

Sermon – Luke 23:33-43
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Grace Lutheran Church
Christ the King – Year C
20 November 2022

“A Kingdom Built for All”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. It's shocking, *shocking I say*, that this hasn't turned out better. The union of FIFA and Qatar, that is. After all, FIFA, the international governing body of soccer, or football as everyone other than us insists on calling it, is one of the most corruption-ridden organizations in the world. And Qatar is among the most repressive regimes on the planet. Who could have predicted that the country wouldn't be ready to host this year's World Cup? Who could have imagined that, while FIFA officials lined their pockets with bribes and lived off the largesse of one of sport's most lucrative events, Qatar would be building the event quite literally on the backs of migrant workers, thousands of whom have died building stadiums and hotels for the event, all while doubling down on the oppression of women and the LGBTQ community? And yet, even with all that money and all that oppression, they still couldn't get their act together to be ready for the World Cup that starts this morning. Who could have seen *that* coming, except for anyone with eyes to see? What a shame, as this should be not only a showcase for some of the world's finest athletes but an event to draw people together from around the world. But no veneer, no matter how spectacular or expensive, can cover up the horrific foundations of this event, not that that will stop them from trying. No doubt we will see signage repeating the slogan with which Qatar bought, erm, I mean won, their bid for the event: “Expect Amazing.”

2. In a world of sin, suffering, and oppression, the powers that be offer seek to distract us. "Expect amazing," they tell us. Don't look at the pain. Don't think on your own suffering. Expect amazing! We build our kingdoms on the backs of others; much of our own nation's wealth was built from the blood of people stolen from Africa and their descendants. Our village of River Forest once belonged to the Ojibwa, Menominee, and Potawatomi tribes. Best not to think about those things, of course. We turn away from our own pain, too, paper over our own suffering with style. Not with substance, but substances. We dare not look too directly at the stark nature of our reality. No, we expect amazing!

3. Jesus ends up with a very different sign over his head as he hangs on Golgotha's tree: "This is the King of the Jews." The sign hangs there above his dying brow in mockery, not praise. It is meant to shame him and his people. This dying man, forsaken upon a tree, is the last person anyone would want for a king. But it is Christ himself who stakes a new sign in our midst. Jesus doesn't turn away from suffering; he endures it. He doesn't ignore sin; he forgives it. He doesn't run from injustice and oppression; he becomes victim to it. He doesn't turn away from his also-forgotten neighbor; he welcomes him into paradise. Jesus doesn't bear a sign encouraging us to expect amazing, pretending that nothing is wrong. No. Jesus bears the cross. While this world's shepherds lead us astray through misdirection, Jesus the Good Shepherd joins his sheep in the darkness. And by joining us in the night, Jesus can lead us to the dawn, the great inheritance of light for all the saints. Jesus doesn't paper over the darkness. He puts it to flight.

4. From the cross, Jesus speaks to us, freeing us from the two great powers that lord it over us, the same powers we use to dominate one another: sin and death. We often say that Jesus died to forgive our sins, and this is true. But it is also true that Jesus died *because* he had the audacity to forgive; tyranny doesn't abide forgiveness – it thrives on punishment. For the very ones who

drove spikes through his hands, he prays to his Father: Forgive them. This King proclaims that there is nothing we can do that is beyond his power or his will to forgive. Sin, in the cross, is defeated. And to the criminal by his side, justly condemned in the eyes of the oppressive Roman regime, Jesus promises Paradise. There is nothing we can do to keep us from our Father's side in eternity. Death, in the cross, is defeated.

5. This Kingdom does not ignore injustice and oppression. It does not paper over the breaks and bruises our bodies suffer. It does not pretend sin is not a problem. It does not avoid the inevitability of death. Jesus is crowned King, raised to newness of life and lifted up into heaven, because he endures and overcomes the forces arrayed against us. If you want to know what God looks like, look to Christ and him crucified; look to Christ, raised but still bearing wounds from which his atoning blood flowed. This One, this Jesus, is the incarnate image of the invisible God. This One, this Jesus, is the new, true King of creation. This One, this Jesus, is the One to whom we bow down in hope, for through him flows the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection from the dead. His is a Kingdom built not *upon* the backs of the least of these, but *for* the least, lowest, and lost. And, by the grace of God, even for you and for me.
6. Today, we come not into the halls of power, but to the town dump outside Jerusalem's walls. We bow not before a throne but at the foot of the cross. We turn not our eyes from suffering but follow Christ into and through suffering. In faith, we learn to expect that we will endure; that whatever power or wealth with which we are tempted, it all pales compared to the unending Kingdom held together in Christ, in whom and for whom all things were created. In faith, we know what to expect: Grace, mercy, peace, and love. If you look closely, it's more amazing than anything this world has to offer, even as we await the fullness of his glory that will one day come. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.