***I BELIEVE***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

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Texts: Colossians 1:3-5a, 9-20 and Luke 23:33-43

*Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.* Those are the words of the thief spoken from a cross beside the crucified Jesus, words uttered high above the ground by one dying man to another while below them swirled a cacophony of taunts hurled by Roman soldiers and religious leaders alongside the whimpers and wails of grieving friends. They are words we sometimes sing, words you may even have prayed from time to time – if you dared. For, in those words is an expression of faith and an audacious request: *Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.*

The expression of faith of that crucified thief comes at the end of his request – *remember me* ***when you come into your Kingdom*** – not ***if you come***, but ***when you come***! It expresses a bold belief that the man dying by his side will yet be king of some kingdom, a claim that seems impossibly hopeful given their circumstance. While those below were taunting the dying Jesus as a false king, an impotent king, a sham, the crucified thief alone – guilty of his crime by his own admission – recognizes Jesus as the true king whose unlikely Kingdom will come despite the nails and the cross and the dying. It is a Kingdom that Jesus said was “not of this world”, a Kingdom that Herod and Pilate had difficulty grasping, a Kingdom that most of the people did not understand, yet a Kingdom that Jesus had been proclaiming from the first days of his ministry when he urged the people, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” Or put another way: Repent, for the reign of God is about to begin!

I wonder when the thief thought Jesus might enter that Kingdom and begin to reign. What kind of kingdom did he imagine it to be? Did he think it would be an eternal kingdom in which Jesus would reign as Messiah or an earthly kingdom that would arrive at some unknown moment in the unknown future? Did he imagine the possibility of resurrection or was he simply grasping for hope in a hopeless situation? The thief doesn’t say. We don’t know what he believed or hoped or dreamed, only that he expressed faith in the coming of Jesus’ Kingdom and Jesus responded, not “some day you will be with me in Paradise”, but “today you will be with me in Paradise.” The Kingdom was coming, was imminent, and his reign was about to begin even as he was about to die.

What kind of king is he, this crucified Jesus? He is a king without a country, a king whose reign spans all of creation. In the words of Twila Paris’s hymn:

*He is Lord of heaven, Lord of earth, Lord of all who live;*

*he is Lord above the universe, all praise to him we give.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

He is not just king of the church, or king of Israel, or king of the Jews or Christians or any other religious group. He is king of all nations, all people, all creation – King of kings and Lord of lords! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Or so we say and sing. Yet when we look around it seems like there are an awful lot of kings and lords and tyrants out there who are paying him very little mind and over which he seems to exercise very little control. He preaches love and they promote hate. He preaches peace and they wage war. He preaches forgiveness and they threaten revenge. He preaches humble service and they practice proud narcissism. He preaches sacrifice and they promote greed. And while you might be quick to jot down some of their names, maybe just maybe, some of ***them*** are ***you*** and ***me***!

We live under the reign of Christ, but does your life reflect obedience to that king who calls you to love God and neighbor, forgive your enemies, humble yourself, be the servant of all, and share all that you own? Who rules your life? Who reigns in your heart and directs your days? What king do you serve, if you serve any king at all? As the musical *Hamilton* reminds us, we cast off the yoke of a king 240 years ago with a Declaration of Independence that denied any royal authority over our American lives. We elect our leaders, more or less; they are not divinely appointed. They serve the people, not the other way around. Are you then willing to serve Christ as king or do you expect Christ to serve you – as the God you have elected to lead your life? Is there any place in your life for a king before whom you might willingly, humbly bend your heart and knee and will?

