

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Sarah Harrold

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



The Sermon Text — Luke 23:33-43

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!' The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!' There was also an inscription over him, 'This is the King of the Jews.'

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in

SERMON

I am certain you've seen some of the billboards around Madison that are put up by the Freedom From Religion Organization. They have a picture of a happy person on them and they say something akin to: "I like biking, baking, and sleeping in on Sundays. – Katie, 23, atheist" There's another one I remember seeing that said something like: "I read the bible and I'm an atheist." I hear that, in England, there are signs on the sides of buses that say "Relax, there probably isn't a god." I find these billboards and signs completely fascinating. I want to know the reason behind them and what they're aiming for. I would love to sit down and have a conversation with the people who are on the billboards and with the people who decided to put them up; to hear what their stories are. Because if you believe something so deeply that you're willing to be put up on a billboard for it (or pay for it), there's got to be a reason behind it. And I want to know what it is.

But while I can't know their stories and their reasons right now, I can have hunches, and one of them is something that is a strong reality check for those of us who are Christian. That hunch is that they're trying to get people to look at life in this world as it "actually"

is. They want people to come to a better understanding of truth. But if not for this group, then for the self-proclaimed atheists, truth means understanding that there is no god. There is no kingdom of God or of heaven; there is no reign of Christ. And the sooner "we" – as a collective population – realize that, the better off "we'll" be. They're saying that 1) you can have a fulfilling life without faith (biking, baking, and sleeping in), and 2) while they don't say this, I think their point is that there's a lot of suffering and evil in this world – where is your God? That presents a fascinating conundrum for those of us who are Christian – especially on Christ the King Sunday, when we proclaim that Jesus Christ is the ruler of this world.

I have a very good friend who is, for all practical purposes, an atheist. And I want to tell you a little bit about him because I asked him about these billboards and signs and he had some fascinating responses, but I think it's important to know a little bit about a person before hearing what they think. My friend is Norwegian – and not the lutefisk eating kind – but a "real" one – as in, he was born in Norway and actually lives there now. He's 30, and teaches high school. He speaks 3 languages fluently, has degrees in German, math, and physics, and has a deep love for his country. I met him on internship, as we both happened to be living in Berlin the same year. He was working at a nearby concentration camp for the year to learn more about the Holocaust and introduce others to it. But he lived next to the church I was at and, when he saw we had a food distribution project, he showed up to volunteer. He had no desire to be a part of church, but did want to help feed the hungry. That was 3 years ago now and, within those years, I've gotten to know this fabulous person who has taught me an incredible amount about life and passion and friendship and dreams. He would not consider himself good, nor would he say that he cares about humanity. But he is one of the most self-less people I know.

So again, I was talking to this Norwegian friend about atheism. Now, he'll tell you that he technically doesn't know whether or not there is a god, but to the best of his ability, he can't find any reason why someone would actually believe there was one. He understands context and culture and emotions and the roles they play in bringing a person to believe that. But for him, to look at reality objectively tells him that there

is no god. There are too many things in this world that seem more easily explained by the lack of a god than by the presence of one. The thing is, I greatly respect this friend and his thoughts. When he says that he's sifted through arguments and talked with people and put this up to life experience, I believe him. I am a pastor, and I might have strong experiences that compel me to believe the opposite, but his thoughts need to be honestly considered.

And I think he's not alone in them – even for Christians. Regardless of who you are and what your beliefs are, people tend to think that, if God existed and cared about the world, then we would witness seas being parted and people raised from the dead and countries at peace. In short, we tend to think that, if there really was a god (and assuming this god was a “good” god), then life would be a whole lot better than it is now. So therefore, as my friend points out, the easier argument is to say that there is no god and we need to learn to rely on ourselves to do what needs to be done in this world.

I get this, and I think it's more than a valid argument. But then in comes this pesky Christ the King Sunday. And with it comes Luke's account of the crucifixion. On the Sunday in which we celebrate the presence and rule of God, we read about a man who's being ridiculed even as he is dying from torture. Apparently, Jesus' death on the cross is related to being a king. Apparently, Jesus' death on the cross is related to God's activity on earth. Apparently, God's presence and activity among us doesn't mean that obvious miracles and joyous life are happening. State-sanctioned torture is happening, after all. So maybe our concept of what a king is, and what a kingdom is, and who God is, needs a bit of work. Because if my atheist friend has a point – and I think he does – and if we do indeed, have a God who is active and present in the world – and I think we do – then there's a bit of reconciliation that needs to happen.

