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Propers 29 (Last Sunday of the Church Year) Series C 2016

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Feast of Christ the King/Sunday of the Fulfillment/Last Sunday of the Church Year – November 20

Our eyes fixed firmly forward, we celebrate an event which has not happened but which is as sure as any event from the past. I say that because it is located in the Word of God. Jesus has made us the promise to return so we can gather on this Sunday and celebrate his return even though we have not yet seen that day. But perhaps our struggle, if we have one with this day, is more a matter of word choice. Is it a return or is a reappearance? Is he already here?

We have in the past spent a considerable amount of time on the fact that Christians in this time have largely gotten the end of the world completely upside down. Because much of the eschatological literature of the NT is written to the frightened persecuted church, it often casts its story in frightening terms. But the thoughtful preacher will realize that the original audience was already afraid. The goal was not to make them afraid but to give them courage, hope, and even joy in the face of their suffering. The goal was to make them less afraid. Contrast that with the Sunday morning TV preacher who is addressing eschatology and you will quickly realize that North American Christianity is not reading their Bibles very closely. They are trying to make me afraid, the very opposite of what the Biblical authors were attempting. I think the preachers of those fire and brimstone sermons have realized that fear is a great way to get people to open their wallets.

Because we are not facing the sort of persecution which the earliest Christians faced and which Christians continue to face around the globe, we have a difficult time hearing these words and they often seem rather odd to our ears. Many have made the mistake that we can only hear these words if we are also afraid, so they see the preaching of the end of the world as a fear-mongering exercise. If only we were aware of just how bad it will be, then we would shape up and live our lives aright. That is problematic on several levels. On one level it just doesn't work. Fear is such a lousy motivator. I really think this is where the current manifestations of apocalyptic prophets, especially the environmental types, will ultimately fail to change the behavior and the carbon footprints of people, at least substantively. We will not do the right thing by the planet because we are afraid, but we might be moved to do it out of love. All the scary words from Al Gore on some documentary or another will not really change my mind, but if I see this creation as a gift from God, precious and deserving of care, then I might just forego that super-sized SUV. Perhaps the coming years will prove me wrong, perhaps God will use fear to effect the changes that his church needs to function in this world, that could happen too. More importantly, however, this fear motive is not really the way the Kingdom of God works. It seems antithetical to the very nature of Jesus' Kingdom which welcomed sinners, lost people, children, and everyone else.

The Feast of Christ the king is not seeking to make me afraid, but it is giving me love, and bestowing that gift so abundantly that I might even love someone else. The Feast of Christ the King is also giving me courage and assurance to face whatever the world can throw at me,

because I know the end of the story. I know the verdict which is handed down on that last day for me and for all who call upon the name of Jesus and who bow their knees in joyful love. Yes, the devil and the world might just kill me, take away my money or my family or my security or anything else that I have. The devil and the world, however, cannot take this one thing away from me: I am God's child by baptism. God will settle the scores and raise the dead and make all the wrongs right. I know this, I believe this, Christ himself has promised and faith trusts his words to always be true.

This makes Jesus the king and my king. I am under his beneficent rule, experienced today in the authority of absolution and sacrament, and I look forward to his ever expanding rule in my life. His rule is not the ultimate police state where all the rules are strictly enforced, but his rule is always a life-giving authority. His rule is the gift of life itself. And so we celebrate the feast of Christ the King this Sunday, the Sunday of the fulfillment of all the promises Jesus has ever made.

All this said, the preacher needs to be sensitive to a certain tension. The feast day of Christ the King involves a profound sense of the "Now and Not Yet" piece of Christian theology. Jesus is here, and yet he comes, he rules and yet the powers of this darkened world seem to be ascendant. Many theologians have finessed this by suggesting that the last day is not a true "coming" or arrival, but it is a revelation of something that is already here. It is as if the fabric of reality is torn and behind all these things we currently see, we now see the king. This is what Paul means when he says we live by faith and not by sight. The reality of heaven, the reality of eternal life, the reality of our perfection is already here, it is not truly a future-only reality. But it is now. We must apprehend it by faith, by the relationship which is with God. Then, on that day, we will see it with our physical eyes as everything else has been destroyed in Christ's judgment. But that which we see by faith has been established in his merciful and gracious love. That will stand in the judgment and it too is right now, but often difficult to see in this conflicted, broken world. One cannot emphasize the not yet to the exclusion of the now, and vice versa. This is hard for us, but a proper balance and tension can be struck and done powerfully for the sake of our people.

