

November 21, 2021
Lectionary 34, Year B
Christ the King Sunday
John 18:33-37
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Good Friday Jesus in a Black Friday World

You might think that I'm crazy when I say this, but one of the many things that I missed during last year's holiday season, was going shopping with my mom and sister on Black Friday.

You see, I am one of *those* people. One of those people who gets up early on the Friday after Thanksgiving to go shopping.

I have never shopped and never will shop on Thanksgiving Day. It drives me crazy that the stores are open on Thanksgiving. I've never gotten up early enough to make it to a store opening. I've never camped out on a sidewalk waiting to get a great deal. I've never been a part of a mob and I've never been in any danger of being trampled or of trampling anyone else.

But I still do get up earlier than I normally would on a Friday when I don't have to go to work and the kids don't have to go to school, and get dressed, tiptoeing around, so as not to wake Britton and the kids and the dog, and I head out to the stores to see what there is to see.

I have friends who work hard all year long to get their Christmas shopping done before Thanksgiving. I admire them, even though I feel a bit overwhelmed by the idea.

By shopping early, they avoid the financial burden of Christmas gifts all landing in the month of December. They have all month to wrap gifts that they've already purchased before December even starts. They have time to enjoy December festivities without the worry about the shopping they still have to do. They avoid last minute panic shopping and spending.

I admire the model, but I don't live it. Instead, I usually start my Christmas shopping, start getting ideas for what I want to buy for people on Black Friday.

It's a good day for me to go shopping. I don't have to worry about rushing back home to pick up kids from school, things are on sale, and I have enthusiastic shopping companions to keep me company.

Besides, it's kind of festive. Most of the salespeople I've run into on Black Friday have been helpful and pleasant, the decorations are nice, and even the other shoppers will meet your eyes and speak to you a little more than they usually do.

Of course, last year I didn't go Black Friday shopping. None of us were vaccinated; the vaccine had just been announced, and Black Friday shopping was not a risk that we were going to take protected only by our masks.

So, the story that I'm about to share is something that happened on a Black Friday years ago, but perhaps, once you hear it, you'll understand why I still remember it.

I was out Black Friday shopping and I found myself occupying myself in a line by eavesdropping on the conversation a man behind me was having on his cell phone. I didn't consciously choose to listen to the man's conversation, but he was right behind me and speaking loudly, so, I ended up listening.

I would guess that he was talking to a friend and apparently, he had found a good deal on something that he wanted, because this is what he said, "I think I'm going to get it because I'm never going to find it this cheap again. It's half price because it's Good Friday."

I think I gasped when he said it. Did you hear it? He said, "It's half price because it's Good Friday." Not Black Friday. Good Friday.

Hearing that my pastor self a little bit laughed and a little bit cried. Because it's so backwards.

Good Friday is that day when the church meditates, in the most focused way of the year, on Jesus' crucifixion.

Black Friday is the day when retailers put most things on sale, hoping that enough people will come shopping to help them end the year with a profit.

But perhaps it makes sense that the man I was listening to got it backwards. I mean, wouldn't it make more sense to call a day when stores are filled with garland and lights and cheerful music, a day when everything's on sale, a day that is a consumer's dream come true Good Friday?

After all, what's so good about Good Friday, when it's the day when we remember, when we commemorate, Jesus' crucifixion?

Maybe the man I was listening to made more sense than the church does. Maybe it's the church that has it backwards.

But, then, maybe the church has everything backwards. Because here we are on Christ the King Sunday, and notice where we find Jesus in our gospel reading.

He's been betrayed by one of his friends and arrested. He's been questioned by the religious leaders of his own religion. He's been sent from one court, one trial to another, and dragged through the darkened streets of Jerusalem.

Our gospel reading for today finds Jesus on trial before Pilate, on trial for his life before the powers of this world. On trial in a trial that he will lose.

Our gospel reading for today is also one of our readings for Good Friday.

