

20 November 2022
Proper 29-C
Grace Church, Muncie
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Psalms 46

Colossians 1:11-20

Luke 23:33-43

*Grace to you and peace from God
who is and who was and who is to come. Amen.*

Do you ever wish that you could have a second chance? I mean a real second chance –not just to fix a slip of the tongue or to mumble a mechanical apology. Not just another guess at Trivial Pursuit or a re-dealt hand at bridge. I mean a real second chance.

A Pass. A Do-over. A Mulligan. A get-out-of-jail-free card. A second chance that has actual significance; that changes your life; that changes your heart.

I imagine we can all think of more than a few second chances we'd like. To say or do something different ... or *not* to say or do something. To begin to repair a relationship. To chase a dream you've deferred. To follow through on a responsibility you've avoided.

Then, of course, there's the flip side. What happens when someone asks you for a second chance? How does that feel? What's that phrase? "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who..." Well, you get the point, yes?

This morning, at the end of another liturgical year, I want us to think back on the stories Luke has been telling us over the past year. Stories, not so much about who or what Jesus is or isn't, but about who and what God is, and HOW God works through Jesus – that One in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

Call to mind the people in those stories: a servant of a Roman centurion; a widowed mother on the way to bury her son; a weeping woman with an alabaster jar; a persistent widow; ten lepers; a man afflicted with the demons called Legion; a hemorrhaging woman; a man left to die at the side of the road; a prodigal son ... the list is long.

The point of these stories is God – who gives all those people second chances. You and I might not have given any of them the time of day. God gives them all a second chance.

Which brings us to today, where we stand at the foot of the Cross. Even here, there are second chances. Only in Luke do we hear Jesus asking God to forgive those

who crucify him. I think that means *all* those who crucify him ... active participants and passive bystanders alike.

And then there's the thief, the one we call "Good," whom tradition has named Dismas. Unlike his scoffing companion (Gestas), Dismas owns up to his sins, and asks Jesus to be remembered in his kingdom. "Truly," Jesus responds, "today you will be with me in Paradise."

Even in the crucifixion of Jesus, we see a God who, right up to the end, and beyond the end, gives not only a second chance but also endless, ongoing opportunities for life, grace, mercy, and forgiveness. Paradise.

Jesus' death is according to the rule and the expectations of the world. If we're honest, there was nothing terribly unusual about it. Just watch the news; people die unjustly all the time. And the world just shakes its head, saying something like, "Oh, yes, it's a tragedy, but that's the way the world works."

In raising Jesus from the dead, God ushers in a different world, a new realm, a new order altogether. Every time we hear Handel's *Messiah*, we are reminded that *the kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever, Hallelujah!*

The crucifixion doesn't merely *challenge* the order of the world, it *overturns* it completely, establishing a new order in which death no longer has the final word, our mistakes no longer define us, our regrets no longer haunt us.

God's new order, God's reign, God's kingdom is characterized by new life, hope, and grace, because it is founded on the most powerful force in the universe, which is the love of God, the kind of love that never wearies in extending second chances.

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This is what Paul says to the Colossians, "[God] 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" (Col 1:13-14).

If we take this morning's lessons, and all the stuff happening in the world, and within each of us, and load all of it into a kaleidoscope, maybe we can glimpse the truth that this kingdom of love, ruled over by a king on a cross, is ALWAYS what God has intended ...from the beginning.

When Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians, he included a hymn of praise that many scholars believe was already being sung in the Church's worship. He names Jesus as the image of the invisible God. He names Jesus as the beginning, the firstborn of the dead.

The words are elaborate and overflowing, but the message is simple: the work of Christ begins and ends in God. I've always loved the phrase, "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." But that language is so beautiful that it's tempting to let it stay there, up on the shelf where we keep the nice things, out of the reach of curious fingers, so it won't get dented by real life.

In his version of the Bible called *The Message*, the late Eugene Peterson offers this version. "So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe...get properly fixed and fit together ..., all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the cross."

Sitting here this morning, with the chaos that surrounds us on every side, this sounds like pretty good news. All the broken and dislocated pieces get fixed and find a place in a really roomy God. Hurray and hallelujah! There really is hope for a second chance for us! For us.

