

Luke 23:27-43

In one of Aesop's fables, a lonely shepherd boy cried "wolf!" and all the villagers came running, but there was no wolf. Later the boy cried "wolf!" again, and the villagers came running; but again there was no wolf. Later when the wolf came to attack the sheep, the boy cried "wolf!" but no one came running, and the sheep were destroyed by the wolf.

To many people, the Church's preachers are that shepherd boy. Two weeks ago the theme of the day was "Christ is coming!" Last Sunday the theme of the day was "Christ is coming!" Today, the Last Sunday in the Church Year, the coming of Christ is again the theme before us. But how many villagers have become weary of hearing the boy cry "wolf!" They have stopped running to God's House to hear His Word and eat His body and blood. They have tuned out the constant cry, "Jesus is coming again!" They refuse to believe what the shepherd boy says, so that when Christ does come again in Judgment, they will not be ready.

Are you ready for the return of your King? To be ready means to come running to His Word and Sacrament even though we cannot see Christ with our eyes. To be ready means that we hear and act on His words even though we hear the same words over and over. To be ready is a mark of Jesus' sheep who eagerly listen to His voice so that they can follow Him.

Two men heard that voice with their ears in our text, but only one of them truly listened. Jesus was dying. The King's crown was made of thorns. His throne was a wooden cross; and His royal clothes were our sins that covered Him. "The King of the Jews" it read above His head, but the people rejected Him as their King. They turned Him over to Pilate to put Him to death.

But this King is not full of anger and bitterness. His weakened heart is filled with mercy. His voice cries out, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Two men heard these words; two thieves, one on either side of Jesus. They, too, were dying. This day on earth would be their last. They had grown up hearing those same words over and over. They were Jews; circumcised on the eighth day; they were taught the Old Testament Scriptures in Jewish homes. They had heard of the Father, and the coming Christ, and the Judgment. They had heard of forgiveness.

But these two villagers grew weary of hearing the words of the Lord. They turned away from God. They stopped listening to the cry of the shepherd boy. They became followers, not of God, but of their own pleasures. They stole, they robbed, they gave no thought to the coming Judgment. And one day they were caught. They were tried and convicted as thieves. And now they are facing death and Judgment—one on either side of Jesus.

The Shepherd Boy cries again, "Father, forgive them..." and this time one of them truly listens. He turns to Jesus and says, "Remember me when You come in Your kingdom." "When You come in Your kingdom" he said. This thief recognized Jesus as his King. It mattered not to him that His King was beaten, bloodied, and dying. It mattered not that the other thief refused His kingship. Jesus was his King, and His kingdom was coming soon. "Remember me, Jesus," he said, "in your kingdom."

For a long time this villager had rejected the cries of the shepherd boy. For a long time, when the cry was given, he had run not to hear the Word of God, but to satisfy his own sinful desires. For a long time he was his own king. No one could tell him what to do. No one could tell him how to live. He lived as he pleased. He followed his own rules. He was his own king. But where had it gotten him? A place on a cross. A place in hell forever.

It was the mercy of God that placed Jesus on a cross next to him. It was the mercy of God that allowed this villager to hear the cry of the Shepherd Boy one more time. And it was the mercy of God that caused him to believe the words which were cried; to repent and believe the good news of forgiveness, life, and salvation.

You are hearing the same cry today. The shepherd boy is telling you the Word of God—the Word of Judgment, the Word of Forgiveness. You may be, like that thief, one who has turned away in the past from the cry of the shepherd boy; one who has become your own king; who will not be told what to do and how to live; who will hear what you want to hear, say what you want to say, and live according to your own rules.

Do not be stubborn in your heart. Admit that this is the truth. Repent! I have become my own king, and you have become yours. For as the Bible says, “We have all turned to go our own sinful way...not one does what is right...not one of us is good.” Like that thief, the cry you hear today may be your last. We don’t know when death will come. We don’t know when Christ will return.

Do not be as the other thief. The words of Jesus entered his ears but did not enter his heart. He refused to repent. He refused to believe that Jesus was his King. Listen to this shepherd boy when he tells you that Jesus is coming again. Listen when this shepherd boy says “Repent of your sins.” Listen when this shepherd boy tells you that Jesus is your King. He was born to be your King. He suffered and died as your King. He rose again, and will come again to be your King forever. He is a King who loves you; a King who forgives you; a King who gives you life and salvation.

In your baptism this King gave you a place in His kingdom. By grace He washed away your sins and gave you His perfect innocence. In His Holy Supper this King comes to you to give you royal food—the bread of life and the cup of salvation. He is not offended by your sinful life, but He bespeaks you righteous and holy. He took your place in hell so that you now have a place at His royal Table; so that your place in His eternal mansion is made certain.

This, your King, gave such certainty to the dying thief. “Today,” He told him, “You will be with Me in Paradise.” The Shepherd Boy spoke, and the villager listened. He trusted the words of his King. He would live forever in His kingdom of Paradise.

These words are also for you. Today you have a place in Paradise. Today heaven is yours. Today you do not need to fear sin, death, and hell, because your King has conquered these enemies for you. His head was crowned with thorns so that yours is now crowned with victory. In Christ Jesus your Savior, you are a forgiven child of God. In Christ the victory is yours; paradise is your King’s treasure and gift to you. Like that thief, you can live in peace until you die. Even if you suffer, as he suffered, your comfort—your hope is, like his, Jesus’ words of forgiveness and life to you.

And so we have come to the end of the Church Year. It has been a year of grace. None of us is deserving, but God has poured out His grace upon you this past year. Through Word and Sacrament He has blessed you with His forgiveness. He has called us to repentance, and pardoned each of you for Jesus' sake. Week after week you have heard this shepherd boy telling you, not just that Christ is coming again, but that He is here with you right now. He is with you because He is for you—for you with His heart of mercy...for you in His living Word.

By the grace of God this shepherd boy will continue to cry out to you in the new year, not because he is lonely for your attention; not because he is wanting to fool you by crying “wolf!” but because this is what God has called him to do. May God, in His rich mercy, lead you villagers here at Christ, Augusta to keep running whenever you hear the cry; to keep running to the voice of your true Shepherd—He who is your King; who died that you may live in Him and with Him forever—Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.