But today is Christ the King Sunday. And behold our king. He stands before us as Jesus the rejected; Jesus the humiliated; Jesus the arrested; Jesus

the mocked; Jesus the interrogated; Jesus the truth teller. Jesus, who shortly after our gospel reading today will be crowned with thorns. Jesus, whose throne will be a cross.

Wouldn't it make more sense for Christ the King Sunday to be more like Black Friday and less like Good Friday?

On this day, on this day that is the culmination of the church year, on this day, when the truth is revealed:

that Jesus, for whom the world had no room;

that Jesus, who was born in a stable and laid in a manger;

that Jesus, who, along with his mother and adopted father was a poor, oppressed, political refugee;

that Jesus, who, as an adult, was homeless;

that Jesus, who touched lepers;

that Jesus who welcomed children;

that Jesus, who ate with sinners;

that Jesus, who called ordinary people to be his followers;

that Jesus, who was so often misunderstood, even by those who loved him;

that Jesus, who was rejected, beaten, and crucified, as he had always known that he would be,

is a king. And, in fact, not just a king, but the King, the ruler of the kings of the earth.

So, wouldn't it make more sense for him to look more like a king? Especially today, shouldn't we get the Black Friday Jesus instead of the Good Friday Jesus?

Wouldn't it make more sense to see him wealthy, adorned in riches, like the stores decorated to celebrate his birth? Wouldn't it make more sense to see him adored, to see crowds rushing to see him, to worship him, people

taking their life in their hands to get to him, risking the mob, to bow to him, to praise him, to kiss the hem of his garments, to kiss his nail pierced feet? Wouldn't it make more sense to see **him** be the desired one instead of some new tablet or toy? Wouldn't it make more sense to see him empowered, shutting down all of the things that do not honor him, using his unending, unequaled strength, wisdom, and authority to put an end to the oppression of the poor, to the wars that plague the earth, to the abuse of his creation, to the violence that surrounds us and that too often we participate in as knowing or unknowing perpetrators or victims. Wouldn't it be nice for him to be more, well, kingly?

But no, instead we have what we so often get. The Good Friday Jesus, not triumphant, but a victim himself. God at the mercy of human beings where he found that there is no mercy, there is no justice, not when power is threatened, not when extravagance is challenged, not when the true extent of God's love is revealed and we find that it welcomes, blesses, embraces, forgives those we would exclude.

Last night, I noticed that one of the houses near the high school has all of its Christmas lights up. And it's a doozy. Festive run amuck, but probably making the people who live there feel happy and feel that holiday season thrill.

Right now, even in the days and weeks before Thanksgiving the world is getting ready for Christmas, but what we are given to see on this Sunday before Thanksgiving, by the church year, is not the baby, but the man, Jesus, who, in spite of our beautiful sanctuary, adorned in the white paraments of celebration, who, in spite of our music that celebrates him as a king, as the one who is to receive all blessing and honor and glory and praise, appears to us as the rejected king, crowned with thorns and enthroned on a cross.

Today we see the Good Friday Jesus, coming to a Black Friday world.

But coming to us, as he does, in humility, in weakness, in love that endures the pain of the cross, in love that forgives those who put him there, you, me, the soldiers who held the hammer and the nails, Pilate, the crowds, the religious leaders, his frightened disciples, we learn things that we need to know, about this Jesus who we call our king.

We know that he is different, from any other power, from any other leader, from any other king the world has ever seen.

We know that he is for us no matter how far we've fallen from what the world finds impressive. He is there for us, he, who was rejected and mocked, and who died the most shameful, humiliating, painful death imaginable in his time, is there with us, in our humiliations and failures and problems we can't solve.

We know that he will endure anything for us, anything to reach us, anything to be in relationship with us, anything to heal us, anything to feed us,

And we know that this king, this Jesus, could only ever be a Good Friday Jesus, could never be a Black Friday Jesus, because his love is not on sale. His love is not for sale. It is free, because it is a gift.

He bought it for us, with his blood, with his sweat, with his tears; the love of the King. The gift without price.

And so, we, who this week give thanks, gaze upon Christ. We behold our king, and say again, Thanks be to God! Amen.