The last two weeks have focused the attention of the hearer on the tribulation, this is a focus on the consummation. This is a focus on the now of the promise we live and the not-yet of what we anticipate.

Collect of the Day

Lord Jesus Christ, You reign among us by the preaching of Your cross. Forgive Your people their offenses that we, being governed by Your bountiful goodness, may enter at last into Your eternal paradise; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

I am struck by the image of Christ as he reigns by the preaching of his cross. Kings reign, we usually think that this means that they sit on some throne which symbolizes their power. We

imagine them dressed in royal robes, holding some scepter, surrounded by courtiers and advisors. Jesus rules from a cross. His hands clutch impotently at the nails which affix him there. He is stripped naked. He is surrounded by the crude soldiers who gamble for his clothes, and keep the leering crowds at bay. No vizier or prime minister flank him, but malefactors, terrorists we would call them. We do not point people to some regal picture, but to a brutal reality. Our king has died.

But we do so because that death is not merely any death. It was the incarnate Son of God who hung there between heaven and earth that day. That death has purged away our sin. And so the prayer continues from this disturbing image of a king whose reign consists in the preaching of a cross. We pray that forgiven of our sins, we might be governed by the bountiful goodness of God. What would such governance look like? What would that feel like? To be governed by God's bountiful goodness would seem certainly to mean that we are not governed by fear or some sense of reward or punishment. We are not governed by some odious or burdensome rule. We are governed by goodness.

How does God's goodness govern us? How does it reign in my economy, in my career, in my relationships? The goodness of God is always expressed in the cross event which has forgiven me. Just as a governor does not tell me who to marry, where to live, etc., God does not micromanage those things either. Rather what he does is empower me to say some things that are directly related to that cross, most especially the forgiveness of my neighbor's sins. The state governs me when it posts those speed limits and excises taxes from me. The state governs when it summons me to jury duty and when I see a patrol car cruise down my street. The state governs not in goodness but of necessity and power. God, we pray, governs us by his abundant, bountiful goodness. The preacher will have a challenge today as the preaching of God's good and righteous reign must overcome all the negative baggage we have because of the failures of the human attempt to govern this world.

The result of God's good governance is that we enter eternal paradise, the very promise that was made to the penitent malefactor on the cross. Jesus looked absolutely impotent to grant that request that day, but in faith the dying man asked for it, Jesus granted it. Dying, we ask the same. Having died, Jesus grants the same.

Readings

Malachi 3:13-18

¹³“Your words have been hard against me, says the LORD. But you say, ‘How have we spoken against you?’ ¹⁴You have said, ‘It is vain to serve God. What is the profit of our keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the LORD of hosts?’ ¹⁵And now we call the arrogant blessed. Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape.”

¹⁶ Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD and esteemed his name. ¹⁷ “They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. ¹⁸ Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.

Malachi wrote in a most modern sort of time. The people of God had returned from Exile, but it had not been the dramatic sort of event which marked the Exodus. They had looked back to the days of Moses in their Babylonian Exile and expected that God would raise up another heroic figure. This new Moses would smite the Babylonians with plagues, part some water, give manna in the desert, and water from a rock.

When the end of the Exile came it was such a disappointment to them. A new Persian dynasty came to power and the new king, Cyrus the Great, simply said, “Y’all can go home now.” There was no mighty signs, no ten plagues, no crossing the Red Sea, and nothing like the dramatic scene at Mt Sinai. Most of the Jews in Babylon said, “No thanks, we like it here.” The few who went had to raise funds to get there, and then, when they started on the rebuilding of the temple, they faced considerable red tape in the permitting process.

It just did not feel the same. It wasn’t the same, but the same God was working behind it. Malachi confronts the people after they have got the temple “done” but it really isn’t done. They are going through the motions of worship, but they don’t bring the best lamb for the sacrifice. They don’t tithe, but they take the nice vacations and make sure they fund their 401K plan.

What is more, they look around them, and the guy who never goes to Church, who is a scoundrel and a thief, seems to be getting along better than the church goers anyway. What is the point of getting out of bed on Sunday morning if there is no benefit?! It is a fair question. Christianity is likewise moribund in our day and age; at least it is in North America. In other parts of the world it is not and if you ask those Christians why their Church is growing, they will often point to real and tangible benefits which Christ brings them.

