

Sermon Title: “Praise for the King on a cross”

Christ the King Sunday November 23, 2025 The Reverend Susan St. John

Texts: Jeremiah 23:1–6; Psalm 46; Colossians 1:11–20; Luke 23:33–43

Whenever I see this scripture for Christ the King Sunday, I wonder ... What has crucifixion got to do with being a king?

Next year we hear from Matthew and he talks about sheep and goats and how they are judged and separated. Then we hear from Luke where Pilate is challenging Jesus’ role as a King. But our text today, On Christ the King Sunday, is Jesus on the Cross. The cross that terrifies those who have the misfortune to witness it. Offering a painful, lingering death. Offering humanity their end in the most human and ‘unkingly’ fashion possible.

Christ the King Sunday was instituted in the Christian Calendar in only 1925. It was given to us by Pope Pius XI in response to growing secularism, the rise of communism in Russia and fascism in Spain. Do we still have a need for Christ the King reminder today ... one hundred years later? OH, YES .. we do! And why? Because in this confusing time where information comes at us from every direction, influences are tossed out as ‘the only truth’, people of different beliefs and different motivations are living on each other doorsteps. We need, more than ever, a focal point, an influence, a reminder of how to build God’s truth in a world that is changing and evolving. The problems we face are all different and all the same.

Introduction: The King We Didn’t Expect

Today we stand at the foot of the cross. Above the bruised and bleeding body of Jesus hangs a sign: **“This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews”** written in Greek and Latin and Hebrew.

Now, before we move too quickly over that sign – which, frankly, I long to do - let’s pause and listen. Because that inscription carries both the pain of history and the promise of heaven.

In the Roman world, when someone was crucified, a sign was hung above their head. It was called a *titulus* — a wooden board declaring the person’s crime. Rome did this to make an example out of the condemned. It was their way of saying, *“This is what happens when you defy Caesar.”* The sign made the punishment public and the warning clear.

So when Pontius Pilate ordered that a placard be hung above Jesus reading, *“Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Judeans,”* it was the official charge against Him — that He had claimed to be a king, not acknowledging Caesar. To Rome, that meant sedition, treason and worst of all, REBELLION.

But Pilate had another motive too. He meant it as mockery — a jab at the Jewish leaders who forced his hand. He sneered, “Here’s your king. Here’s the best your people can produce — hanging on a Roman cross.”

It was the language of **imperial sarcasm** — the empire laughing at the hopes of a humiliated people.

But oh, my friends — God has a way of turning the world’s sarcasm into heaven’s song. What Pilate meant as insult, heaven meant as truth.

When Scripture calls Jesus “King of the Judeans,” that word “Judeans” describes people who come from Judea, named for the tribe of Judah. Judah was the fourth son of Jacob and Leah. When Leah bore that child, she said, “This time I will praise the Lord.” And she named him Judah — which means praise Jehovah.

What we need to understand is what this sign meant to people who were closer to the history of “Judeans”. “King of the Judeans,” is also calling Him **King of those who Praise Jehovah**. Jesus reigns over the tribe that refuses to stop praising God, even at the cross.

Rome was declaring mockery, but God was declaring majesty. The world was trying to shame Jesus, but heaven was showing us who Jesus really is.

In **Latin**, the language of empire, it said: *Jesus is King — above every Caesar and every crown*.

In **Greek**, the language of the world, it said: *His kingdom is for every nation and every tongue*.

In **Hebrew**, the language of faith, it said: *He is the King of those who praise God — the ruler of those who trust Jehovah*.

And so what began as a Roman warning and a Roman insult became God’s revelation. The cross was not a defeat — it was a coronation. The crown of thorns was the sign of a true King who reigns, not by crushing, but by carrying the pain of those who are not able. Jesus, the son of man, is the King of people who praise God because what we praise grows stronger and God’s way can become stronger and more compelling in us, when we praise God.

So, what Kingly proclamation did Jesus deliver from that cross? King Jesus proclaimed “Lord, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

Ancient kings were expected to establish justice, protect the innocent, and **grant clemency**. Jesus fulfills kingship not by destroying his enemies, but by **granting clemency for them** at the moment of their oppressive and horrible rebellion.

So why didn’t Jesus simply say, “I forgive you”? Why ask his Father, God, to forgive the oppressors? After all, Jesus **did** forgive sins throughout his ministry and his forgiving led to praising and glorifying God.

In Luke-Acts, forgiveness results in **worship** of God:

- The sinful woman → forgiven → praises God (Luke 7:47–50)
- The healed leper → returns glorifying God (Luke 17:15)
- The crowd at the cross → later “returned home beating their breasts” (Luke 23:48)
- Pentecost → people forgiven → praising God (Acts 2:38–47)

But on the cross, Jesus has a more divine role to play, a Kingly role. Jesus the Christ is leading at that time when we would most surely fail. Jesus leads us for that time when we hang on our cross of pain and shame and fear. Jesus, is the King for us; setting the example of living in God’s Kingdom.

- Not just the forgiver, but Intercessor repairing torn relationships
- The revelation of the son in relationship with the Father
- The instruction of the teacher to pray for our enemies and our fears
- The King proclaiming reconciling communion of divine love

His request ‘to forgive ...’ is not due to lack of authority. Jesus’ request is a **purposeful act that completes his mission** because forgiveness forms a praising community. Jesus’ kingly act literally **creates his kingdom**. This is the **Kingdom of God on display ... forgiving even when we are in great suffering and pain**.

Jesus reigns as KING by reconciling people to the Father. His request is royal authority **expressed through obedience and love**, creating harmony between heaven and earth.