Our text today starts out with a man being brought to the place of his execution. Well, three men, really. A guy named Jesus and two criminals. It's been a long time coming, and in many ways it's the culmination of a larger story. This man, Jesus, had a long history of irritating the people who were defensive about their faith. He also had a long history of getting the common person to be completely fascinated by him. And on top of that all, he happened to live in a rather turbulent empire. The rulers of the empire – the Romans – were not very happy with the people they were controlling in that area – the Jews – and there was a fear that someone among them would rise up and create massive problems. So Jesus is going along

making speeches to random people and associating with unbelievers and all such things and the protectors of the faith are just disturbed. You would think they would just avoid Jesus if they didn't like what he was saying, but instead they followed him around and criticized him. And to make matters worse, Jesus comes into Jerusalem just before one of the high holy days and people come out in *throngs* to welcome him. So the leaders see their chance to both get rid of this infection to the faith and to make the Romans think that the Jews were cooperating and trying not to cause an uprising. They use Jesus as a scapegoat, and actually say to the governor: “we found this man (Jesus) perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.” This is enough even to convince the fickle crowd that worshiped him days earlier into believing he was a curse on the nation and the governor sees his chance to become a hero. So Jesus withstands trial, is tortured nearly to the point of death, and then is brought out on the hill to be executed in front of the whole nation. Which is where our text starts today. These men are most likely crawling out to their place of execution and nailed up onto the crosses. But then there's a sign that's put above Jesus that reads: “This is the king of the Jews.” The king of a people of faith. The manifestation of God among us, is tortured and hanging naked on a cross.

And what does this king – a king who has not only angels but the hand of God to save him - do? He watches the soldiers who have beaten him, laughing and gambling in front of him for his clothes. He looks at the same people who rejoiced at his coming into town, now staring blankly at the events and saying nothing. He listens to the pious scoffing at him in the smug triumph of “proving” that Jesus was not the chosen one of God, but rather an infectious trouble-maker. He takes in the challenges to prove that he actually is God, and, as if in response to them, this king begs God to forgive them all, citing a lack of foresight as a reason. He doesn't choose to prove his power or to be angry or to force people to worship him. He simply has compassion on them and loves them, even as he's dying. The two criminals next to him take notice of this – one uses it as grounds for more derision and as a desperate attempt to save him as well – and the other recognizes Jesus for who he is, and asks only to be remembered in Jesus' kingdom. The only person who sees Jesus as a king is the one who is buried under such a load of inescapable guilt and punishment that he knows there's no way out and is willing to have a king who also dies on crosses. Jesus' response? “TODAY you will be WITH me in Paradise.” Today. Not when

the world ends, not after you shape up, not after you've paid the price for your sins. But today. And where is this Paradise? Well, Jesus is on the cross. My guess is that that's where the kingdom happened to be that day.

So now you tell me: is this man - is Jesus - God? Is this really God who has shown up on the cross and in the midst of death? Because in many ways, it's "easier" to explain this story if he's not. It's easier to believe that this man really was just a trouble-maker who ended up being executed. But if he IS God? If he IS a king? What kind of a king would this be, and what kind of kingdom is being established?

I really do think that it's difficult to see the option of a real, present, and active god in this world. And I don't think that we, as Christians, have any sort of superior knowledge to our atheist friends. We have a book that tells us there is a god, we have family and friends who tell us there is, and we have our own experiences of the supernatural. But very few people – Christians even – can say with 100%, absolute certainty that there is, indeed, a god. I do, however, have faith that there is. And I believe that this god is the God we see in our scripture reading today. It's a God whose glory and reign is found in the bloody, tortured, broken body of Jesus on the cross. It's a God whose work it is to absorb the oppression we force upon others, to listen to our silence in the face of injustice, and to receive our smug self-righteousness. And then to die for us so that reconciliation, healing, and resurrection out of our filth would happen. It's a God who, rather than getting people to shape up by beating them over the head with a stick, instead enters fully into the deepest and darkest places of our world. We tend to look for kings in the places of wealth, glory, prominence, and power. We tend to see God in the places of our certainty of belief, in the places of our prosperity, and in the places of miraculous escapes from suffering. But it would seem as though God's glory and God's presence is actually in the places of despair and exhaustion.

So, Katie, 23, atheist on the billboard: you like biking, baking, and sleeping in on Sundays. I like singing, coffee in batman mugs, and talking to people in parking lots. I'm 27, my name is Sarah, and I do believe that Christ Jesus is the ruler of this world. Amen.

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