

No Reason to Fear

by Linda Rex

November 20, 2022, CHRIST THE KING or REIGN OF CHRIST—It's hard to believe that we have reached the end of another cycle on the Christian calendar! Next Sunday, November 27, we will celebrate the first day of Advent, the beginning of Year A in the Revised Common Lectionary.

As I was reading the gospel passage for this Sunday, Luke 23:33–43, it occurred to me that Jesus was never more truly himself as Lord of all and as truly human as all of us as when he hung on the cross, dying at our hands, humbly submissive to his Father's will. Even in that moment, when he could have simply climbed down from the cross and walked away, he was held by the nails of his love for the Father and the Spirit, and his love for all of us.

Often, it seems, when people think of Jesus Christ returning in glory, they picture him riding in triumphantly on his white horse, annihilating all the people who are standing in opposition to him in that moment. The apocalyptic language of the prophetic Word plants this idea in our minds and hearts, and our earnest longing and desire for God to make everything right fuels our belief that this is the way Jesus, as king of kings and lord of lords, will return in glory.

Looking at the readings for this Sunday, I found a theme—God does not want us to be afraid. He promised long ago that he would “raise up ... a righteous Branch” who would reign as king, acting wisely, justly, and righteously—“the Lord our righteousness” (Jeremiah 23:1-6 NASB). He said, because of this Lord there would be no need for fear or of being afraid.

Another reading for this Sunday, Luke 1:68–79, talks about how God would free us from our enemies, so we could serve God without fear. God never meant us to dread his coming or to be afraid of him or anyone else. Fear is not what should be uppermost in our hearts when we think of God, or of Jesus returning in glory. The psalmist says that: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea;...” (Psalm 46:1-2 NASB).

What if Jesus' response to all that is standing opposed to him when he returns in glory looks a lot less like the dropping of a nuclear bomb and looks a lot more like what he did on the cross? In the midst of mockery, ridicule, and humiliation, Jesus quietly asked for his Father's forgiveness of his opponents, tended to the care of his grieving mother, and offered grace and reconciliation to a criminal. Could it be that Jesus' triumphant entry will be more of a calling of all people everywhere to wake up to the truth of who they really are—who Jesus made them to be when he took on our human flesh and brought it through death into resurrection, into his eternal relationship with the Father in the Spirit?

This is the crisis of judgment—to see things as they really are, and to be given a choice as to what we are going to do in that moment. For some, there will be a refusal to live in that truth. For others, there will be joy and gratitude, and embracing of all God has made us to be as his adopted children in Christ by the Spirit. On the one side, a sickening realization that everything one has built his or her life on is now gone, for the other a celebration of all that they had hoped for in Christ finally becoming a reality.

What crisis might you be facing in your life today? The older I get, the more I realize how often I have pushed off to the future any crisis of judgment I probably ought to be facing right now, today. For example, even though I may know that having that lovely piece of cake right now probably won't harm me, in the long run it might, if I continue to eat as though large amounts of sugar won't affect me. Putting off the inevitable isn't going to make it go away. Truth is, I can have a little here and there, but I must not continue to eat large numbers of very sweet things unless I want the consequences of a serious illness.

I realize this is just a dietary concern, but I'm using it as an example to help us think in terms of the other things we face day by day: our little habit of "being nice" instead of telling the truth in love; our "adjusting" the numbers to get the best return possible; our private addiction which we believe no one knows about ("so it won't hurt anyone").... Do you see how easy it is for us to put off God's judgment about things?

One day we're going to have to wake up to the reality that some things just aren't a part of who we are as God's beloved children. Some of the things we think, say, and do are in opposition to the truth of who God created us to be. These things were never meant to be a part of our way of being as those who love God with all our being and who love one another as ourselves. One day, when Jesus returns in glory and ushers in the new heavens and new earth, all of that which is not truly us will need to once and for all come to an end. Then there will be no other way to live but that way which is our true self in Christ by the Spirit,

Jesus hung voluntarily on the cross facing our crisis in our place on our behalf. He stayed there, in spite of the legions of angels who longed to deliver him from his suffering. He allowed himself to undergo our worst so we could receive his best, handling himself with such kingly dignity in such a humiliating circumstance. We have no need to dread Jesus' return in glory—unless, of course, we refuse to wake up to the reality of who Jesus is as king of all. Perhaps we ought to consider facing our crisis today, embracing his loving judgment right now, instead of putting it off until then. Is there something you would like to say to Jesus right now, today, about who you really are?

Heavenly Father, thank you for moving us by your Son from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. Lord Jesus, you are our King, now and forever. You are the One who made all things and sustains all things, and who brought all things with you through death into resurrection, reconciling all things through your self-offering. Today we open ourselves up to your judgment, that you may remove all that is not of you and that you may make us truly as you always meant us to be. Thank you, Father, for removing, by your Spirit, our fear and giving us faith, through Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

"... strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light. For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven." Colossians 1:11–20 NASB

"When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. But Jesus was saying, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves. And the people stood by, looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, 'He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One.' The soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine, and saying, 'If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!' Now there was also an inscription above Him, 'This is the King of the Jews.' One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, 'Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!' But the other answered, and rebuking him said, 'Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.' And he was saying, 'Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!' And He said to him, 'Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.' " Luke 23:33–43 NASB

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