Malachi’s words are not entirely satisfactory for the person who wants God to come right now and mete out some good old fashioned fair justice. He tells them to wait. God has seen the faithful and written their names down in a book. Someday the things he sees will be visible to all. In other words, the righteous will be noticeably because they enjoy the favor of God and the unrighteous do not.

This seems like good news, and indeed it is. But the preacher today as well as Malachi needs to remember that he has been hitting the church goers pretty hard in the chapters which precede this. It is not entirely clear that they think that they are in the righteous camp.

This promise of God to settle accounts could be tremendous Gospel or horrific Law. For the man or woman who feels less than holy and right, this will be a very painful message. The preacher

will need to keep that person in mind. The preacher will do well to read the next chapter in preparing for a sermon on this text. We had that chapter last week in the readings. In the few remaining verses of this short book the gracefulness of God's favor is more clearly described than it is here. The image of a calf released from the stall, joyfully leaping about, is particularly potent for someone who grew up on a farm around animals.

We wondered what this might mean in an election year in which some are horrified at what has transpired and others are celebrating. God's promise here is that all the upside-down things of this world will be set aright. The day comes when the righteous will be distinguishable because it will be evident that the blessing of God rests on them. The citizen needs to keep in mind that this belongs to God, not to any man. We cannot give too much to a candidate or leader. Will he be one of the things which God must set aright? Or will he be less so? I don't entirely know. I do know, however, that God will be about this work. God works his kingdom, most often despite humanity. The Christian is always a little distant from the political triumphalism which reigns in any election season. This is all temporary, God's kingdom endures.

That said, the president will be inaugurated. His reign will begin on January 20 or so. Revelation tells us that at the time of Jesus' second coming some will still not believe it to be so. It sounds like there are some who are in shock and disbelief that the election happened. We have had riots in Portland and other cities which are essentially an expression of disbelief in the reality of this election result. Most are looking at these rioters as churlish and sore losers. But there might be an eschatological handle here – is this what we will see at the end of days when Christ's reign is asserted forcefully? Eventually every knee will bow, but they might not all be willingly bending of that knee.

Psalm 46

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.

² Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,

³ though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble at its swelling. Selah

⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.

⁵ God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;
God will help her when morning dawns.

⁶ The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.

⁷ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah

⁸ Come, behold the works of the LORD,
how he has brought desolations on the earth.

⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the chariots with fire.

¹⁰ “Be still, and know that I am God.
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth!”

¹¹ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah

Did your congregation enjoy singing “A Mighty Fortress” on Reformation Day a few weeks ago? This is a great time to reprise that joy. Of course Luther’s anthem of the Reformation is based upon this psalm and its confident tune and words are just right for this day.

Colossians 1:13-20

¹³ He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

The preacher interested in this text might use the initial verse in the imagery of a passport. When we travel abroad a passport is a very important document. It is a potent statement of our citizenship, it gives us access to the consulate or embassy. It means that people are there to defend and help us. Being delivered from the kingdom of darkness we have been given citizenship in the kingdom of Jesus. We have a passport from King Jesus. Though now we are traveling through a land which is sometimes under the control of an enemy, even this king of darkness, we are citizens of his light filled kingdom. Our baptism is that passport. We clutch it to ourselves for it is precious. It speaks to us of where we belong.

My national passport has an American symbol on it, an eagle. My passport from the kingdom of Jesus has a cross on the front, a cross which proclaims my relationship to God through His death and resurrection. Could we build a sermon out that imagery?

This is a great text for this day. Colossians 1 proclaims a Savior who has reconciled and rules over the whole cosmos. In this letter Paul seems to be contending with a group of folks who are importing some of their Hellenistic ideas to their Christianity, particularly the notion that the physical world is not really the creation of God, but it is something of a trap or even a prison into which we have been placed.

They also have a real problem with spiritual arrogance, compounded by the fact that the early Christian movement seems to have had great success among slaves and people of lower status in Roman society. The educated, intelligent, sophisticated among them are looking down on their simpler brethren. They seem to think that because they know more, that means they are closer to God.

Paul has smashed both of these ideas. In a back-handed prayer, he thanks God for their love and faith, and prays that they can all get some knowledge. The very virtues which are despised because they are common he has lifted up as praiseworthy. The very virtue by which they want to distinguish themselves, Paul has prayed that they might get some. It is all rather nicely and sharply done.

