Jeremiah 23:1-6 [1]Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. [2]Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. [3]Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. [4]I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD. [5]The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. [6]In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called:

"The LORD is our righteousness" – Yahweh Tsidkenu **יהוה צדקנו**

Colossians 1:11-20 [11]May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully [12]giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. [13]He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, [14]in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

[15]He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; [16]for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers-all things have been created through him and for him. [17]He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. [18]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. [19]For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, [20]and 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.

Luke 1:68-79 [68]*"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. [69]He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, [70]as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, [71]that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. [72]Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, [73]the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us [74]that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, [75]in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. [76]And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, [77]to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. [78]By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, [79]to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

<u>SERMON:</u> ***Living in Anticipation & Hope, with Thanksgiving***

Today is *Christ the King* Sunday, also known as *Reign of Christ* Sunday. It is the Sunday before *Advent* begins, according to our liturgical year. Actually, our liturgical year ends today, in celebrating Christ's reign in our hearts and our living in the kingdom of God on earth. It is also the Sunday before our secular holiday of *Thanksgiving* here in the United States, which I find appropriate to mention because all we have, all we are…every good thing comes from the hand

of God (James 1:17). Since he is the source of all good, it is right that we should remember to give thanks. To give thanks this particular week is to thank God both after and before. We are thanking God *after* all the many blessings we have received in this past year, but also thanking God *before* we begin the new liturgical year with *Advent* – the season of anticipation.

This likely seems strange to you – the thought of giving thanks *before* we have received. And yet, we know God is good and has made us many promises. *Should we not thank him before we receive, trusting in God's good timing to bring us what we need when we need it?* Such is the stuff of hope! As Shelly mentioned, many have been trained to give thanks upon receiving – it is only polite. But that is easy to do without thought, without feeling it deep within our hearts. To give thanks BEFORE we receive – that requires *faith in the giver*. It is not a faith we can place lightly, for to place such faith in humans is to live recklessly – humanity is unpredictable and often fails to deliver. **Not so with God!** What God promises, he delivers. We can therefore freely bestow our thanks on him for what is *yet to come*, knowing that he has the best for all concerned in his heart.

God moves in his goodness according to the long game – not according to the moment. Those of you who are sports fans know that prospects can look slim in the moment. If the coach and the team gave up in the moment, many outstanding comebacks and celebrations of victory would never have happened. And sports fans know that those comebacks make some of the greatest games to witness. That is the nature of living in hope and determining that you will continue in hope rather than giving in to defeat. With hope, we anticipate that things can turn around, go from bad to good, turning a certain loss into an unexpected victory.

If such hope in human efforts can produce fruit, then think of what hope in divine efforts can bring to our world! The Bible shares with us the story of hope in God – what good comes from faith, from living in hope and trusting in God even when things get bad, really REALLY bad. Our liturgical year tells a story too – it begins with anticipation of God's Messiah and the birth of Christ. Yet it does not end with the death of Christ as one might suspect – for his death led to resurrection, ascension and the rebirth of hope in his followers.

So, after we remember Christ's death, we come to Easter and begin a 7-week celebration of his resurrection and ascension, which ends at Pentecost – the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon believers, which signified the birth of the Church. This marks the birth of the community of Christ's followers who spread the good news of Christ's message to all who would follow him. We spend a good amount of our year then just looking at what living as part of the family of believers means for daily living, for the body of Christ. And then we come to today, to our celebration of Christ as our king to begin our week of Thanksgiving.

Every part of humanity's story of life with God is significant: from birth to death, from promise to fulfilled purpose; from earthly life to eternal life. God gives what is good, accompanies us through the bad times, and brings new life on the other side. We saw it with Job. We see it with Jesus Christ. Our liturgical seasons follow this rhythm, thus we *end with celebration* just to begin with anticipation of the *glory of God's promises fulfilled* that is to come.

God's glory looks nothing like what we expect with earthly glory. In sports, glory comes from the win, which is short-lived because we always move on to a new game or into a new season and begin again. God's purposes for humanity and all creation build slowly toward his final goals,

accomplishing his will despite human actions that sometimes work in opposition to his plans for creation. As God's plan plays out in human history, his glory can be hard to recognize in the moment. Christ's life of itinerant ministry and having nowhere to lay his head didn't LOOK glorious. He traveled to meet the people where they were and bring God's message to everyone, even to the lowest in society. That didn't look glorious to the powerful, but it did to the people he walked out to meet. Allowing himself to be captured and crucified, refusing to allow fighting and bloodshed in order to protect his life and earthly freedom – none of this looked like the coming of God's king to rescue the people of God. And yet, his willing shedding of his own blood led to his eternal crown, to ruling at the right hand of God the Father where all will come before him to serve, obey, and worship in the eternal realm to come. God took the shameful death of Christ on a cross and turned it into eternal glory…

Christ's reign has begun. You worship a risen Lord. Your hope is in him alone. No one else can bring you into the kingdom of God, nor reconcile you to the Father so that you may stand unashamed in his presence. No one else can bring *such good out of evil*, such **love**, such order to chaos. Only God. The only human worthy at all times of your *love, devotion, and worship* is the one in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell – Jesus Christ.