But wait. What about, you know, "them." Your them might be different than my them, but we all have them...those people. Everyone knows that, as a nation, we are deeply and bitterly divided. And we also know that it's "their" fault.

At our diocesan convention last weekend, the keynote speaker was Dr. Catherine Meeks, who brings more than four decades of wisdom to transforming the work of dismantling racism. She said that, driven by the fear of what we can't control, we seek to control everything around us, to occupy the throne that is Christ's alone. Only in releasing that fear do we become free to move from disdain to compassion; to navigate the path to our rightful thrones in God's kingdom.

She offered a workshop that afternoon called "Love Your Enemies, But How Can I?" Oh goody, I thought (and I wasn't alone in this), I'll pick up some good suggestions. But she disabused us of this notion, saying, "I don't really know how to love my enemies, because I really want to hate them. What I do know, is that I have to."

I have a friend who likes to remind her congregation that "God loves the people we hate." Well, ouch! But, if we're going to take Scripture seriously, we have to believe that this is true. God loves the people we hate.

It's right there: "through Jesus, God was pleased to reconcile to Godself all things." There's that pesky word, "all," Which means all. There's no such thing as some of all. There's just all.

But the thought of loving "them" is hard, especially in these days when hatred, mendacity and corruption have been raised up as virtues by many who hold positions of leadership, if not trust. We inhabit a world where every relationship is a deal to be made, a tactical battle; where forgiveness has been replaced by revenge.

To be clear: the Christian message of forgiveness is not “Things happen, and we can just leave it at that.” The Christian message does not say that consequences, justice, or penalties for wrongdoing don’t matter. Instead, the Christian message says, “Sin matters so much that God in *Christus Victor* atoned for it himself, so we might walk in forgiveness. God was crucified to pay for our sin, and the sins of our enemies, so we don’t have to crucify each other, or crucify ourselves with shame and self-hatred.”¹

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As the United States nears its 250th anniversary, there is a lot of talk about kings – what it means to have separated from a monarchy, and what it means to maintain a democracy in the face of the monarchical inclinations of some politicians.

Too many who call themselves Christian want to turn the cross into a flagpole for the Stars and Stripes. To conflate God’s Kingdom with a political movement that tells us that only straight white people (mostly men) will inherit the kingdom, and that the Savior is a gym-built Bro brandishing an assault weapon.

It is understandable, even seductive, simply to blame Christian Nationalists and their ilk as wrong-headed, heretical, even evil. But that’s not quite enough, is it?

Perhaps we who do not live under the authority of an earthly monarch might be ideally suited to understand a king like the crucified Christ. At least twice a week, we say that we get it. In both the Creed (“and his kingdom will have no end”) and in the Lord’s Prayer (“your kingdom come on earth, as in heaven”), we say that we believe in a state of being that is without end, and quite unlike the world we know now.

The Jesus we praise today as king, is, in fact, like no earthly monarch who has ever reigned – not like Ivan the Terrible, or even Good King Wenceslas. This Jesus, who reigns from the cross, is the righteous Branch that Jeremiah foretold, turning our expectations of authority and power upside down.

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From the beginning, the reconciling work of God has been to fix and fit back together the broken and dislocated pieces. But it is a cop-out to expect God to act when we will not. God calls us to resist tyranny in whatever form it appears. God calls us to see, and stand up for, the least, the lost, and the lonely. God also calls us to share the abundance of our lives with others in joy, and to live without the burden of regret.

On this last day of the liturgical year, on this Sunday before Thanksgiving, when we celebrate our commitment to being good stewards of everything that God has given

¹ Fr. Clint Wilson, <https://covenant.livingchurch.org/2022/11/14/forgiveness-and-guilt-in-a-cancel-culture-world/>

us, we are chiefly bound to give God thanks that this Jesus is our unlikely King, reigning from his improbable throne, and raining down second chances upon us all.

Let us pray. Hasten, O God, the coming of your kingdom; and grant that we your servants, who now live by faith, may with joy behold your Son at his coming in glorious majesty; even Jesus Christ, our only Mediator and Advocate. Amen.