



“THE IRONIC SUPERMAN”

Luke 23:33-43

Christ The King C

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Our Saviour Lutheran Church

West Lafayette, Indiana

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Singer/songwriter Alanis Morissette in a popular hit from a generation ago sang about experiences in life that turn out to be exactly the opposite of what you would expect them to be. Appropriately, the song is titled “Ironic.”

*An old man turned ninety-eight
He won the lottery and died the next day
It's a black fly in your Chardonnay
It's a death row pardon two minutes too late*

*It's like rain on your wedding day
It's a free ride when you've already paid
It's the good advice that you just didn't take*

*A traffic jam when you're already late
A no-smoking sign on your cigarette break
It's like ten thousand spoons when all you need is a knife
It's meeting the man of my dreams
And then meeting his beautiful wife.*

Today the Christian Church Year ends with the festival of Christ the King. The Gospel for today reminds us how “ironic” the Christian Faith is. Jesus is King. Jesus is the Lord of the universe. Jesus is finally calling the shots. But how is Jesus King? Ironically, surprisingly, unexpectedly, in a way that no one in his or her right mind would ever expect . . . from the cross.

The Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, certainly did not think he was a king. He placed an inscription over Jesus’ head on the cross that proclaimed “This Is The King Of The Jews,” mocking Jesus’ claim to be a king. Those who actually called the shots in Jerusalem, the leaders and the soldiers, also mocked Jesus, daring him to come down from the cross, save himself and be a king. One of the criminals crucified with Jesus added the final insult to injury. He too dared Jesus to be a real king and not only save himself but those who were crucified with him.

“Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

Jesus does not look like a king, hanging there, dying on the cross. Kings are supposed to be in the business of saving. That’s what kings do. Kings save their subjects, their kingdoms and most of all themselves. Jesus seems neither interested nor capable of saving.

That is why we and so many in our world have so much trouble trusting a God who saves by being executed as a criminal on a cross. We do not want a crucified God. We want Superman. Author Robert Farrar Capon puts it well in these memorable words from his book Hunting the Divine Fox.

“The true paradigm of the ordinary American view of Jesus is Superman: ‘Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. It’s Superman! Strange visitor from another planet, who came to earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men, and who, disguised as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper, fights a never-ending battle for truth, justice, and the American Way.’

If that isn’t popular Christology, I’ll eat my hat. Jesus—gentle, meek and mild, but with a secret, souped-up, more-than-human insides—bumbles around for thirty-three years, nearly gets himself done in for good by the Kryptonite Kross, but at the last minute, struggles into the phone booth of the Empty Tomb, changes into his Easter suit and with a single bound, leaps back up to the planet Heaven. It’s got it all—including, just so you shouldn’t miss the lesson, kiddies: He never once touches Lois Lane.

You think that’s funny? Don’t laugh. The human race is, was and probably always will be deeply unwilling to accept a human messiah. We don’t want to be saved in our humanity; we want to be fished out of it. We crucified Jesus, not because he was God, but because he blasphemed: He claimed to be God and then failed to come up to our standards for assessing the claim. It’s not that we weren’t looking for the Messiah; it’s just that he wasn’t what we were looking for. Our kind of Messiah would come down from a cross. He would carry a folding phone booth in his back pocket. He wouldn’t do a stupid thing like rising from the dead. He would do a smart thing like never dying.”

A smart king would not be weak. A smart king would come down from the cross and get even with his enemies. A smart king would be like Superman and fight for truth, justice and the American Way. A smart king would be everything that we long to be: powerful, beautiful, admired and applauded by those whose admiration we covet.

But Jesus throws a wrench in the gears and messes everything up. He claims to be a king and yet forgives his enemies. He welcomes lawbreakers and losers, goes out to dinner with tax collectors and let’s trashy women touch him. He criticizes the virtuous and successful and befriends those whom your mother would never let you bring home for dinner. In his greatest hour, when he has the attention of the world hanging on the cross, he drops the ball. He could

have come down from the cross and everyone would have been standing in line to get his autograph. He did not.

We admire Superman because Superman does what we all want to do. We want to be able to assert ourselves, take charge of our lives and win the admiration of our neighbors. We want to be somebody. We often feel obscure and ordinary living our humdrum lives unnoticed and unappreciated, like Clark Kent, nerdy looking, mild mannered newspaper reporter. We dream of being able to jump into a phone booth and emerge as a super-hero able to save ourselves and save the world. We may not dream of being in a Marvel comic book or in a Hollywood blockbuster. But how about a pat on the back or a promotion or a new house in a better neighborhood? We just want to be someone because lurking in corner of our hearts is the fear that we don't matter, that our lives don't count and that finally our lives will just disappear into the dustbin of history, ignored and forgotten.

So, what do we do? We try our best to make sure we don't get nailed to a cross. We work hard at making something of ourselves. If no one else will, we will do our best to SAVE ourselves. We certainly are not going to give our hearts and lives to someone who loses, like criminals who get executed in Michigan City or at Calvary on a cross. But who will we give our hearts to? Whom can we trust when everyone finally disappoints or betrays us?

But there hangs Jesus dying on a cross still thinking that he is a king. Everyone thinks Jesus is a fool except for the second criminal also hanging there on his cross. Everyone and everything else in life has let him down. Yet, he dares to believe that Jesus is a king worthy of his trust. He still believes that this king who rules not with armies and swords but from a cross can save him. He believes that Jesus can make his life matter and give him the love that he so desperately craves.

"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

How ironic!

Jesus answers with a most incredible promise. Jesus still thinks he is a king, some kind of Superman who can save this criminal and the world by dying.

How ironic!

"Truly, tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

How audacious for Jesus to think that he could give to this criminal what only God could give? Jesus must think he is God or something.

If Jesus was a Superman, he sure looked like he met his Kryptonite that Friday on the cross.

The IRONIC truth is that on the cross he IS King. In spite of evidence to the contrary, flying in the face of everyone's expectations, hidden beneath what seems to be anything but royal or godly, Jesus is King. Jesus does have the last word. This is not just another futile and meaningless death carried out by the big, mean Roman machine. This is the triumph of God's love!

Of course, it would take the resurrection of Jesus three days later to confirm that. However, through the door of the empty tomb we see that it is the truth, the ironic truth, the in-spite-of-evidence-to-the-contrary truth!

When the evidence against us is piled high, when we realize that we are there with the leaders ridiculing Jesus, with the soldiers mocking Jesus and the criminal deriding Jesus, instead of spitting back to us what we deserve Jesus offers us that incredible promise: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing." When we are nailed to our crosses, suffering the consequences of bad choices, misguided arrogance or simply just steam-rolled by the injustices of life, Jesus declares, "Today you will be with me in paradise."

Hidden on that cross is Christ the King. He is Superman in a way we would never have expected. How ironic!!!