

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

November 23, 2025

The Throne of Shame

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today is Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the church year. We gather to celebrate a King. We gather to proclaim Christ's sovereignty over all things. We sing hymns of triumph and victory.

But if we want to truly see this King, we must look at where we find him in today's Gospel reading. Not in a palace but hanging between two criminals. Not wearing a crown of gold, but a crown of thorns. Not seated on a throne of ivory and precious stones but nailed to two pieces of wood on a garbage heap outside the city walls.

Above his head, a sign mocks him: "The King of the Jews." What a joke to the Roman Empire! What a scandal to the religious authorities! What an embarrassment to those who had hoped he would be their liberator! And yet, here is where Christ's true power is revealed. In the place of ultimate shame, the cross, we discover what real kingship looks like. This is the Throne of Shame, and it redefines everything we thought we knew about power, authority, and justice.

To understand why this matters, we need to go back. Back to the prophet Jeremiah, back to a time when the Jewish people desperately *needed* a good and just King. Listen to Jeremiah's opening words: "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!" (Jeremiah 23:1). The leaders, the kings, the priests, the governors, had failed. They were supposed to use their power for justice, to gather the people, to care for the vulnerable. Instead, they used their power for themselves. They were corrupt. They were greedy. They scattered the people rather than gathering them. They destroyed rather than building up. They did the opposite of good leadership.

And so Jeremiah prophesies that God will raise up a different kind of king—a "Righteous Branch" who will "execute justice and righteousness in the land" (Jer.

23:5). Christ the King Sunday is not just about celebrating Jesus' sovereignty. It's about holding power accountable. It's about waiting for, and recognizing, the kind of King who finally rules with justice. And when that King arrives, he arrives in the most unexpected place: a cross.

Jeremiah's charge is clear: Those who use their authority to scatter, destroy, and exploit are not true shepherds. A righteous king is defined by justice and mercy, not by conquest, wealth, or the ability to dominate others. This condemnation still applies today. Those who cling to power, who hoard it, weaponize it, use it to exclude and control, cannot lead well. Righteousness will win over greed. Justice will triumph over oppression.

And the cross is the ultimate judgment on all human systems that thrive on exclusion, shame, and violence. Look at what happens at the cross. The Roman Empire, with all its military might, executes an innocent man. The religious authorities, who were supposed to represent God's justice, collaborate in his murder. The economic systems that sustained the empire are built on the backs of the crucified: the enslaved, the conquered, the expendable.

The cross shows us what corrupt power does to pure justice. It crucifies it. But here's the beautiful, terrible irony: In that very act of crucifixion, God is unmasking the bankruptcy of worldly power. The cross exposes the violence at the heart of empire. It reveals the ugliness of religious hypocrisy. It shows us that all systems of *power-over* ultimately lead to death.

Now, you might ask: If Jesus is condemned by the powers of this world, doesn't that mean they've won? If he's hanging on a cross, defeated and mocked, where is his kingship? This is where Colossians comes in with one of the most stunning passages in all of Scripture.

Listen to this resume of the King we worship: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created... He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything." (Colossians 1:15-18)

This is cosmic authority. This is the King who holds the entire universe together. Every atom, every star, every breath you take exists because of his sustaining

power. And here's the paradox: The King who holds the cosmos together allows himself to be broken apart on a Roman execution device.

The One who has "first place in everything" takes the last place, lower than last place, the place of the condemned criminal. Why? Colossians tells us: "Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross." (Col. 1:20)

Christ's kingship is not about conquest. It's not about crushing his enemies. It's not about domination. His kingship is about reconciliation. His authority is used to heal, not to harm. His power makes peace; it doesn't make war. This is *power-with*, not *power-over*. This is the King who doesn't rule from a distance but enters into the very heart of human suffering and transforms it from the inside out.

This brings us back to the cross. To that Throne of Shame where we find the most radical expression of Christ's kingship. Look at his company. Christ's first subjects in Luke's Gospel are not princes and governors. They're not the wealthy and powerful. They're not even the religious elite. They are two criminals, crucified beside him.

One mocks him: "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" (Luke 23:39) But the other—the other sees something. Through his pain, through his shame, through his dying breath, he sees a King. And he makes, perhaps, the most desperate prayer in all of Scripture: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." (Luke 23:42)

And Jesus, the King who holds the cosmos together, the Righteous Branch promised by Jeremiah, the One in whom all things are reconciled, Jesus responds with one of the most powerful, definitive statements of his reign: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:43)

Today. Not someday, when you've cleaned up your act. Not eventually, after you've proven yourself worthy. Not after you've done penance or earned forgiveness. Today. This is the King's most powerful act: a promise of **immediate belonging**.

To be condemned by the systems of this world is to be elevated by the King who reigns from the cross. Jesus stands in total solidarity with those criminalized by the

state, abandoned by society, deemed unworthy by the powerful. The Throne of Shame is a place of radical kinship.

And the invitation extends to us. Christ's reign is a "Kin-dom": a place where power breathes through and among us, not from the top down. Our power is not found in dominating others or climbing social ladders. Our power is found in sitting with the marginalized, offering solidarity, extending radical belonging to all who have been condemned or exiled.

When we look at the cross, the world can feel chaotic. Everything seems upside down. Our King is crucified. Justice is defeated. Love is mocked. But the Psalmist gives us different eyes to see: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea." (Psalm 46:1-2)

Christ's reign is not a temporary political movement. It's not dependent on the rise and fall of empires. It's not contingent on who wins elections or which army has the most weapons. Christ's reign is the unshakable refuge of the universe itself.

Christ's authority, won on the cross, is eternal and secure. The kingdoms and empires of this world will rise and fall. But the Kingdom, the Kin-dom, of the Crucified King will never end. And so we hear that ancient call: "Be still, and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10)

Stop chasing worldly power. Stop trying to dominate others. Stop clinging to systems of *power-over* that only lead to more violence, more shame, more death. Be still. Trust the power of the Crucified King. To live under Christ the King is to practice *power-with* others. It means demanding accountability from corrupt systems, like Jeremiah. It means working for reconciliation, like Colossians describes. It means extending radical belonging to all those who have been condemned or exiled, like Jesus did on the cross.

Go forth, not serving the kingdoms of this world, but serving the Crucified King. Find your refuge in the solidarity of the cross. Know that Christ's paradise begins today, right now, in the work of radical kinship and justice. Remember: The King we worship doesn't sit on a throne of gold. He hangs on a cross of shame. And from that Throne of Shame, he speaks the word that changes everything: "Today, you will be with me in Paradise." Amen.