Here we get Paul proposing a solution of sort; although, he will need to spend the rest of the letter unpacking this paragraph we see before us. Some think that this is actually a song which Paul was quoting. It is as if Paul suddenly, in the midst of a sermon, said, "A Mighty Fortress is our God, a trusty shield and weapon." The Lutherans in the crowd would have a tune running through their head. So would lots of other Christians. The person who had never heard the song before, however, will only focus on the text which he is quoting but be missing some of the emotional impact of the music. That is rather the position we find ourselves in right now. We cannot hum the tune as Paul quotes this song which was probably quite familiar to his readership.

Theologically this paragraph is the core of the letter to the Colossians, it is the knowledge he prays the arrogant among them learn and it is the affirmation of those who are on the bottom of the socio-economic, theological, ecclesial heap there in Colosse. Christ has in fact reconciled all things to himself, including the physical things. As you read this paragraph, just count how often Paul uses the word "things" therein. The theology is really quite profound. Jesus has died to reconcile the rocks and trees and rivers as much as he has died to reconcile my soul.

It comes as no surprise to those who have read these Sunday Sermon notes for some time that I believe that our current American Protestant culture is dangerously Gnostic. In a sense we have allowed the Enlightenment to confine and constrict our theological conversation into a matter of morals, spirit, and other ethereal topics. As a result we speak of God saving our souls and little

else. The danger is that the physical is devalued in this sort of a theology. If Jesus died to save my soul, does he really care that I am hungry today? Does he care that I have cancer or that the economy is in the tank? Too many churches have acted as if those things simply don't matter. "We are here to save souls" they have said, whether in their mission statement or simply by the way they minister.

This in turn has given rise to a powerful reaction within our culture which in fact is at the heart of the Enlightenment enterprise: Materialism which has said that the physical is in fact all there is. Our souls don't really exist in this sort of a world view. The church is welcome to save these non-existent souls. It works for the dominant culture to have the church, which that dominant culture does not like, doing something which the culture thinks is utterly meaningless. In this world, morals are simply what we make of them. If you want to believe that there is some divine spirit out there, fine, but don't bother me with it and it is rather gauche to talk about it in public. The church has simply bought into this. Ask most Christians about the afterlife and you will get a gauzy image of transparent people, wearing white robes and halos, strumming harps on a cloud. It is completely "unreal." The picture we give the materialist world is one in which Jesus has not saved the material world but we have escaped from it. That is Gnostic.

So you can hopefully see by this point that this text is really central to the contemporary conversation we have about Jesus. He has not only laid a claim upon my soul when he died, but he shed red, sticky blood on a hard wooden cross in order to reconcile all things to himself. That means my body and soul, my possessions and all that I have, and all that my neighbor has, and all this physical world. That means I will see the trash beside the road differently, I will see the denuded rainforests of the Amazon and the melting glacial ice-caps differently. They have all been reconciled in that cross. Jesus has died for the environmental disasters as much as he has died for the moral disasters that mark my own personal history. Jesus has reconciled all things to himself. He cares as much about the starving people of the Philippines today as he does for my pallid confession of naughties on Sunday morning, namely a great deal for both of them.

That we hear this reading this Sunday gives the preacher an opportunity to proclaim a Gospel which I think is desperately needed in this time. The coming king does not come to discard this old world, to destroy, but to save. He is not coming to undo creation but to restore. Yes, the sin, the broken, the death, all this will be undone and we can hardly imagine a creation without it. But that is because we have grown so accustomed to this old and dying creation that we think its brokenness is the normal situation. We think this is the way that it has always been. That is simply an error in fact. Jesus comes to assert his lordship over all creation, a Lordship which rightly belongs to him as creator, a lordship which was challenged by the fall into sin, but which he re-established by his death upon a cross.

This text serves as a frontal assault on the notion that Jesus has died for our spirit, our soul, and that is the end of it. Jesus has died for the whole of it, he is the cosmic, the universal savior.

Luke 23:27-43 (The crucifixion of Jesus – he wears a crown of thorns)

²⁴ So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted. ²⁵ He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they asked, but he delivered Jesus over to their will.

²⁶ And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷ And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. ²⁸ But turning to them Jesus said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹ For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' ³⁰ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' ³¹ For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

³² Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³ And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. ³⁵ And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" ³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine ³⁷ and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸ There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹ And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³ And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

What can one say about this? This is the way we need to see the coming of the king, we need to see him through the lens of his coronation. The one who comes back to us in glory is the same one who died for us in humility. We need not fear this one. We can rejoice and be glad; our beloved and dear Jesus comes to us. He has spared nothing, not even his own life, for our sake. He comes to rescue us.

