

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

November 20, 2022

The Sweet Taste of Forgiveness

Dr. Jo Forrest

**The Sweet Taste
of Forgiveness**
Dr. Jo Forrest

© 2022 by Dr. Jo Forrest and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: December 27, 2022

In graduate school, elective classes teased me with catchy titles and imaginative descriptions. Yet, the prerequisites listed in the fine print presented huge hurdles to this brain candy. Without recent experience with Plato and other ancient Greeks, no one could take a perennially popular, graduate level class on George Lucas' *Star Wars* series.

Recently, the class moved from the Classics department to the Divinity School. Perhaps to establish the relevance of studying religion, it became an introductory class, and places contemporary science fiction side-by-side with religion, showing that the boundary is blurry and permeable. Students see through the sci fi themes into the core messages these films borrow from enduring faith traditions.

Professor Russell Johnson says, "When George Lucas first set out to write *Star Wars*, he tried to distill the essence of the world's religions and mythologies with the Jedi and the Force, and all of that." And in the process, Lucas relied heavily on philosopher Joseph Campbell's theory of the hero's journey. Across any of Lucas' films the hero's journey follows a character called to adventure, descend into chaos, experience

a revelation and transformation, and then ultimately emerge successfully with new wisdom to share.¹

The hero's journey.

Not unique to *Star Wars*, mythologies about heroes pervade cultures. Such heroes give battlefield speeches in Shakespeare or roar as the lion, Aslan. They raise a cheer when they appear at the crucial moment in *Marvel* movies, rush into the burning building rather than away from it, and like *Wakanda*, now appear in a variety of gender and racial identities. What all these heroes have in common is their commitment to save whoever needs saving, leave no one behind, and vanquish evil.

Who saves us? That's obvious, but how?

Our church year begins with Advent – next week is the first Sunday when the Advent wreath appears – to frame our time to prepare and wait for the arrival of our savior as a fragile infant.

¹ Cole Martin, "The Force is strong with this one': Course uses Star Wars to examine religion," UChicago News, May 2, 2019, <https://news.uchicago.edu/story/force-strong-one-course-uses-star-wars-examine-religion>

Since last Advent, we walked along with Jesus through the Gospel of Luke. Heard him teach. Watched him gather crowds. Transform the lives of his followers by radical forgiveness and inclusion. His ministry also threatened the authorities.

Today marks the finale of our church year, known as the Reign of Christ Sunday. The texts we read reveals who is our God. It is the climax we've all waited for.

Dear God, we come to meet you, to know you, to learn your plan for our lives. As we approach your son, in his most fragile human moment, quiet our breathing and thinking, so we take in all of this. Send your spirit among us. May we hear the final words spoken by your son and be startled by the truth. Amen.

Luke 23:33-43

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 in your kingdom.” ⁴³Jesus replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Of all the ways we know Christ, to commemorate the “Reign of Christ,” couldn’t we imagine him presiding over crowds or

sitting on a throne? Not a cross. A body hanging to death on a cross repels us. That's why Romans used it to kill. That's how they intimidated anyone who mustered the courage to glimpse towards it.

It's so unsettling, to think this moment reveals our savior. We might be tempted to overlook the Reign of Christ in favor of Thanksgiving. Jesus taught his followers to gather people around a table. Focus on family, turkey, and mashed potatoes and gravy. In these divisive times, why not turn our attention to gratitude over staring at the cross with Jesus' body writhing in pain? Jesus never pursues the easy way; he leads directly to God.

Almost one hundred years ago, a very short time in the history of the church, Pope Pius XI established the Reign of Christ. The name suggests the magnificent power of monarchy.

Despite deep divisions within Christianity, denominations quickly embraced this milestone for the healing power it holds and Christ's strength to confront the evils in our world.

Rewind to 1925, people lived with the regret from getting caught up in get-rich-quick schemes and corrupt financial policies that benefited others. The system they were caught in broke, and the Great Depression crippled every dinner table. Mussolini marked three years of leading Italy. Hitler entrenched his authority in Germany with his autobiographical manifesto *Mein Kampf*.

