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Luke 23:33-42

## COUP D'ETAT

While we Americans love our democratic form of government--this government of the people, by the people, and for the people--I think that we nevertheless harbor a bit of "monarchy envy." Look at the popularity of the British royal family among Americans. It's very high. We love looking at them, reading about them, following their lives. Certainly we are attracted to the glamour and the splendor and the majesty of royalty. But I also think that some of what appeals to people about royalty is their "otherness." They are somehow removed from the rest of us ordinary folks. Even their excessive wealth and lavish spending is tolerated, even admired, because it represents something grandeur than us ordinary people. They are the beautiful people, who are somewhat untouchable, unreachable, set above and apart from us and our messiness. Their hair is always in place, their clothing is always elegant. They transcend the ordinary.

We Americans envy having such symbols of transcendence. Oh, we will *try* to find substitutions but they are usually poor substitutions. We love our Hollywood celebrities--but they still don't quite satisfy that longing for transcendence. From time to time, we will elect those who bring a touch of the monarchy to the elected office--those whose families wear \$10,000 bracelets and \$4,000 jumpsuits.

Of course, part of what also appeals to us about a monarch is the power a king or queen holds. Monarchs don't have to deal with pleasing the public or worrying about being re-elected. Kings and queens can rule with strength, with might, with determination. Modern day

monarchies have mostly had the teeth removed from them--the British, the Spanish, the Swedish monarchies are these days largely figure heads. But there was a time when monarchs ruled with power and with impunity--when they commanded vast armies and could slay their enemies with but a single command.

The Jewish people had known such kings in their history. They had known good kings and bad kings. Some they loved. Some they hated. But at least they were *their* kings. At the time of the New Testament, however, the Jewish kingdom was gone and the Jewish people were ruled by a far more powerful, far crueler monarch than they had ever known--the Roman emperor Caesar. This foreign ruler was their king now and one challenged the king's power at great peril.

Caesar may have been a despised king, but he represented a kind of monarchy everyone understood. He was cruel, he was powerful, true, but this is how kings behaved. But what took place with Jesus on that cross, what took place there, symbolized a kind of monarch that baffled everyone. When Jesus was crucified, the Roman soldiers put a sign over his head that said, "This is the King of the Jews." This sign, of course, was not intended to be a declaration of belief in who Jesus was but was rather intended to be a mockery of the man who hung there. It was Rome's way of saying to all who saw Jesus, especially to his Jewish followers, take a look at your pathetic king now. Whoever heard of a king being crucified--it was the form of execution given to the lowest class of people. Here he hangs in humiliation, in shame, in weakness and vulnerability, between two low life criminals. Come, everyone and see your "king"--as impotent and as pathetic as Israel itself. That was Rome's message.

And it wasn't just the humiliation and powerlessness displayed in Jesus' execution that was decidedly "un-king-like." Everything about this king was off-kilter. Take the kinds of people Jesus drew to himself. Instead of behaving like any normal king--drawing to himself people of power and prestige (that's what kings do), socializing with the rich and famous (that's what king's do), considering the poor occasionally but only in a detached, patronizing way--instead, King Jesus gathered to him followers who were the most uneducated, backwater, blue collar bunch of nobodies. He ate with outcasts, socialized with women and rejects, and moved among the sickest and poorest kinds of people. Unlike any normal king, he spent time with the wrong kind of people.

The wrong kind of people still exist today. You know who they are. If you don't, just think about the people you read about in the paper or see on the evening news. In the eyes of many in our society, these people are socially WRONG, politically WRONG, legally WRONG, ethnically and racially WRONG, sexually WRONG.

Time and time again, Jesus helped the WRONG people, cared about the WRONG people, loved the WRONG people. And once again, in today's story, we see Jesus still at it. As he hung in agony on that cross, with his last breaths from his dying body, Jesus once again helps the WRONG kind of person as he says to the criminal beside him, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." This criminal will be the first to walk into the splendor of the heavenly kingdom with Jesus.