Luke draws our attention to two things. First of all, notice the women. They show up regularly in Luke and need attention. Roman and Jewish society essentially said that they were not worth much. Rabbis regularly thanked God that they were not a woman. Romans treated them shamefully and even wealthy young women were essentially bought and sold as political alliances were made and economic dealings were conducted. If you wanted to move up in the world, you married your daughter to a rising star.

Luke is something of a radical feminist here, at least by first century standards, if not by the standards of today. The men have all run away, but the women have remained at his side. If you have followed the career of Burmese activist Aung San Suu Kyi, you know that a woman's witness sometimes only appears to be weaker than a man's. The same could be said of Catherine of Sienna, Margaret Thatcher, Mother Theresa, and a host of others.

Jesus sees their weeping and their suffering and it is not a matter of indifference to him. They are important to him. Paul's letter is really about pointing out that the faithful love and service of the humble in the midst of the Colossians is of value to God, more so than the haughty knowledge of the educated elite in their midst. God's values are visible here.

Then we get the crucifixion scene itself. Luke wants you to have Psalm 22 running in your mind as you read this story. Pick up that Psalm and have it ready as you study this text. It is eerie to read it and realize that this was written nearly 1000 years before Jesus was crucified. With a criminal on either side, the Greek is "evil doer" but that sounds too much like George W. Bush's oft mocked assessment of terrorists perhaps.

As I said in the opening essay, this is our King. The sign even declares it. INRI is probably found somewhere in your church. You might point it out. Our king is recognized by his cross.

It is the discussion with the malefactor that really catches our attention here. Here is a man who has perpetrated terrible things. We don't know what it was, but normally to get yourself crucified meant that you had participated in some pretty nasty stuff, murder is most likely. We would have probably labeled this fellow a terrorist. They did not crucify men for stealing or the like. I suppose stealing a bunch of collected taxes from the Romans might get you on a cross, but chances are this guy was part of the simmering Jewish rebellion which would flash into open rebellion in 68 AD.

This fellow with blood on his hands, literally, both from the nails which pierce them and from the murders he has committed, begs Jesus for mercy, and from this crucified king, he gets it. This man's idea of a messiah always involved winning, kicking out the Romans, victory over the infidel, not dying at their hands. Yet, here in his dying, he sees that he has always been wrong about this. The real Messiah is found in this Jesus who dies beside him. He is called to be part of that kingdom, so are we.

Our films today like to portray the end of the world. It is always a terrible cataclysm, some portal to another world has opened up and monsters are coming up from the depths (Pacific Rim) or an asteroid is headed straight for us, or aliens have landed and are destroying everything in their path, or the environment has gone completely off the rails and we are dying of some ecological disaster. Usually there is a savior in those movies, some man or woman with the right idea, the right tools, the right skills to avert this disaster. He knows how to stick a nuclear bomb in just the right spot to kill all the enemies (Independence Day). But all these saviors can ever do is avert the disaster. They come back to a planet which is still dying, still troubled, still

the kingdom of darkness. They have not solved the problem, only averted the doom temporarily. Next week another movie will come out with hordes of killer zombies.

Our hope is not in a savior who averts the cataclysmic disaster. Indeed, he brings it. But in bringing the disaster upon the earth he reveals the kingdom which he established in the cross when he died and which has been here the whole time. This is the kingdom of which we are a part right now, this is the kingdom which we experience in baptism, sacrament, word, and fellowship. This kingdom is the kingdom of light which has no end. (See the now and not yet discussion in the opening essay.)

