

Jesus is left hanging on the cross and we are left hanging in suspense. Why, on the feast of Christ the King, do we get a reading about the crucifixion without any reference to the resurrection? There is wisdom in pausing here in this horrific moment. We may want to turn away, but in our desire for the sweetness of the fruit to come, we can miss the fragrance of the flower that precedes it.

This feast day marks a turning in the church liturgical year. This reading from Luke marks a turning of the ministry of Jesus Christ. Today is the end of the year for the church and the reading tells of the end of earthly ministry for Jesus. Next Sunday, we will begin a new year by turning our eyes and hearts and hopes to Advent and the coming of the light into the darkness.

But today is not Advent. Today, we stand in the last day of the mystical season, trying to make sense of a gathering darkness as the earthly life of our brother, Jesus, draws to a humiliating and painful close. But if we can endure this raw moment, traces of God's heaven begin to flicker, even in the shock and the hate and the emptiness. This is not the last moment of the historical Jesus, but it is a moment already pregnant with new life and a new story.

In just over a month, we will hear Luke's gorgeous story of the birth of a child. But before we leap ahead, I want to remind you of a story that happened in another transition time—the transition between when John baptized Jesus and when Jesus began his earthly ministry. In that transition time, the Spirit led Jesus into the desert, where he left us for 40 days and was tempted three times.

"If you are the Son of God," his challenger said. "*If* you are the Son of God." And then Jesus faced two opportunities to save himself from death and one opportunity to save himself and all of humanity. And all he had to do was to accept the mantle of earthly kingship, and he would receive power and authority over all the kingdoms of the world. But despite being famished, powerless and in physical danger, he chose something different. He chose to stay true to his nature and to God. So his challenger left, Luke says, "until an opportune time."

Now, let's return to our Gospel for this morning. What more opportune time could there be than this moment, where Jesus has been severely beaten, left friendless and nailed to a cross. "...*if* he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one," the rulers say, "let him save himself and others." The first temptation from the cross. "*If* you are the King of the Jews," the soldiers say, "save yourself!" The second temptation, and now both institutional church and powers of the state have spoken. "Are you not the Messiah?" says one of the crucified criminals beside him. "Save yourself and us!" Here, then is the third temptation and this one in a voice from the margins, the people Jesus most wanted to save.

The people and powers tempting Jesus work under the assumption that if Jesus is who he claims to be, he will not die. But Luke's story assumes just the opposite. It is precisely because he *is* the Son of God that he will give his life in obedience to God's will.

Now let me be clear here, because this is the fragrance of the flower that precedes the sweetness of the fruit to come, and I don't want anyone to miss it. God did not will or wish for the death of Jesus. What God willed for Jesus is what God wills for us: *faithfulness*. God wills faithfulness to the kingdom of God, and for Jesus to be truly faithful to the kingdom in first century Palestine meant that he ran the risk of crucifixion, because that's how the Roman Empire dealt with disloyalty to the Empire.

So here we are the literal crux of our faith—that life given for others leads to life in abundance. This is the fundamental pattern that Jesus embodied in his earthly ministry: Life given for others leads to life in abundance. And because Jesus stays true to this pattern and to the will of God, he resists temptation from the cross like he did in the desert. Again, Jesus chose to stay true to his nature and to God.

Luke's Jesus is still hanging on the cross in this reading, but perhaps we are not really hanging in suspension. Maybe it is more accurate to say that we are straddling a moment between two worlds: the transition from the earthly ministry of Jesus to the heavenly reign of Christ the King as something new breaks into already present. Perhaps we are seeing the opening—an interface of sorts—being created there on the cross.

Jesus speaks to the dying thief: "Truly I tell you," says our King and Savior, while still in his earthly body, "today you will be with me in Paradise." In answer to the three temptations, Jesus gives voice to an incredible three-part response: "Today you will be with me in Paradise." Let's savor the fragrance of that promise!

"*Today you will be with me in Paradise.*" This is not a reference to a 24-hour period of time as we measure it. In Luke's Gospel, this is a reference to God's salvation fracturing all time. This is the tear in the fabric of time and space through which the kingdom of God begins to pour in. That kingdom pours in faster and stronger as we pass God's grace and love to each other and to those around us, whether we are in conflict with them or in love with them.

Now, then: the second facet: All the thief said was "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." There was no begging forgiveness, no confession of sins, no acts of great justice or mercy. And what Jesus said was simply: "*Today you will be with me in Paradise.*" Those acts would not have earned the man a place in the kingdom any more than they earn places for you

and me now. We act in those ways because we have seen something of what the second thief saw in the face of the man hanging on a cross next to him.

Here's the third facet: "Today you will be with me *in Paradise*." Luke uses this word only once, right here. It appears once in one of Paul's letters and once in the Revelation to John of Patmos, and nowhere else in all of Christian scripture. Luke has carefully chosen the word he puts in the mouth of Jesus, who utters only one other phrase before dying on the cross. By using this word, Luke's Jesus promises something more than just a room reservation in heaven.

The word "paradise" comes from an ancient Persian language called Avestan. The root word referred to a huge walled garden. Persian nobles loved to build and hunt in these carefully maintained gardens. When a king wanted to honor one of his subjects, he invited the person to walk in the garden as a companion of the king. As if offering life eternal to the man crucified beside him wasn't enough, Jesus the Christ is promising his companionship in the garden of God's kingdom.

That same kingdom and the same promise are here now, though not yet not in fullness. We also stand, you see—you and I—at the opening torn in the fabric of time and space. Like the leaders, the soldiers and the first thief, we live in human time, where the violent powers of Empire still influence and shape or even determine historical events; where the Challenger tempts us to choose the path of distrust and fear, and where Death appears to have the final say.

But we also live under the reign of Christ the King if, like the second thief, we see God's grace and respond with our hearts and minds and souls to pray: "Remember me."

There is a thickening darkness in the world around us, taunting us to act on our uncertainty with rage, fear and divisiveness. There is much work for us to do to counter this darkness. And that's why it is essential to take deep breathes first, inhaling the fragrance of the presence of Christ the King that is here now, yet not in fullness. We will begin to notice slight glimmers and wisps of faint light on the horizon—the coming of new life and a new story rising from the dawning of paradise with the sounds of a helpless newborn baby. And *there* lies our strength and our hope.

The light *is* coming.