Reconciling us, when we are turned from our true relationship with God, toward reconciliation of our relationship with God. God doesn’t ever turn from us, we, however do turn from God and Jesus is our relationship builder, restorer and renovator. Jesus brings us back from chaos and the persistent call of what we see, what we “know”, our fears and our assumptions, to bring our focus back to be the people who praise God.

And that brings us to where we live today. Because that same King — the King of Judeans, the *King of those who Praise God*— calls us to live as His people praising God even in our confusion, in our fear, and in our anger.

So let’s walk through this gospel story in three very human times - to see what the *King of those who Praise God* is teaching us when we find ourselves on the cross of confusion, on the cross of fear, or on the cross of anger, on the cross of judgment where we most righteously feel the need to punish. Oh, and the cross we find the most appealing ... resisting the change that happens when we trust the King’s authority.

I. When We Are Confused — Praise God by trusting the forgiveness offered by Jesus on the cross.

(Jeremiah 23:1–6; Luke 23:33–38)

Jeremiah looked at the leaders of his day and cried out, “*Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!*” The people were confused — they didn’t know who to trust. The kings had failed them. The prophets had lied to them. The nation was lost.

But then God spoke a promise: “*I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and He shall reign as King and deal wisely.*”

Centuries later, that promise hung on a cross. The people looked up at Jesus, saw the sign — “King of the Judeans” — and couldn’t make sense of it. How could a dying man be a reigning king? How could God’s way include a Roman cross?

We know that confusion is part of the human story. We try very hard to understand, to be in charge, to predict the outcome. But we also know that old adage, “If you want make God laugh, outline your plan”. Can we count the times when our plan doesn’t make sense anymore? When faith feels foolish, when the pieces don’t fit. That’s when praise becomes trust.

To *praise Jehovah* in confusion is to say, “God, I don’t understand what You’re doing, but I still believe that You’re doing something.” When we can’t trace God’s hand, we can still know that Christ the King will set us toward our freedom with clemency and reconciliation. With a trust God’s promise of the righteous branch who will reign as king, when we can’t see the plan, we are told to praise God — not just singing but trusting. Not just shouting, but standing firm in faith. God’s Kingdom is revealed.

II. When We Are Fearful — Praise God by trusting that forgiveness points us to the true King

(Psalm 46; Colossians 1:11–20) Psalm 46 begins in crisis: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth gives way.”

The mountains are trembling, the waters roaring — the whole world is shaking. And yet the psalmist declares, “*The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.*”

Then Paul, centuries later, writes to the Colossians: “He is the image of the invisible Christ, the firstborn of all creation... and in Him all things hold together.”

Do you hear that? *All things hold together.* When it feels like the world is falling apart, Christ is still holding it all firmly.

That’s the King of those who Praise God — the one who rules not with weapons, but with wisdom; not with armies, but with authority born of love, not with judgement, but the truth of reconciling forgiveness.

So, when fear comes — when the news is bad, when the diagnosis is uncertain, when tomorrow feels fragile — we are asked to praise Jehovah. Praise is not denial. Praise is declaration. Forgiveness is not condoning, but a step closer to seeing our fear as a tear in our relationship with God, that forgiveness will reconcile. Forgive us, for we don’t know what we do. Praise says, “God is still our refuge. God is still our strength. God is still on the throne.”

The world may tremble, but the King reigns. And that’s why we can be still and know God, up close and personal.

III. When You Are Angry, when we want to Judge and punish — Praise God by trusting that forgiveness will allow us to release control

(Luke 23:39–43)

At the cross, two men hang beside Jesus. One hurls insults in anger: “*If you are the King, save Yourself — and us!*” He’s bitter. He’s angry. He wants control. But the other thief does something different. He turns his anger into trust. He says, “*Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.*”

That’s praise, right there. It’s not a hymn — it’s a surrender. Not a shout of triumph, but a whisper of trust. And Jesus responds, “*Today, you will be with Me in paradise.*”

Dear friends, very often our anger is justified — life has been unfair, people have hurt us, the world feels cruel. But the *King of us who praise God* invites us to take that anger and release it into God’s hands. To stop trying to fix everything and start trusting the One who holds everything. That’s how praise transforms us — it turns the clenched fist into an open hand. It turns “*Why, God?*” into “*Here I am, God.*”

When we let go, we make room for grace. When we release control, we experience peace. That’s what it means to praise Jehovah.

It means when life is confusing, fearful, or angry, we remember who reigns. We live as members of the clan of Judah — people who praise God.

To put all this together from the world of Christ the King:

When **confused**, we forgive and trust God's path.

When **fearful**, we forgive and rest in God's strength.

When **we are angry and the only answer is to judge and punish**, we forgive and release control to God's hands.

And every time we do, we lift high the banner of that cross — the same cross that bore the sign "King of the Judeans." What Rome meant as shame, God meant as salvation. What the empire mocked, heaven magnified.

Because that sign still speaks: Jesus is the King of the Judeans — the *King of those who Praise Jehovah*. And God through Christ reigns over every life that chooses to trust Christ's reign and that offers 'winning' through the peace and strength of reconciliation with God.

So, my dear friends, when confusion clouds our vision, when fear grips our heart, when the anger of judgement to punish burns in our soul — lift our eyes to that sign above the cross and let it remind us that our King still reigns. Not from a golden throne, but from a rugged cross. Not by force, but by love. Not for Himself, but for us and our relationship with the Creator of all things that are sacred and holy and dear.

So let everything that has breath — everything that has hope — everything that has seen God's hand at work — **praise Jehovah!**

Because the King of those who Praise God still reigns — forever and ever.

God bless us in the hearing and living of this gospel. AMEN