

Primary Readings: Jeremiah 23:1-6; Luke 23:33-43

With the sun making its arc lower in the sky each day... and with daylight waning so early in the afternoon... I was thinking this week about my experience of living in the mountain-valley retreat center of Holden Village about six winters ago.

Holden Village is an old mining village that holds a community of about 500 in the summer, but there's only room for about a hundred restless souls in the wintertime. The village sits nestled deep in the valley with the rushing waters of railroad creek not far from the heart of the village.

To the north of the village is a ridgeline – Martin Ridge – which towers thousands of feet above the valley. While to the south of the village stand two mountain peaks – Buckskin to the east and Copper to the west. In these winter months, the constellation Orion begins to climb one side of Buckskin early in the evening... and by early morning Orion begins its descent down the other side of Copper Mountain.

But during daylight in the winter – if it's one of those rare winter days when snow clouds aren't hovering near the village – the sun's arc doesn't reach high enough to climb either of these two mountains, but only shines between the two peaks. So the only direct sunlight the village would receive on a daily basis would be this hour or so between mountain peaks...

It seems to me that we stand this morning between two great mountains of celebration. Thanksgiving has just barely passed, maybe you also are barely over the tryptophan addiction from turkey sandwiches and turkey soup. But Advent & Christmas already loom in the near future.

This Sunday is 'Christ the King Sunday' – the last Sunday of the church year before we begin again next week with Advent and a new church year... 'Christ the King Sunday.' Falling as it does, it always seems to be overshadowed by these two towering mountains of celebration. And right there planted between the two towering mountains we have today before us the cross. The central symbol – the heart of Christianity.

These two towering celebrations, of course, are easier to sell on a shelf than the cross of Christ the King Sunday, aren't they? We might ask ourselves, how would one go about celebrating the Christ portrayed in a Gospel reading like this one?

“When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, *Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.*”

I came across in the news this week a noteworthy report of a sweatshop in China where workers labored for 14 hours a day, seven days a week, in order to earn 26 ½ cents per hour about half of China's minimum wage of 55 cents.

The most astonishingly ironic part of the report was what the Chinese workers were creating – small ornamental crucifixes, which it seems were for sale at churches in America. One would think we have enough crosses & crucifixes in our world that we wouldn't need slave labor to build more...

But a new question is being asked after this report, a question particularly poignant for the valley we find ourselves in this morning. Thanksgiving casting its shadow behind and Christmas towering ahead of us. The new question we might ask ourselves is: WWJB – What Would Jesus Buy?¹

Father, forgive us, indeed. For we don't know what we're doing... We have no idea what we're doing.

God, forgive us. For we have little idea how our actions and our purchases affect peoples and lands across the world over.

God, forgive us. For we in this world have rarely found ways to develop an economy without creating a system of poverty that it depends on.

God, forgive us. For we in this world have rarely found ways to structure governments that take into account the needs of more than just those in political power or those with a powerful lobbying force.

For this and for all that we have no idea what we're doing. God, forgive us.

¹ The report in small part can be found at: www.alternet.org/columnists/story/68632/ while the original report can be found at: www.nlcnet.org/article.php?id=479.

Jeremiah had a different vision. Jeremiah had a vision of a king – a political leader who would reign and deal wisely, and would execute justice and righteousness.

How strange this king turned out to be for we who call ourselves Christians. Even as a Christian, I must admit that I find myself from time to time repeating that challenge spoken by soldiers so long ago – “If you really are a king, then at least, save yourself!”

But how quickly we forget the lessons of this God, even as we have heard them all throughout this past year from Luke – *if we want to find our life, we must first lose it. If we want to be first, we must be last. If we want to be exalted, we must be humbled.* The true king, will wear a crown of thorns and be *enthroned on a cross.*

It is a dark valley indeed in which we stand and not just this week. A ridge of war and terrorism seems to constantly loom behind us. Mountains of impoverished peoples and polluted lands cast long shadows. It can seem as if the hopeful sun can barely climb above these mountains of injustice. So little sunshine... so little hope to warm our faces.

I have to admit that we went to the mall in Rapid City on Friday afternoon and were transformed in a matter of minutes into one of the many zombies walking the stores. We overheard someone make quite an observation. They said to the friend who they were walking next to, “It’s so strange. Everyone has such an empty look on their face...”

How we are starved for hope! It’s not just shopping that makes you hungry. How all of us hunger for a little sunshine to warm our faces!

I happened upon a little hope this week when I came across an interview with a famous Black theologian James Cone. But like any hope that’s worth its weight in sunshine, I had to acknowledge some dark shadows and towering mountains of injustice first.²

The interview began as James Cone talked about nooses swinging on trees... the *practice of lynching* – a practice that wasn’t all that different from the practice in our Gospel reading today: *crucifixion*. Both lynching

² For a transcript of this interview see: www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/11232007/transcript1.html.

and crucifixion – virtually random, but utterly final acts of violence used by people in charge to remind other people that they weren't. Romans and Judeans of the first century. Whites and Blacks of the 19th & 20th & now 21st century.

But James Cone didn't stop there with the interview. He went on to connect the experience of lynching with the experience of the cross. "See the cross is my story..." said Cone. "When I tell my story, that's what I tell..."

"But, then, I want people to tell me their story. *What I do know is religion is always the search for meaning for people who are weak and powerless.* And it connects me with people all over the world...God speaks in many tongues. I know where God is present when I see little people, the least of these, affirming their humanity in situations where they have few resources to do that. That power is what I mean by the cross..."

"Any time your empathy, your solidarity is with the little people, you're with the cross... [It's] power in the powerless..." concludes Cone. And I would add, *it's the warmth of sunshine in the cold of shadows.*

It's the "***beloved community***" to use a pair of words Martin King used. "That's what Martin [Luther] King, Jr. was working for," and it's the kingdom that this Jesus that today we dare to call 'Christ the King' was working for. It wasn't a kingdom like the ones we usually build starting with the needs of the rich or the powerful in mind.

No, this ***beloved community***, this "kingdom come" which we pray for all the time starts with *the little people*, criminals hanging from trees, Black people hanging from nooses, Chinese workers laboring on crucifixes. People searching for meaning in a world where there is little or none.

And it is about ***hope***. "Don't lose hope," says the Black theologian James Cone. "If people lose hope, they give up in despair."

And so says the criminal who hangs on a cross next to Jesus... "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." What a hopeful statement in the midst of death and despair looming over them.

And so this morning, we hear anew the promise of Jesus, a king: "*Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in the **Beloved Community**.*"