So, when life looks grim, when you look around and see the mess our world is in, remember that God turns the bleakest of human situations into triumph on an eternal scale, when we follow him. It doesn't matter if what bothers you touches you on a *personal* level, such as the hate-filled speech and *finger-pointing, blame-placing* that has been escalating these past years, or if it is global in nature, such as *famine, poverty, or the wars and rumors of wars that are reported in the news*…

God can change anything to work toward his eternal glory. It has always been so. Out of the hate and fear that resulted in the crucifixion of his Messiah **he brought to an end sin & death's power to control us** through *shame* or *fear*. Imagine what ultimate good God can bring out of the hate and fear in our world today! You might think that people now and the fears and sorrows we know are different than they were back then, but you'd be wrong. As it says in Ecclesiastes – there is nothing new under the sun (Eccles. 1:9). Technology may make the horrors we face be of a grander scale in destructive power, but the worries and terrors of the heart – they remain the same. So does our need to wait upon the Lord, to seek the wisdom of our God and King.

God's people, the Israelites, had waited for generations, for hundreds of years for his promised Messiah to be sent into the world, as their people were conquered again and again, and carried off into exile from the Promised Land. And yet their hope remained, burning within their hearts – the hope of intervention by their powerful God, the one who had intervened for them so many times in unexpected ways throughout their history, caring for them as his own children.

We, the children of God in this day and age, can harbor such hope in our hearts when the one we worship is Christ the King, when we allow Christ to reign in us, directing our actions, our choices in life. We can trust that even the bleakest, most dire of situations we must endure are being used by God toward some purpose. We may not understand God's eternal purpose because we do not have an eternal perspective – not yet, not in this earthly life. But we do not have to understand God or his purposes in order to live in hope, which is to live by faith. God

brings this truth to us in Hebrews 11:1-3, in which we are taught: *"faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. [2] Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. [3] By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible."* And God has poured his Holy Spirit into our hearts to fan the flames of faith within, so that our hope can burn bright because of faith.

We follow God living by faith, not by sight. The visible can fool us. It can steal our hope. Don't let it! We can live by faith in God because he has shown humanity, repeatedly, that he is good, that his steadfast love endures forever. No matter what his children do to one another, no matter what humanity chose to do to his Son…God remains faithful and would free us from our wrongs so that we may dwell with him in his eternal kingdom, freed of shame. God's plan has always been for *reconciliation*.

Our Father's plan is larger than the earthly life and teachings of Jesus Christ. His plan is for the eternal reign of Christ, for Jesus to shepherd us in life and death and bring us into new life again, reconciled with the Father. This was his plan from the dawn of creation. This plan was set into motion even before the first sin was committed, before the first human ignored the teachings and commandments of God. Christ has been our king since the beginning, before humanity knew him, *long before* Jesus was born into this world and lived as one of us, long before he was crucified, *resurrected, and then ascended to heaven* to sit at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

As we heard last week, the Father has given his Son all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt 28:18). It is in him we place our trust, in him we believe. **It is Christ who leads us** – that is what we are saying when we declare ourselves to be Christians. Earthly leaders make both good and bad decisions, for they are human, *like us*. We are fallible creatures, swayed by earthly concerns and personal desires. God is not. Our Triune God is divine and so unswayed while achieving his good purpose. So, live by faith in him, by faith in his Messiah. Walk in the light cast by our Savior, our Shepherd, who knows what is best for his sheep and will lead us through the darkest valleys of shadow to find the light on the other side. When darkness settles in, turn to him, not to any other leader, for all other leaders are imperfect. God says of earthly leaders who bring woe to his children that they are *"shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture…"* God promised *"I myself will gather the remnant of my flock…and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply."* God indeed has gathered us in Christ. Abiding in him, living according to his Word and his Way, we can be fruitful, no matter the chaos that surrounds us. We can bear God's fruit in this world, in the kingdom of God on earth.

Therefore, declare this day – this moment – within your heart:

Christ is my king and I will follow him!

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty Savior for all humankind and for his creation. All thanks be to him. All glory to our God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit! Amen.