

Luke 23:33-43

November 24, 2013

Christ the King Sunday

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

“And the people stood by, watching.” The text doesn’t tell us anything more about these bystanders, but we can only begin to imagine they stood there silently, mouths a gasp, eyes wide open to what was taking place before them. Watching the leaders, soldiers, and even one of the criminals mocking him and challenging Jesus to save himself. Echoes of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness by Satan who essentially said the same thing daring Jesus, if he was indeed the Son of God, to use his power to save himself. Watching Jesus utter words of forgiveness for those who have sentenced him to die such a horrible death and who now throw insults his way. Watching perhaps helplessly and hopelessly the one whom they thought was indeed the Savior God promised would come dying a slow death, alone on a cross, with two criminals by his side. We can only begin to speculate as to the feelings and emotions those standing by watching were experiencing. Shock. Anger. Frustration. Despair. Sorrow. Guilt. Agony. Hopelessness. Maybe even fear that if they spoke out in defense of Jesus, they too might end up alongside him on a cross, just like those two criminals. Some in the crowd possibly even a had sense of joy and relief as this one who threatened the status quo would finally no longer be a thorn in their side, a threat to their way of life.

For some reason, my mind gravitated toward these few words in the passage today. “And the people stood by watching.” Possibly, because so often in life I feel as if all I can do is stand by and watch the agony of what goes on before our very eyes in the world in which we live. I can only watch as one more child is separated from her parent and confined to a cell in a

foreign land not knowing if they will ever be reunited again. I can only watch as our nation seemingly becomes more divided by the day. I can only watch as another storm rages or another fire blaze out of control. I can only watch as another innocent life is lost into the evils of human sex trafficking. I can only watch as one more child goes to bed hungry. I can only watch as one more faithful saint is diagnosed with an incurable disease or whose body no longer functions as it once did or suffers from a mental illness. I can only watch and wonder what the future holds for my children, our children, and the children to come. And I stood by watching.

We all find ourselves in this position at one point or another in our life – standing by and watching. Sometimes it's all we can do as we are seemingly paralyzed by fear. Overcome with grief. Trapped by anxiety. Consumed by despair. Overcome with guilt. I find myself oddly connected with those who stood by that day as Jesus breathed his last and watched. Because, I simply imagine I would do the same. Stand, watch, and feel helpless. Cry out in disbelief over what is happening to this one I have been following and have come to love and trust is the one to rescue me from all that ails me. Possibly even ask the same question as those who mocked Jesus did, "Why don't you save yourself?"

Yet, I also feel drawn to these few words because I need the words that blanket these words. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." "Truly I tell you today you will be with me in Paradise." I simply can't read this text and wonder if some in that crowd didn't feel compelled to stand up against the leaders who were mocking Jesus and condemned an innocent man to death. How often do I stand by and watch, sit silently in the face of injustice? I suspect at some point each of have thought about calling our elected official or writing a letter but possibly felt inferior, didn't know what to write, or simply gave in to apathy. We have contemplated saying something when we have heard a racial slur tossed out, a rumor we knew

to be untrue, or a homophobic statement of hatred uttered and instead simply said nothing. Failed to act. Sat by and watched. Indeed, I need the grace and forgiveness offered by Jesus on the cross that fateful day. I need to hear those words, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” I need the strength that is found in weakness to stand with the weak and be a voice for the voiceless, as Jesus the God made visible, did. I so desperately need the one who didn’t come down from the cross that day, but modeled leadership that is often difficult to find in the world today and in the Roman culture of Jesus’ day.

Watch leadership that sets aside personal agenda, well-being, and livelihood for the benefit of the other. We witness a God who understands our inability at times to act, a God who sees the struggle we encounter daily with the temptations of the world that promise the lie we can save ourselves, a God who hears our cries of pain and here at the foot of the cross as we stand by and watch – a God who acts. In Christ, God once again intervenes and acts on the world’s behalf because there is no action on our own that could overcome the snare of sin and death.

Christ’s crucifixion is not glamorous or glorious but rather quite the opposite. It’s messy, ugly, gruesome, painful, and yet it’s the greatest act of love that will ever be revealed. In Christ’s crucifixion, God meets us in the most unlikely of all places, a cross, and frees us from our inability to act and into a life of service. The cross of Christ and His subsequent resurrection on Easter morning have opened to us everything we need – we are fed with the promise of God’s forgiveness even when we stand by and watch, we are nourished with the hope of eternal life even when our guilt and shame tell us we don’t deserve it, and we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to truly see how beautiful that costly act of grace is and strengthened by the

bread of life to respond to that beautiful grace by meeting the world exactly where God meets it.

The saving action of our king on the cross gives us voice to those moments in life we stand by and watch. In the face of whatever comes our way, we know there is a tomorrow. I recollect a colleague of mine years ago working in the insurance industry who had recently been diagnosed with an incurable illness. Many questions he had and what he would experience in the future was yet unknown. Just how long did he have to live? How was his body going to act to treatments that may help prolong his life? In some ways, he was still standing by and watching. Processing. Grieving. I didn't know John all that well, but one day shortly after his diagnosis was tasked to go help train him on a new computer system the company recently switched too.

Come alongside this time of watching and waiting. Yet, what I found so remarkable about this man of faith and other saints undergoing similar situations is how the gift of faith and the freedom, hope, and new life offered through Jesus Christ equipped him to proclaim the light of Christ that entered his darkness. He trusted in the words that he, too, would be in paradise with Jesus. In his weakness, he found the strength of God to move from a state of watching to a state of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. He found resurrection hope in the face of death. In our watching, may we too find that same strength, that same hope, and that same voice.