

No Less a King  
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Good Friday, 2023

Scriptures: Isa 52:13-53:12; John 18:1-19:37

“Behold, my servant shall act wisely, he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted.”<sup>1</sup>

Some translations of the opening of our Old Testament reading for today say that the servant “will prosper,” instead of “act wisely,” but either way, it is on the surface a pretty stark contrast with what follows, these verses that tell the story of the suffering servant of the Lord.

Starker still, is the apparent contrast between this language of wisdom, of prosperity, of being high and lifted up, with the horror, the violence, the desperation and the weakness of the crucifixion. We don’t think of prosperity as public execution. We don’t think of wisdom as something that gets you killed. To be high and lifted up, that doesn’t initially conjure the image of being lifted up on a cross, the death given to slaves. Wisdom is the sort of thing we would expect that would help in avoiding such a fate.

But here is the wisdom of God: despised, rejected, bearing griefs and sorrows, stricken, smitten, afflicted, pierced, crushed, chastised, wounded, oppressed.

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<sup>1</sup> Isa 52:13

And we know, to quote the famous Good Friday sermon, “Sunday’s coming,<sup>2</sup>” but after we hear these words from John, and indeed in our lives and in our experience, Sunday feels far off. Thanks be to God that every day is not Good Friday. But today is. And so we must confront the Cross.

Some of the first words spoken of Jesus in John’s Gospel come from the mouth of John the Baptist, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” In these words, John is pointing to the Old Testament traditions of Passover and ritual sacrifice, and pointing ahead to where these two ideas meet in the beautiful tragedy of the Cross. In one sense, John’s words serve as our sermon today, having heard the story once again, we must simply behold the love of God and what that love meant, what pain and loss God the Son suffered for the sake of that love, for you, for me, for us. What can we say of the Cross besides this: “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world?”

We will celebrate in a few weeks the Ascension, where Jesus takes his rightful place at the right hand of God, as King of the Universe. But the Lord’s reign does not begin at the Ascension. Jesus says that his kingdom is breaking in in the midst of his ministry.<sup>3</sup> In the Garden, Jesus says he has the authority to ask the father for 12 legions of angels to defend him from those who have come to arrest him.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus is no less on the throne when he is on the Cross. And so today, we do not only behold the Lamb, we honor and worship him as King and Lord. The Lord would say to the Apostle Paul later that his power is made

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<sup>2</sup> A well-known sermon by S.M. Lockeridge

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 11:12

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 26:53

perfect in weakness.<sup>5</sup> That power was on full display on the Cross, in the weakest of possible positions. Jesus is no less on the throne when he is on the Cross.

There is a moment of great meaning in John's telling of the Crucifixion, the squabbling over the wording of the sign that is placed above Jesus as he is crucified.<sup>6</sup> Pilate has it written in multiple languages that this is "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." This is problematic for the chief priests and so they petition for an edit. They want the inscription to read that Jesus said he was the King of the Jews, not that he actually is King. Pilate doesn't budge, and in this way becomes an unknowing prophet, for the sign declares the truth, Jesus is King, not only of the Jews, but of the Romans and the whole world as well.

"Behold, my servant shall act wisely, he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted."

Jesus was king when he was betrayed in the garden by one he knew as a friend.

Jesus was king when Peter lashed out in anger and defensiveness, misreading what Jesus himself had taught him so many times.

Jesus was king when he was brought before the high priest, the head of the system that had been commanded and set in place by his own Father.

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<sup>5</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:9

<sup>6</sup> John 19:19-22

Jesus was king when he was asked disingenuous questions by this high priest, when he was struck while the high priest looked on and did nothing.

Jesus was king when his friend Peter, who had seen him Transfigured on the mountain, who had took up arms to defend him, who had wanted to not only have his feet washed by him but his whole body, when this Peter denied that he even knew him not once, not twice, but three times.

Jesus was king when he encountered Pilate, the one in this situation who held all the perceived power as the representative of the Roman Empire.

Jesus was king when Pilate tried to shove him off as somebody else's problem.

Jesus was king when Pilate couldn't grasp that there are more important kingdoms than those that are of this world.

Jesus was king when the crowd chose Barabbas over him.

Jesus was king when Pilate had him flogged and dressed in a crown of thorns and a purple robe, mocking his rule.

Jesus was king when the crowds shouted for him to be crucified.

Jesus was king when Pilate chose the coward's way and caved to the crowd, when he was brought out to a place called the Stone Pavement at the same time that the Passover lambs were being prepared for the meal.

Jesus was king when he was sentenced to death by crucifixion.

Jesus was king as he carried his cross.

Jesus was king as he was placed between two criminals.

Jesus was king when the soldiers split up his clothes amongst themselves, casting lots for his seamless tunic.

Jesus was king as his mother, his aunt, and the other women looked on him in horror and sadness.

Jesus was king as he arranged for someone to care for his mother when he was gone.

Jesus was king when he was given sour wine to drink in response to his cry of thirst.

Jesus was king when he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Jesus was king while the soldiers discussed whether to break his legs.

Jesus was king when his side was pierced.

Jesus was no less king in his death than he was before. He was no less God than he was before. And so today, we behold our king.

“Behold... he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted.”

O come, let us adore him.