"But wait!" we stammer. He's a *criminal*! He broke the law! He should be shown no favors! No favors for those who are wrong!

And that's when Jesus lifts his dying head and looks you and me straight in the eye and says to us, "No, *you're* wrong!" We who are self-satisfied with our orderly, legal, well-mannered and proper lives of correct living, correct loving, correct behavior, correct choices. Jesus' reply to all that correctness and self-righteousness is to say to us: WRONG! Well, in Luke's gospel he used other words like "Woe to you!" but it means the same thing. Woe to you who are rich, woe to you who are full, woe to you who are laughing, woe to you who have it all and turn away from those at the bottom.

The astonishing thing about King Jesus is that he taught with his life and showed here even at this death, that the Kingdom of God is a place that welcomes all those folks we think of as wrong people--and even you and me.

Do you know why the Romans killed Jesus? He was charged with trying to carry out a coup d'etat--an overthrow of the state. A coup d'état is when an individual or group tries to depose a ruler in order to take power. It doesn't matter that Jesus never picked up a sword or a weapon in his life. It doesn't matter that he didn't plot to overthrow the political powers in charge. What matters is that he was called King. You can't have two kings. And so Jesus was seen as a revolutionary.

And you know what? They were right. Jesus was a revolutionary king who had come to toss out the rulers of the day. He planned a coup d'état alright: a coup d'état of the human heart and mind and soul. King Jesus planned to overthrow all the powers that rule in us--that cause us to hate, to kill, to turn away from those in need. He came to overthrow those powers of greed and selfishness, of bitterness and fear. Jesus planned a full scale coup d'état so that he alone would rule your life and mine with love, compassion, justice, and forgiveness.

As Jesus hung on that cross, dying an agonizing death, people mocked him and said to him, "Hey king! If you really are a king, why don't you save yourself?" They were taunting him of course. If he really were God's king, God's messiah, well, why not prove it with a lightning show and some "shazaam" displays of power. That's what kings do--they use their power.

But this king of ours used a different kind of power for a different kind of purpose. Instead of saving himself, King Jesus made himself vulnerable in order to overthrow the ruler of death--the death that claims us when we die but especially the death that claims us now. I say "especially" because the living death we experience in the present is something King Jesus spent a whole lot more time talking about than he did our physical deaths. There are rulers within us that harden the heart, cause us to blame and judge, and divide us from one another. King Jesus came to overthrow these forces that claim us and mislead us and that hold us hostage to their tyrannies, and then, he planned to assume the throne and rule in their place. And the weapons Jesus uses to crush these other rulers--the weapons of power he picks up are love and forgiveness. Grace. He knew the great power to transform that lies within the gift of grace.

King Jesus pushes open the doors to the Kingdom and invites everyone in--all the wrong sorts of people. Paradise is offered to us. You can know it when you die, but what a shame, what an utter shame to wait until then. Because you can know it now. Paradise. The Kingdom of God. It's near at hand. All we have to do is let go--to let go of the hate and bitterness; to let go of the fear of scarcity; to let go of judgment. All we need do is to let go and to let the Kingdom of grace enter our hearts.

King Jesus is not simply satisfied with liberating the individual heart and soul and mind, but King Jesus also set his sights on the human community. He comes to liberate our communities from the rulers of tyranny: the tyranny of injustice, the tyranny of hatred and suspicion, the tyranny of greed, the tyranny of fear. Earthly rulers will arise who will encourage the hold of these tyrannies upon us--who will even tell us that these tyrannies are good and good for us. But these are words intended to imprison us. King Jesus comes to liberate. Today, on Christ the King Sunday, we celebrate the power of our King, Jesus, who will ultimately triumph over all human tyrannies. Tyrants and strong men and dark forces within and without may rule for the moment, but Christ is King and his victory is assured.