Against all the bluster of heroes campaigning for loyalty, promising to save people from poverty and the threat of one another, the church reminds the Christian community, we owe our complete fidelity, our very lives, to Christ alone.

The reading for today take us by the hand to see the moment his reign begins. Let's linger at the portrait painted by Luke.

Jesus is in the center, on the cross, his body beaten, his clothing gone, taken, and auctioned. He is ruthlessly mocked and shed of all dignity by the powers that be.

On either side hang two thieves, one deriding him, another begging for mercy. In the foreground, the soldiers offer sour

wine and mocking looks. If you look carefully, you can see the inscription over his body: “This is the King of the Jews.”

This must have felt like a cosmic blow to the hopes of the disciples who had — except a group of women — largely deserted him. The finale of Jesus’ ministry appears to be one of despair in the face of human violence.

Luke includes in the background, “the people,” a crowd of generic onlookers and this writer doesn’t waste his ink on the people. In this portrait, their faces are indistinct, therefore anyone and everyone. Luke positions the religious leaders, just behind, scoffing at him, pointing fingers, laughing: “If he is the Messiah, let him save himself!” Did they anticipate a king, a hero, to leap off the cross, slay his accusers, and bring down the corrupt — teach everyone a lesson? Actually, yes.

Of course, Jesus doesn’t climb down from the cross. That’s not the way he chose to reveal God’s heart. So, he endured the humiliation and suffering that came with the cross.

Everyone gathered, heard as clearly as the soldiers and all the ages Jesus say: “Father, forgive them.”

The reign of Christ begins when we see him stripped bare by this world of clothing, friends and family, all human dignity. Then he rewrites the rules of this age-old game of dominance at the place of the Skull by praying, “Father, forgive them.”

Likely, he prays to forgive the Roman soldiers who were carrying out his execution. But Jesus, raised as a Jew in the Greco-Roman culture, knew how the Roman legal system worked. In order for him to be crucified, there had to be cooperation with others who were willing to carry out his prosecution.²

Since Jesus knew well and understood the systems and structures at play, his prayer for forgiveness was for everyone who in any way participated keeping things the way they were, keeping quiet, keeping safe. The soldiers, Rome, and the system of inhumanity crucified him.

He asked God to forgive them because they did not know what they were doing. It wasn't because God required a

² . G. Kruse, “Persecution” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. Craig A. Evans, Stanley E. Porter (InterVarsity Press, 2000), 775-778.

bloody sacrifice to appease God's wrath. Rather, humanity refused to fathom the kind of realm Jesus offered the world.

His words of forgiveness make all other words possible. Words like grace, tenderness, freedom, inclusion. More than words, ways to live that bring God's kingdom from heavenly realm to life on earth. On those hills Jesus was not only the King of the Jews, but the King of Mercy. His words are the ultimate game changer.

As we gaze at this climactic moment, we'd want to see ourselves as faithful followers, not caught in a wheel of injustice, as paralyzed as those who crucified Jesus. At this moment, we learn the path to this realm of God demands humility, surrender, and love. In his dying, we hear that we are worth the sacrifice.

In the years after WWII you can imagine why the church would want to assert that Jesus was Lord and King, not world leaders who had led their people into such horror and destruction, or failed to protect and defend; that there was a true leader who was outside of and beyond the divides of class, nationality and political allegiance.

In 1940, after the the bombing of Coventry Cathedral by the Germans, the church leaders raised up in the ruins a huge cross made of two charred beams of wood. On the cross they inscribed the words “Father, forgive.” They might have said ‘Forgive the Germans who perpetrated this awful deed; forgive them.’ What that omission says by its very silence is this: We are all in on the tragedy of war. The hands of all of us are stained.³

The Reign of Christ, this final New Year’s celebration asks us to peel off the outer layers that protect us. Willingly look at all of the tragedies that humanity has and can create. And become the people who say “no more, we’ve tasted the sweetness of forgiveness and want to speak those words in our lives, forever more.”

³ Donald Coggan, *The Voice from the Cross* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 5.



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630
www.westminster-church.org