The history of Protestants in America is the history of people of faith who believed in the reality of God’s Kingdom. As H. Richard Niebuhr describes it in his classic book, *The Kingdom of God in America*:

*These early American Protestants [William Penn, Roger Williams] believed in the kingdom of God, but it was not a society of peace and concord to be established by men of good will; it was rather the living reality of God’s present rule, not only in human spirits but also in the world of nature and of human history. His kingdom was not an ideal dependent for its realization on human effort; men and their efforts were dependent upon it; loyalty to it and obedience to its laws were the conditions of their temporal and eternal welfare.*[[2]](#endnote-2)

That is to say, our Protestant founding fathers and mothers believed in the sovereignty of God, believed that all things stood under God’s rule and were totally dependent upon God. Niebuhr goes on to say that across the years that understanding has grown to embrace the Kingdom revealed in Jesus Christ that began with his life, death and resurrection as well as the promised Kingdom that is to come in power and glory. In seminary they refer to it as “the already and the not yet” – the kingdom which has *already* come in Christ among us but is *not yet* fully realized, a kingdom in which Christ reigns but we are not fully obedient, a kingdom of which we are a part even as we wait and watch and pray, “Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

That is where we live – under the reign of Christ in the kingdom of God as we await his return in glory. It is a kingdom that exists within us and around us. It is here in our midst, but all creation is not yet the way God wants it to be. It is a work in progress under the reign of the risen Christ.

Over these past two weeks there have been both celebrations and great angst over the election of a new president for our nation under God. Some believe that his promises hold great promise for our nation. Others worry that his toxic texts, racist rhetoric, and punitive policies will place not only our nation but world at risk. We are a nation deeply divided, and while he has vowed to be a president for all Americans, not just those who voted for him, time will tell whether the president-elect lives into that promise. How are we to respond as Christians who live under the reign of Christ but also under the leadership of a president – regardless of who the president might be?

We begin by affirming our loyalty to the king of creation who died and rose for us. We begin by declaring that Christ reigns over our lives, and we live in obedience to him and to him alone in the Kingdom of God. Regardless of who we voted for in the presidential election, we begin by living into the demands Christ makes upon us all as disciples:

love God and neighbor;

do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God;

show hospitality to the stranger in your midst;

care for the poor and oppressed;

forgive as you have been forgiven.

We begin by resisting the urge to self-righteously judge others, including those who voted for a different candidate, and recommit ourselves to living into God’s vision for us. Then we demand of our leaders policies and practices that are faithful to God’s vision for us as the people of God, divine expectations that cross all national and international boundaries. We demand justice for all people,

concern for the poor and oppressed,

love for neighbors regardless of race, religion, nationality, gender or sexual orientation,

faithful stewardship of the environment, and

respect for one another, because we are ALL created in the image of God, even if we are tarnished images.

We can disagree about how best to live into those divine expectations, but we should be united in affirming that those are the expectations God has for us, one and all. Barack Obama doesn’t reign, Donald Trump doesn’t reign, you and I don’t reign, Jesus reigns over all – and that is good news, hopeful news for the world and for all of us – come what may! We live in the Kingdom of God under the reign of Christ who calls us to follow him, build up the Kingdom and make it more the way God wants it to be.

Which brings us back to those words spoken by the thief at the cross: *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.* You who now live in the Kingdom of God which is already and not yet, are you bold enough to ask what he asks, “Jesus, ***remember me***”? Do you really want Jesus to remember you – who you are, what you’ve said, what you’ve done? If so, what do you want him to remember – just the good things or everything? What do you want him to forget? Paul writes to the Colossians:

*Jesus has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins*.

Those words of Paul are the good news we bear for ourselves and for the world, the hope to which we cling as dearly as did that thief on the cross. It is the promise that we are remembered and forgiven and loved by God, not because all the good we have done is worth remembering, but solely because God is gracious and loving and forgiving toward us despite our failures. God urges us in turn to be gracious, loving and forgiving toward ourselves despite our failures, and to be gracious, loving and forgiving toward others despite their failures, and to be hopeful and faithful all our days. For, the Lord who reigns is a God of justice, love and grace who longs for us all to live with justice, love and grace, even as we pray with the thief who joined Jesus in Paradise: *Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.* Amen

1. “We Will Glorify the King of Kings”, Twila Paris [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, p.51 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)