Law and Gospel

1. The King is coming and that strikes terror into my heart. I need no man to tell me that I have a problem. I feel it in my heart. I have not lived up to expectations and he wields such awesome power. At best I can hope to be ignored, at worst I can expect to be consumed by his wrath. But the king who comes is not simply God straight up. He is God in the flesh, the flesh of Christ, the incarnate Logos, who laid down his life and took it back up again. The returning king has holes in his hands and feet where he died for me. My heart is at rest in this.
2. I long for the day when I will get to see the justice of God. I know that I am forgiven in that blood of Christ, but I look around me and see that the scoundrels of the world seem to be getting ahead. Why is it that the people of God are laughed at, scorned, mocked, and trod upon? Do they not follow the true God? Do they not have a special relationship with the one who sits on heaven's throne? Then why can we not see that? God promises today that a day comes when this will be made clear.
3. So Jesus is coming to whisk me away to heaven, a divine escalator of sorts. But what of this world, what of the hurts I see today, what of the pollution and the crime and the suffering and the beauty I see around me? It is not just me whom he perfects and completes on that day of Jesus; it is the whole of his creation. Will the Dodo bird be restored? Will the passenger pigeon darken the skies once more? I cannot specifically say exactly what Jesus means, but he has reconciled the whole of creation to himself. The lion and the lamb lie down together.
4. I often feel like I am beneath the notice of God. My problems are really not so great, not on the cosmic scale of things. The returning king is all fine and good, I will take my place at the back of the great crowd that gathers that day, I will cheer the new king, and I will return to my anonymity, another servile cog in the heavenly machine. But wait, the Lord turns on his way to his most important task and he notices my weeping, my distress, my fear, and my loneliness. He has comforting words for me. No part of his creation is beneath his notice, no one is unimportant to him.

5. I saw a woman today. She was weeping. I did not know what to say. I am a failure as a Christian. Others are so much smarter and better than I am at this whole Jesus thing, and they know it and I know it and I am sure that God knows it too. But Paul speaks good words to me today. Jesus has delivered us from the domain of darkness and put us into the glorious reign of his son, who is the very Word of God. He is the Word, I am not. He has spoken me to this moment in time. The woman in the hospital did not need some learned theologian to speak to her, she probably needed a simple Christian to sit by her and share her grief. God delights in such things, the faithful love and service of his people he does not scorn.

Sermon Ideas

1. The Book of Life or the Book of our Lives (OT and Gospel Reading – that the Holy Spirit would set the hearers heart at rest about the end of the World.)

Many folks have a fear of the end of the world which simply does not reflect the biblical witness. This is too often due to preachers getting it wrong, but also due to our own human nature which is prone to this fear. We come to the day of reckoning and we can only imagine that we will be judged and found wanting. We know our sins, they are ever before us, they haunt our memories and our relationships and we cannot imagine standing before God's piercing gaze and not being found guilty. It is the monster of uncertainty that plagues human beings. It is normal and natural. We want to change the question from "Have I done enough?" to "Has He done enough?" The answer to that second question is always "YES!"

This sermon wants the hearer to find peace in the promise of God of what happens on that last day. The preacher may want to familiarize himself with a number of passages, Revelation 20:12 and 15 speaks of the book of life and the book of our lives. I Thessalonians 1-3 also has three amazing passages about the end. Paul assures them that Jesus rescues them from the wrath, that Paul will boast about them at the end, and finally that God will make them holy on that last day.

Malachi speaks of a book which God is making. Our human nature will think it is the book which records our sins, the book of our lives. But Malachi says it is the book of God's remembrance, the book in which our names are written so God will save us and set our world aright and all will know that we have His righteousness. This is really, really good news!

The Gospel reading then comes into this. The beautiful story of Jesus' dying on the cross and talking to the malefactor beside him. Today you will be with me in paradise. That is the word which Jesus speaks to us today. We have not deserved this, he gives it to scoundrels, even people whose lives are as corrupt and sinful as mine has been. This is

always what people are dinging Jesus for in the Gospels. He hangs out with all the wrong people, the sinners and tax collectors. But that is Jesus. He hangs today with evil men, and he forgives both the guys who pound the nails and who deserve the cross. Those words of Forgiveness are spoken to us.

This means we have a hope and a joy about the end of the world. The culture around us cannot see anything but judgment and death. But we are given to see something else. The one who comes, comes to save us, to rescue us. He has our names written in the book of life, the book of remembrance. They are written there because Jesus died for me and you. We know that because Christ spoke our name and wrote it there in our baptism. He has fed us at this altar, called us with his own voice to this place today.

2. Be still and know that I am God (Psalm – that the Lord would calm the fearful hearer’s heart. It is in his hands.)

The sermon really presumes that the hearer is afraid. Our culture seems preoccupied on end of the world scenarios. Just watch the movies. (see discussion at the end of the Gospel reading)

This sermon really cannot avoid the news of the last week or so. We have elected Donald Trump to be president and the nation has stopped aghast at what just happened. Were they afraid of what a Hilary administration would bring, is that why they voted, not for Trump but against Hilary? Are they now afraid of what they have done? The media are in a dither. In Portland, where I live, rioters have caused millions of dollars’ worth of damage. It seems we have done something which no one is sure what it means. I certainly have no crystal ball to know what a Trump presidency will look like. But I know that many in town are afraid of what we have done.

