

Westminster Sermon – Executing Righteousness  
St. Andrew’s Sunday, November 20, 2022  
Scripture: Jeremiah 23:1-6, Luke 23:33-44  
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On this Christ the King Sunday, our first scripture reading is Jeremiah 23:1-6. Written at the time of the Babylonian Exile around 587 BCE, the prophet conveys judgment against the kings for the way they executed power. This is a lament and divine judgment on the abuse of power by those who were called to shepherd God’s people. The prophet offers the hope that God will raise up shepherds, leaders, and kings in the future who will execute power with righteousness and justice. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

*Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. <sup>2</sup> Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. <sup>3</sup> Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. <sup>4</sup> I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD.<sup>5</sup> The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. <sup>6</sup> In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.” Amen.*

In our second scripture reading, Luke 23:33-43, we read Luke’s account of the execution of a King who exercises power with righteousness and justice, who absorbs the hostility of the world, who embraces the injustice of the cross, and who saves others by not saving himself. Listen to what the Spirit is saying.

*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, God’s 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.” Jesus replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” Amen.*

The title of the sermon: Executing Righteousness

*Text: ...and he shall reign as king and deal wisely and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. Jeremiah 23:5b*

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, how grateful we are for those who are faithful to your call to execute justice and righteousness. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Each week as I execute the writing of a sermon, I do so at a desk which has been a part of the Denham Family for several generations. I have memories of it in the living room of my grandparents two-flat in Roseland, IL where we journeyed most Sunday afternoons during my early, formative years for dinner. My most prominent memory of the desk is its placement in the living room of our bungalow home in South Holland, IL where our father would sit to write checks and keep track of the family finances. Today it rests in the office of our Lake Springfield home offering a lovely view of the water for those who sit at it. It is a joy and privilege for me to feel the presence of those who have gone before me as I sit at this simple, dark wood, pedestal desk.

Those who execute justice and righteousness on behalf of the United States in the Oval Office sit at a desk with distinct historical significance. Several presidents including the five most recent have sat at the Resolute desk which was a gift from Queen Victoria to President Rutherford B. Hayes in 1880. It was built from the oak timbers of the British Arctic exploration ship *HMS Resolute*, which was abandoned in the Arctic waterway in 1854 while searching for Sir John Franklin and his lost expedition. Resolute was found the next year floating in Davis Strait by *George Henry*, an American whaling ship. The United States repaired and returned Resolute to the United Kingdom as a gesture of goodwill and the Queen presented the Resolute desk to the President as a memorial of this courtesy and act of kindness.

To be resolute is to be admirably purposeful, determined, and unwavering, a characteristic necessary to execute justice and righteousness. The word “execute” has two distinct and different definitions. The first is “to carry out or put into effect a plan, order, or course of action.” The second is “to carry out a sentence of death on a legally condemned person.”

Ironically, our first reading in the prophet Jeremiah addresses the execution of justice and righteousness by kings and shepherds who use their power for good and our second reading is Luke’s gospel is the story of the execution of Christ the King in whom we find justice and righteousness.

Jeremiah prophesies that God will raise up kings and shepherds who will execute justice and righteousness unlike those who have misused the power with which they were entrusted in the care of God’s people. The consequences for their abuse cost the Israelites dearly who were exiled from their home. They endured their own cross of suffering and the death of a way of life. This loss transformed them and was followed by a resurrection though a return home, a new beginning, and a second chance.

On this Christ the King Sunday, we proclaim that Christ is like no other king we have ever known. Jesus not only identified with those who were marginalized in society, teaching, and healing the least of these, he also suffered a humiliating death when he was executed for a

crime he never committed. He suffered with resolute strength and did not come down from the cross, even when the religious leaders, soldiers, and the unrepentant criminal at his side bullied and mocked him.

We come to understand the true nature of Jesus' Kingship in these mocking words. On the one hand, the repeated demand, "If you are the Messiah, save yourself!" functions as another temptation for Jesus. Just as the devil had earlier challenged Jesus three times in the wilderness and offered him a less painful option, so now Jesus is being invited to save himself and to avoid the cross. By his lack of response to the scoffers, Jesus remains resolute and steadfast in being true to himself.

On the other hand, the words of the scoffers poignantly pose the paradox of his kingly mission. Jesus is a Messiah who saves others by not saving himself. He is resolutely committed to God's plan, which includes betrayal, absorbing hostility that does not belong to him, and an execution. In the confidence and decisiveness of the cross, Jesus demonstrates the authority that ultimately rescues criminals, scoffers, and religious leaders.

This means that the constituting event of the Christian faith is not a power play that follows the roles and logic of most of the power plays we know—retaliation, competition, cruelty, pettiness, self-protectiveness, and the like. Instead, Jesus dares to trust the God who takes him to the cross and beyond...and forgives those who do not know what they are doing. There is, perhaps, another irony that the religious authorities lead the cries for Jesus' death, whereas the one character in the story who perceives the truth and dares to speak it is the second criminal crucified alongside Jesus. He acknowledges that he justly deserves his punishment, in contrast to Jesus who is righteous, and in so doing resolutely declares his faith and receives salvation.

In Christ, the repentant criminal and all those of faith witness a life executing self-control and acting from within, not from without. Like Christ, we too can live with dignity no matter what circumstances arise in this unpredictable world because that dignity does not come from this world. That resolute dignity comes from the God who conquered death by dying on a cross and who offered forgiveness and kindness in the face of unspeakable cruelty and injustice.

When we feel overwhelmed by the circumstances in our lives or in this world, remember the God who remembers us. Remember and resolutely respond with mercy, courage, and kindness, executing righteousness and receiving amazing grace. Amen.