. When we say that Christ is King, when we speak of the Reign of Christ, Christ as our head and our Lord, that grim but remarkable image is what is lifted up – that world-rejected, friend-abandoned, state-executed, suffering figure who reveals to us... God.... and just how profound God's love for us - and all humanity and all creation - truly is. For this we have every reason to give thanks with overflowing hearts of gratitude for the graciousness of our Maker!

But it begins with an acknowledgement of our own brokenness and sinfulness. We gaze upon the cross and we do not say "good gracious, those Romans were brutal." Nor are we to say "oh my gosh, those Jewish religious leaders were evil." Nor should we say "that crowd who chanted 'crucify him' were messed up in some kind of mass hysteria", rather we see Christ on the cross and we say "I am sorry Lord! I am sorry that you came out of love for us and we brutalized you. I am sorry that you came to side with us and we sided against you. I am so sorry that you came to join us and we joined with the crowds in

condemning you! You, who came not to condemn the world but to save it!" And you know what God says in return – not "yeah, you stink! You're a piece of trash and you are going to pay!" No, God says "I forgive you for you know not what you do." And our response: thank you. thank you. thank you, 70 times 7 times.

That's why it's appropriate on this Thanksgiving Sunday to place before our eyes and hearts the image of the crucifixion, because it is meant to draw from us praise and gratitude.

But also why the crucifixion account is situated here in this juncture of our year is because we are about to enter into Advent and prepare for the coming of Christ, and from the moment that Mary received the divine seed and conceived him in her womb, we remember that all of it; his birth, his baptism, his gathering of disciples, his teachings, his healing, we remember it all in light of where it's all heading – to the cross. In fact we must read the Gospels fully aware that the whole story is told from the perspective of those who experienced his appalling death and a miraculous resurrection.

So we are coming to the beginning next week, but first we must remember that the end is right there in the beginning:

The gathered shepherds and wise men who come to see the birth of a King are a reflection of the people gathered along the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem as Jesus is mockingly labeled King of the Jews.

Mary and Joseph awaiting the birth and then laying the baby Jesus in the manger is a reflection of the women gathered waiting at the foot of the cross and Joseph of Arimathea laying him in the tomb.

The wooden cradle containing the Christ child is a reflection of the wooden cross upon which hung the adult Christ's body.

The angelic hosts of light and the star in the sky announcing his birth, is a reflection of the sun's going dark when Jesus died.

The end is in the beginning.

The Christian apologist G.K. Chesterton writes beautifully about this when he contrasts Christ death to the deaths of heroes in mythology. Chesterton, like CS Lewis, argues that the story of Jesus, far from mirroring mythological tales is in fact what all the myths were pointing to; they were a thin, piecemeal, attempt at articulating something of the truth buried deep within the human psyche that actually played itself out on the stage of history in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Chesterton writes about Jesus' death in this way:

It was a fulfillment of the myths. Jesus' story was a journey with a goal and an object, like Jason going to find the Golden Fleece or Hercules the golden apple of the Hesperides, but the gold that Jesus was seeking was death. The primary thing he was going to do was to die. He was going to do other things [as well] but from first to last the most definite fact is that he is going to die...We are meant to feel that his life was in a sense a sort of love affair with death, a romance of the pursuit of the ultimate sacrifice.

And then Chesterton draws out the full implication:

From the moment when the star goes up like a birthday rocket to the moment when the sun is extinguished like a funeral torch, the whole story moves on wings with the speed and direction of a drama, ending in an act beyond words.... And when they took him to the tomb, the whole of that great and glorious humanity which we call antiquity was gathered up and covered over; and in that place it was buried. It was the end of a very great thing called human history; the history that was

merely human. And when they came to the tomb three days later, they hardly realized that the world had died in the night. What they were looking at was the first day of a new creation, with a new heaven and a new earth; and in a semblance of the gardener God walked again in the garden, in the cool not of the evening but of the dawn.”

I have to share that as I was writing this sermon and wrote down the last of these words of GK Chesterton’s, I received a text from my mother. She was keeping us updated on my cousin Peter’s son who is also named Will. Will is a 16 year old who on Thursday had a heart transplant. My mother texted late the night before saying “the vascular surgeon is on his way via Lear Jet to receive Will’s new heart. Once that is done there is a 4-hour window during which it can be implanted in Will. Please pray for him and his surgical team who are getting ready now. Pray also for the family who through their grief have donated the heart of their loved one.” Then on Thursday as I was finishing writing that last sentence of GK Chesterton’s, a text rang into my phone: “he’s off the pump and his heart is beating!”

The end is in the beginning. The end of one life leads to the renewal of another. It’s a symbol and a revelation of how death has been overcome through the Christ event so that forever more death only leads to more life... and we... we who have been graced with being a part of this incredible journey of life, how are we to respond to the promise of its unending nature? In the only way conceivable - we give thanks: Thank you God for all you have given, even your very self in order to restore and renew the world in love’s wide open embrace, in Jesus name, Amen.