



The Gospel According to Bob Dylan

Britt Cox

Luke 23:33-43

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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. ³⁴Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵And 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!" ³⁶The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, ³⁷and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." ³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴²Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

On this Christ the King Sunday, I feel it only appropriate to admit to you all that I'm actually somewhat of an expert when it comes to Kings. Well maybe just one king in particular... the one, the only king of rock n roll, Elvis Presley that is. It all started when I was six years old and I woke up so obsessed with Elvis Presley, my poor parents wondered if I had been him in a past life. I learned every single song, watched every single movie. I even begged to dress up as him for Halloween not once, but three times in my childhood, each one representing a distinct era of his life. While my friends were obsessed with barbies or legoes, I was busy collecting Elvis memorabilia and ended up having one of the largest Elvis memorabilia collections in the state of Texas. There was just something that drew me like a moth to the flame to that slicked back hair, that commanding voice, those dancing hips, and those jumpsuits. Oh wow, those flashy jumpsuits. I was so struck by the bravado and production of it all.

So with all this talk about kings today, it's a wonder we didn't have a Christ the King Sunday brought to you by the music of the King of RocknRoll, Elvis Presley. We could have had a lot of fun with that one I know... Flashing lights and electric organ intro music, Jumpsuits for us and the band, jelly donuts for after worship. There's always next year right. But during this election that we've just finished, for me, instead of Elvis it has been the verses of Bob Dylan that have been stuck in my head. Truthfully, unlike Elvis, Dylan would cringe at the title of King of RocknRoll though... let Elvis have that title all to himself. In fact, Dylan when was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for literature earlier this year, he was so elusive, no one could find him to congratulate him. When the committee finally got a hold of him he told them thank you but he already had plans for the day of the award ceremony. And really, should we have been so surprised that this was his reaction? He let us know what kind of musician, what kind of person he is over the past 50 years of his music. Its clear that his lyrics were meant for something much different than the power, money, and accolades that come with being king. And we find that perplexing.

In songs like, All Along the Watchtower and A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall. He perplexes us with apocalyptic imagery and political overtones in songs like:

Dylan calls us to prophetic justice in songs like blowin
Blowin in the Wind: I'm not going to sing it but here's what he writes:
Yes, and how many years can some people exist
Before they're allowed to be free?
Yes, and how many times can a man turn his head
And pretend that he just doesn't see?
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind.

And in our first song this morning, The times they are a-changing, our First United Bob Dylan cover band sang about a new world order, calling us, gathering us into a new reality:

The line it is drawn now
And the curse it is cast
AND The slow one now
Will later be fast
As the present now
Will later be past
The order is
Rapidly fadin'
Oh the first one now
Will later be last
For the times they are a-changin', changin'

Those verses sound as if they could be scripture don't they? Spanning time and context to flip the world as we know it on its head through song. To redirect our allegiance from the power hungry to a greater good. They call our attention to the losers we pay no attention to, rather than the winners who compete at all costs. They sound a lot like some of the things Jesus might have said.

Yet, the scripture from Luke we read this morning, I know seems out of place to read just before Advent, our season of expectation and longing. Our season of all the sugar-coated feelings of hope, peace, joy, and love. Feelings that if we're honest we might have a hard time with coming to terms with after the political season we've just encountered. For many of us it might be tempting instead to say to THAT family member across the table this Thanksgiving, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they do." While we long for God's reign of hope, of peace, of joy, of love to be made real in the arrival of a baby named Jesus, this year it's difficult to fully believe possible because of the pain we've just walked through as a country. Through all the anger, perceptions of winners and losers, no matter what political party, many of us have been left with this deep longing to be known differently than we were portrayed in campaign ads and on debate stages. We long for our human web to be made whole again. But it seems as if we are at a loss of where to begin with each other.

But this Good Friday moment at the cross expresses its own form of expectation and longing, too doesn't it? It's an Advent moment, come full circle. Maybe even a more honest expression of what we are experiencing within ourselves and with others. So this Sunday before Advent, before we prepare the room in the Inn, and make a place for the shepherds and wise men, we are hungry for the opportunity to be reminded of what happened at the cross. For if we don't we might miss the whole point of Jesus' arrival among us will eventually lead us to. Lutheran Pastor and author Nadia Bolz-Weber puts it this way:

"He'd been trying to tell us this the whole time: by having a mom without status, and there being no room in the Inn for his birth, and by gathering around him, not a team of all-stars, but a motley crew of losers and then ticking THEM off by also insisting on eating with the winners anyway. He tried to teach us madding things-things that de-stabilize our systems of trying to get-over on people by saying the first shall be last and the last shall be first. If you want to find your life then lose it. The greatest among you must become servants. If someone slaps you offer them the other cheek as well. If someone asks you for your coat, give them your shirt too. [If someone crucifies you, don't save yourself but forgive them.] Why?"ⁱ

While Jesus hung on the cross with "King of the Jews" written above him, the criminals on either side of him wondered this too. Why was he here? If this guy really is a king, why doesn't he save himself? How could the kingdom of God that Jesus endlessly preached and taught about allow for this kind of treason? For they too had been labeled as criminals, those who weren't going to cut it in the reign of Roman authority. I bet they would give anything to bring in the big guns, to call upon God on high to save them, and to tear down the ones who put them up there in the first place.

But the reign of Christ is different, it's quieter, and often opposite to our reflexes. It isn't found in labels of the powerful, or in the paradigm of winners and losers. The kingdom of God is found in the hidden, and small, and easily missed. The kingdom of God is within you. Even in the labels that this world inscribes above your own head. Even in the deep woundedness you have encountered, in the places you feel most powerless. Even in the dark places you never thought God's kingdom of love could reach. There within you is the image of God from which you were shaped and formed. Within you is the kingdom of God, wanting to be known, wanting to be expressed, wanting to be lived and wanting absolutely nothing to do with being right, or making your point, or saving yourself or winning or losing. It is this kind of King, in this kind of Kingdom that would go to a cross to have those painful parts of you be deeply known because God went there to know that kind of pain. But we know that God doesn't leave us there.

Last Sunday during our Time for Sharing with our children, I talked with them about baptism. I had a big bowl of water in my arms and to see their eagerness to touch that water was awesome but terrifying. I asked them why we use water for baptism and all of their ideas were beautifully curious. Then at the end of our time together I invited them to remind each other of who they are not only to God, but to themselves, and to each other. It was chaotic but a beautiful picture of the

reign of God's kin-dom within us. They reached out to touch the water, then touched a friend's forehead and said to them "I am a child of God, you are a child of God, we are All connected." Something happened down on that step last Sunday, the world for just a moment turned upside down, there were no winners or losers, there were no political parties or campaigns at work. They made sure everyone heard it, no one got looked over, and they were eager to say those words to each other. But this was also an invitation for us all.

It was an invitation to begin ourselves anew. It is this invitation that summons us to pledge allegiance to the upside-down, inside-out world of Jesus. An invitation to a life which proclaims love as not self-saving but self-emptying, so we may know of each other's pain and find healing together, even when it looks impossible. While it can often seem as if pain has had the final say with us, it is under the reign of Christ that pain does not have the final word. Resurrection does. Reconciliation does. Rebirth does. It is by turning towards each other with the healing waters on our own fingertips that we proclaim what our world doesn't want us to believe about ourselves... That you are a child of god, I am a child of God, we are all connected. May the reign of God turn our world around, and may it begin within us. Amen.

ⁱ Nadia Bolz-Weber, Losers, Amish, and the Reign of Christ.