Some are happy about this election’s outcome, others are afraid. I had a young Somali woman in my office a couple of days ago whose entire family are leaving the country to Dubai and the UK where they have other family. Only she, her sister, and their step-father will remain. The girls because they are in college and the step-father for emigration/documentation reasons. Yes, being Somali, they are Muslim. She is afraid.

Of course, it is not just elections and their outcomes that can make us afraid. Many things can. Doctors can utter the “C word” to us. The IRS can send a notice that we are being audited. Our bank can send us an overdraft notice that our house payment has not been paid for insufficient funds. Our child can join the military and be shipped to the Middle East. This list could go on for a very long time. The election might just be the introduction to the fear motif which we want to address in this sermon, but one could easily point to a whole host of other fearful things, things of which we are rightfully afraid.

The psalmist knows this. The earth quakes, the oceans roar, and the very cosmos melts in this psalm, but the reader is exhorted to calm and confident trust in God, even when it is his voice which melts the very earth. There is a river which makes glad the people of God. Revelation speaks of that River in chapter 21. Ezekiel sees it flowing out of the temple. It is the water of life which was offered to a Samaritan woman by a well and which was proclaimed by Jesus and is Jesus.

Be still and know that God is God, we are not, and he has this thing in his hands. The feast of Christ the King/Fulfillment is a stout and stubborn promise in the face of a world which feels sometimes like it is falling apart. God is God and he has this in his hands. It is never out of his control though it may feel that way to us. The psalmist is very good about acknowledging and permitting the fear. But he also sees reason for confident expectation despite the reasons for the fear.

The Christian will see that in Christ. He has died, he has risen so that he may reign even now in his gracious mercy and love. The One who holds all the power, who sits at the right hand of all might, that one is our king and rules this universe. He is the river who makes glad the city, the people of God.

The Christian preacher will note that the one who has it in his hands has perforated hands, the hands which soldiers pierced on a cross long ago outside of Jerusalem (Gospel reading) and that means that I need never fear the judgment and wrath of this king. He has died for me. How can he not give me everything else? (Romans 8)

3. Jesus of Nazareth, King of All – (From the Epistle and Gospel, Goal: that Jesus’ universal claim over this whole world be proclaimed for the hearer to believe and act upon.)

There are many things which make a claim upon me and my life. We acknowledge that there are legitimate claims upon my time made by my boss or my business or my teachers. I have to show up. There are legitimate claims made upon my bank account by creditors and government. My physical needs claim my attention when I get hungry or sick. This sermon would assert God’s divine claim over everything, the cosmic claim that Paul makes in the Epistle lesson.

Our culture and climate today would displace God’s claim by suggesting that it belongs at best only to those things which are not real – ethics, spiritual matters, things like that. It is a matter of personal preference, but not something which belongs into the conversations and activities of real life. This sermon wants to shatter this false dichotomy which says that I have God time and world time. It is all God time. It is all God’s stuff. He made it, he died for all of it, he has a claim over the whole of my life.

Paul and the Luke will have none of this. Jesus breaks his beautiful body, sheds his red blood to reconcile the whole world to its creator and rightful Lord. God has transferred us, all of us, from darkness to light, because Christ has not just died for our souls, but for the whole of Creation.

This could be developed along some really interesting paths. Jesus has died for the whole of creation – meaning that the environmental degradation which we see is a matter of great concern to him. He has died to reconcile all things to himself.

The environmental movement has done us a disservice in this. We probably do need to change our behavior, but fear will not accomplish this. Paul proclaims not God's judgment on the broken creation; he proclaims his love for the whole creation in Christ. Jesus. Jesus shed real, red, sticky, physical blood because the physical world is terribly important. He got his feet dusty on the roads of Galilee because that dust itself was important.

Today that has real implications for us. The world in which we live is really concerned about the environment. They can hear from you today that God is concerned too, that Jesus act of reconciliation was intended for his whole creation. The wolf and the lamb will lie together according to Isaiah. Jesus is the reconciliation of all things, including the problems we see today.

