

If you were to travel to Jerusalem today and ask to see the place where the events we read just now took place, you would be asked, “Which one?” You see, there are two competing claims of where Jesus was crucified. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher was built on the site where, according to tradition, Jesus was crucified and then buried nearby. The church is covered in ornate gold, crowded with tourists, pilgrims, and icons depicting the scenes of Jesus’ execution. Here, the tomb is held in its own chapel that you have to stoop to enter one at a time. On the other hand, the Garden Tomb is just that, a simple and understated garden, outside of the city and near a rock face that kind of looks skull-like. Here, the tomb is a simple room, cut into the nearby hillside.

Not only do different denominations lay claim to these two places, but at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, priests have gotten into fights about who is in charge of the site. Ownership and stewardship of a holy site can bring a denomination attention, prestige, and power. And so the different churches debate where the actual site of Jesus’ death is.

But where is Jesus? Reading this passage we are reminded that the most important part of this story is not **where** Jesus died, but that he is among the crucified. He is among the mocked, the scoffed at, and the condemned. He is among the poor, the prisoner, and the rejected, the outcast and the forgotten. That is where we find the cross today. That is where we find our leader.

On Christ the Ruler Sunday, we are invited to contemplate the nature of leadership. After his arrest, Jesus went before Pontius Pilate and then he stood before king Herod. Neither wanted responsibility for Jesus’ death. They literally and figuratively washed their hands of him. Jesus was a popular preacher, teacher, and healer. They knew that if they were responsible, the crowds might threaten their power. And so they manipulated the system to accrue more power, wealth, and prestige. These rulers, like so many before and after them saw power as something to be protected, and people as a means to an end. They focused on maintaining their power, not using it as a way to serve the people.

And now, we see Jesus. Upon the cross—lifted up as a message to other would-be-messiahs, “If you mess with the status quo, if you try to threaten those in power, this will be the result.” On his cross, Jesus cries out to God for mercy, because those around him do not know what they are doing. Jesus does not call upon his God to rescue him and smite the wicked—he asks his loving parent—our loving parent—to forgive those who persecuted him.

I don’t know about you, but when I read this, I can’t imagine Jesus was stoic and dignified—like the hero of some Greek tragedy bravely facing his fate... Instead, I hear agony, desperation, and anger.

And yet, even as he is struggling with every last breath, fighting for each precious word, Jesus uses those last words, those fleeting breaths, to serve others. In these last moments Jesus continued to serve—interceding on behalf of his murderers and comforting a dying human being who just so happened to be a petty criminal.

This criminal, this rejected and despised outcast is the recipient of paradise. He hasn’t done anything to deserve grace. He hasn’t followed Jesus, listened to his teachings or worked alongside the disciples helping Jesus heal and feed people. This criminal hasn’t said that he

believes anything about Jesus. All he does is recognize Jesus for who he is, and is shown grace. Grace is offered to this criminal.

But what if things had happened differently? What if Jesus had “saved himself,” as so many people suggested he do? Would things have changed? Would the people standing and ridiculing be silenced? Would the criminals hanging next to him be set free? Would Jesus have continued to heal the sick, feed the hungry, and bind the brokenhearted? Would the rejected and outcast, afraid for their safety and the safety of their loved ones, be free to live without fear?

There are times when I really wish that he would have saved himself. Not only would it mean that his ministry could have continued, but it would be something we could point to and say, “Look—undeniable evidence that I am following the right leader. He was in a tight spot, and he had the power to save himself from crucifixion. If I follow him, I will be on the right path.” Not only that, but it would make for a better story! I don’t know about you, but I love stories of self-made women and men who pick themselves up by the bootstraps out of desperate circumstances and become successful.

And so if Jesus had saved himself, I could continue to believe in the power of my own independence. This would be yet another story of might makes right.

Instead, we worship a God who died on a cross.

Jesus shows us what true power, true “kingship” looks like. It’s not the power to crush the mighty Roman empire—or any enemy—true power is the ability to extend forgiveness to those who persecute us. It is not the power to overturn centuries of religious dogma and doctrine—nor is it the power to change other people’s minds, but to transform peoples hearts. It is not the power to save himself—because power is not to be used for our own gain, but in the service of others. It is not the power to condemn or judge others, because true power is revealed by the capacity to see others not only as deserving of human dignity but as worthy of divine love. Jesus, willingly dying upon the cross shows us that true power is found in vulnerability.

That is the kind of ruler Christ is. We follow a king whose subjects include not just the saints who have it all together, but also the petty thief, the common criminal, and everyone in between. We follow a leader who walks the path to the cross and calls us to follow.

It’s scandalous! Or... It would be. If Luke’s gospel hadn’t gone to great lengths to describe the kingdom of God. According to Luke, In God’s kingdom, the expectations and rules are different than the rules the world makes. Instead of everyone getting what **we** think they deserve, it looks like wayward sons returning to find their fathers overjoyed and ready to celebrate instead of punish. Instead of everyone looking out for **themselves**, God’s kingdom looks like a shepherd risking everything to find one lost sheep. Instead of might makes right, it looks like treating everyone, especially children, with patience. The kingdom of God looks like mercy offered to this death row prisoner. And now, instead of a view from an ivory tower, the kingdom of God looks like the view from the top of a cross.

The reason it is important that Jesus didn’t leap off the cross is because now we know where he stands, once and for all. I am convinced that Jesus did not die to satisfy the debt of an angry God, but to reveal the depth of God’s love for us. Because Christ is crucified, I know that God can be found among the crucified. Even in the shadow of the cross, God is with us. Not only is

God-with-us, but there is no place we can go where God is not with us—not even the most painful place we imagine.

I have to admit, this has been hard to believe in this past presidential election.

Leading up to this year's presidential election, it seemed like everyone just wanted to get to election day so that it would all be over and the conflict would end. After the election, though, it seems as though nothing has changed—there are still those who have hope for a brighter tomorrow. There are still those who live in fear for themselves or for their neighbors. There are still those who protest and riot, and there are still those who reveal their prejudice, their bigotry, and their hate.

On Christ the Ruler Sunday, we are reminded that the example we have of leadership in Jesus is not as a powerful tyrant. Instead, Jesus leads with compassion and mercy. When we read this passage, we are reminded that the power of God is revealed through the life of an authentic human being who treated others with dignity and brought healing to their lives and who was crucified for it. Jesus embodies the message of the prophet Micah—he acted for justice, loved kindness, and walked humbly with God. In Jesus, we see the coming kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God doesn't look much like a kingdom at all—it looks more like a kin-dom, spelled K-I-N-D-O-M, because it looks more like a family. A kin-dom where grace rules and compassion is king. A kin-dom where all are able to have life and have it abundantly—because we all recognize our interdependence. A kin-dom where peace, hope, joy, and forgiveness are shared like bread around the dinner table, until all have their fill.

We will recognize this kin-dom in our midst when we can look upon the cross and not just see a criminal, and not just see a king—but instead see love that is greater than we could possibly imagine.