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# “A Curious King is Crowned”

A SERMON on Luke 23:33-43 for Christ the King: the Last Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C  
Preached 23 November 2025 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister<sup>1</sup>  
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“Save yourself.”

Over and over again, these words are hurled at Jesus: by the religious leaders as they mock Jesus’ foolishness, by the soldiers as they demonstrate the futility of undermining the authority and stability of the empire, and by one of the criminals condemned to die with Jesus, laughing at the hopelessness of the situation.

Save yourself.

It is a mocking challenge to Jesus, because none of them believes that he can. This is the way of the world—you don’t challenge the status quo, you don’t threaten the order of things, you don’t give hope to those who are hopeless. You are just one person, poor and weak, and this is what happens to people like you. Go ahead, save yourself. We’d like to see you try.

Save yourself.

They are the words of people who don’t believe that salvation is possible. They are the words of people who don’t know what salvation looks like.

But what *does* salvation look like? Is it the vindication of having those who would disagree with us proven wrong, or those who would challenge us put to shame—as it was for the religious leaders? Is salvation the conquering of our enemies, or the domination of others—as the soldiers of the empire thought? Is salvation a release from whatever problems ail us, a get out of jail free card if you will—as it was for the criminal who hung next to Jesus on the cross?

Perhaps you already know the answer: No, this is not what salvation looks like. And yet, is this not how we so often think and speak about God’s salvation...? And not just us, but so many of our ancestors in the faith, too? We pray to God to save *us* and put to shame those who would disparage us, upholding *us* before *their* eyes. We pray to God to save us and deliver our enemies into our hands, whether on the battlefield or the political stage. We pray to God to save us from the present brokenness and suffering of the world—and yes, the brokenness and suffering in our own lives, too—that our slates might be wiped clean, and that we would find prosperity and happiness in a world free of adversity.

What does salvation look like?

Those who gathered around Jesus, taunting him as he hung on the cross, didn’t know. To be honest, sometimes I’m not sure I know either. Sometimes I’m not sure *we* know.

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In our reading from the Gospel of Luke this morning, we find Jesus captured in the grips of the worldly powers of the day. We’ve once again jumped ahead a bit in the storyline—forward to the climax, in fact, to the place where it has all been leading: the cross. Having provoked the ire of the leaders of the empire, Jesus has been condemned to death. He is being executed by The State for sedition and treason. The religious leaders, filled with any number of mixed motives, are going along to get along, even taking a leading role in the choruses calling for his death. And that death,

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon incorporates material from the sermon on this text “Christ the King?” written and preached by me on 20 November 2022, as well as a sermon on this text written and preached by the Rev. Adam Yates on 24 November 2019 at St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, East Haddam, Connecticut; said content used by permission.

that execution, is to be by way of crucifixion—hanging on a cross—

Crucifixion is one of the most gruesome and torturous ways to kill a person known to humanity. Moreover, crucifixion is meant to be deterrence. “Crosses outside cities and along roadways [serve as] a Roman public service announcement: Caesar is Lord. We are your masters. Defy us, and *this* is what will happen to you.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus does, of course, defy the powers that be of that era, and so to the cross they lead him. And unlike the sorts of battles between powers that we take part in, Jesus doesn’t resist—at least not with force and fury.

But why?

The Reverend Shannon Kirshner, who currently pastors Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta and formerly served 9 years as senior pastor of the landmark Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, that grand cathedral-like church right in the middle of the so-called “Magnificent Mile”—she helps us ponder that question:

Have you ever wondered why Jesus did not fight back? [she writes]. Why God chose to save us, to show us God’s love, like that? Why did God choose to be God in such a vulnerable way? Jesus, our King of kings, Lord of lords, the fullest revelation of who God is, the one whose reign we honor this day, to whom we give our life, *that* Jesus just hung there.

He hung there, spoke words of forgiveness and welcome, showed compassion, and died. God’s actions in Jesus, the way God expresses God’s power and dominion, are so dissonant with what we know of power and leadership in our world. Seriously, what are we to make of a God, our Sovereign, our King, who suffers and dies by choice?

It can be hard to know what to make of it. Father Robert Capon tried to give words to the struggle in his book *Hunting the Divine Fox*. In one chapter entitled “Superman,” Father Capon puts it this way:

The human race is, was, and probably always will be deeply unwilling to accept a human messiah. *We don’t want to be saved in our humanity; we want to be fished out of it.* We crucified Jesus, not because he was God, but because he blasphemed: he claimed to be God and then failed to come up to our standards for assessing the claim. It’s not that we weren’t looking for the Messiah; it’s just that he wasn’t what we were looking for. Our kind of Messiah would come down from a cross. ... He wouldn’t do a stupid thing like rising from the dead. He would do a smart thing like never dying. (Robert Capon, *Hunting the Divine Fox*, p. 91)

Coming down to fight, refusing to give into death, those are the qualities of power and leadership that we understand, that we see, that we certainly prize. Forgiving, expressing compassion, showing welcome, being vulnerable—all things Jesus did as he hung there, dying, our King—we don’t prize those things the same way, do we?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Rinehart, “From a Preacher” commentary for 20 November 2022, in *Sundays and Seasons: Preaching*, Year C 2022 (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2021), 287-288; emphasis added.

<sup>3</sup> Shannon J. Kirshner, “Power and Strength”, sermon for 20 November 2016 at the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2016/112016.html>.

Indeed, we don't prize those things in our world. I mean, perhaps some of us *say* we do—especially those of us who like to think of ourselves as “good Christians” or simply “good people.” But nevertheless, the world around us still looks to accolades and achievements, fortunes and fame, muscle and might as it judges who it deems to be in control.

The good news of the gospel, though, is that in the end, it is in fact God in Jesus Christ who proves victorious. Sure, in this scene on Calvary Hill that we've been taken to by our scripture reading this morning, it sure looks like the powers have gotten Jesus right where they want him. But we, the church, are here to give witness to the fact that the story doesn't end there on that hill. No, you see, there was a third day, and an empty tomb, and a Christ in our midst that could not be crushed even by death itself.

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What does salvation look like? Salvation looks like the cross. And what is a cross, but the intersection of two lines? What is a cross, but the crisscrossing of two pieces of wood, not in opposite directions, but in fundamentally different directions that meet at a single point that gives shape and form to the whole...?

What does salvation look like? It is the intersection of our own brokenness with God's creative urge, where the God who first formed the red earth into human being and breathed life into its lungs meets the dry and broken potshards of our souls. And where they meet, at the centre, is the cross.

What does salvation look like? It is the crisscrossing of our disdain for ourselves with God's overwhelming love for us. Where the two meet hangs Jesus, crucified, taunted, humiliated.

What does salvation look like? It is the place where our transient fidelity is crossed by God's enduring faithfulness. Where the two connect is the stone once rejected, but now the cornerstone upon which the Kingdom of God is given its foundation.

This is not the salvation that we often imagine. It may not be the salvation that we even want, but our reading this week is a reminder to set aside the salvation that we expect and pursue instead the cross, for that is where we will find Christ. That is where we will see at last the new creation that God is working. At the cross, God invites us to enter into the hardships of this world, not flee from them. At the cross, God invites us into the sufferings of the world, not to seek salvation from them. For at such a meeting place we will find salvation. It is only there that we will find ourselves face to face with the cross, and therefore with Jesus. It is only there that we will be witness to the cornerstone being laid in our midst.

*Blessing and honour, glory and power be unto God, now and forever. Amen.*