One could also talk about the more personal implications for this. Jesus has reconciled my bank account. I would not try to cop that excuse the next time you are overdrawn, but it would give you an occasion to speak of how Jesus has not only reconciled the spiritual matters we willingly accord to him, but he died because my whole life stands in need of his reconciliation. He never intended me to be in jeopardy of foreclosure or hunger. He never meant for the diseases that ravage my body to have their way with me, he never meant that arthritis or exhaustion or something else should take all the joy out of my life. He went to a cross for all those problems too, problems which often fail to see as spiritual and hence outside the purview of his salvation.

One could also point to Jesus righteous rule today, wherever hospitals, which often bear his name, are places of healing we see the king of merciful love, in food banks where the hungry are fed we find the same Jesus who fed the multitudes. In the counseling centers and the schools, in the many places that Christ has asserted his benevolent reign as king.

4. Reconciled and Precious to God (From the OT and Gospel lessons, That the preacher would proclaim God's delight in and love for the hearer's life, service, faith, love, and knowledge.)

The Christian who imagines the last day has two potential scenarios which cause him to be afraid or, worse, indifferent to that day. The first is rather easily dispatched with, but needs to be constantly proclaimed to the people of God, if only because we are so prone

to the alternative. That would be that Jesus has born the punishment of our sin. He really meant that, he has taken all our sins away. That means that we need not fear the judgment of God ever again. In the face of Satan's accusations, I point to my baptism and my inclusion in the death of Christ and that is that. All is forgiven, I am reconciled to Christ. It is not easy to find a way to quickly say that and the preacher might just want to leave it at that if he knows his congregation to need to hear that.

But my guess is that most of our folks already know this. But they remain indifferent or mildly annoyed by any talk of the end of the world. Perhaps they are simply fed up with all the wing nuts who distort this message and they don't want to be confused the Left Behind crowd. I share that sense of frustration in the end of the world talk I hear in my classrooms at Concordia. Most folks think that is what it is about.

But I wonder as well if there is not another sort of indifference about that last day. Yes, Jesus has forgiven me, but I am really a nobody, a very minor character in a world driven by fame and significance. I am just not that important. The last day will be just another day in which I am happy, true, but I am still simply of ten thousand who are singing bass in the heavenly choir.

Malachi and Luke today dispel that for us. Malachi promises that God is writing down the details of you and your life in a book of remembrance. Critically, you will have to preach the forgiveness part here because our human nature will immediately recoil at the thought of God writing down a journal of my life. We reflexively can only think about our sins. But God is not writing down your sins, but your good deeds. He is making a journal of the righteous, so that on that day, the time you helped a child, the time you sat with an aged aunt all afternoon and just talked to her, or whatever it is that has delighted God, that will be seen that day. Jesus paid attention to the women who wept with him, he noticed them. Likewise he noticed the malefactor on the cross, and Malachi points to the fact that God notices us. It doesn't feel that way right now. It feels like there is no benefit to being good. The scoundrels sometimes get ahead. But God is noticing. And he makes his notation. We know that God does not need some little book to take notes, and Malachi did too. But God writes this down to assure us, not to remember himself. Nothing actually escapes his attention, but any time we need it, he wants to have this little white book at hand, so he can point to it and smile at us and remind us that he is keeping track of these things.

We spoke of an image of standing there on the last day with the whole world, everyone's attention on Christ the King, and suddenly he turns and looks at you and walks over to you and shakes your hand. This is what Malachi is talking about happening on that last day. Jesus, sees the women, he does not, cannot pass them by. His love compels him.

We frequently sense that people are feel that God is distant, and thus they turn to intermediaries or to other religion or no religion. They feel that their situation is so bleak,

God must not notice them. How can he help them recognize the truth? Now they are feeling abandoned. The women in the story of Jesus crucifixion serve as an example. Notice that the women are not told that he will take away these problems, but he tells them to pray. We also thought that the words of Paul in which he says that Jesus died for everything, that means the rocks too.

Look at the Jesus on the cross, the best picture we have of the returning king. He is a carpenter, a man who worked with his hands. He is being stomped on by the government, shorn of all legal rights, he is a long way from home. He looks like a migrant. God proclaims that this peasant from Nazareth is far more than what he appears, but he was really those things too, and he is the salvation of the world. If our congregation contains such weak and helpless folks we can proclaim to them that the king who comes, looks a lot like you. He knows your struggle, suffering, and pain. He has not forgotten about you and the day he comes again, he comes because you are in trouble, because you are hurting, he comes to rescue you. I don't know just when that will be, but I know why that will be. He comes to rescue you!