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Christ the King Sunday, 25th Anniversary of the Hosanna Jazz Liturgy

Bishop Cindy Halmarson, Saskatchewan Synod, ELCIC
November 21, 2010, Augustana Lutheran Church, Saskatoon

Grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus Christ, the firstborn of creation, the Savior of the world. And glory to God whose creative Spirit inspires us to sing new songs of God's praise.

Today we commemorate Hosanna, a liturgy written 25 years ago by David Hunter and Dennis Hendrickson, collaborators in a project to make God's majesty known through the medium of jazz music. We celebrate their creativity and give thanks to God for their unique expression of praise and thanksgiving using a musical style that echoes the bar scene, the club scene and the concert stage. For those of us more attuned to the organ than the saxophone, it may be difficult to hear in jazz music how God is glorified. But composer Fred Pratt Green wrote in a hymn published in our new worship book, "Let every instrument be tuned for praise; let all rejoice who have a voice to raise; and may God give us faith to sing always: Alleluia".

What is it about jazz style that makes it such an unexpected format for church music? I think it has to do with the way that jazz bends the sounds so that they never come out quite the way we expect. Jazz juxtaposes major and minor keys; it sets off rhythms in syncopation that sneak up on us and catch us off guard. Because jazz is charted and improvised, a piece never sounds exactly the same way twice. So jazz keeps us guessing, keeps us wondering what sound will be around the next corner.

And come to think of it, the story of our faith does the very same thing. Who among us wasn't a little bit confused when I read that Good Friday text for the gospel today? Here we are getting ready to start Advent – getting ready to start Christmas if you're really honest about it – and we're suddenly in the middle of Jesus' crucifixion. Talk about catching us off guard!

So look at the cover of the bulletin to see if there's a misprint. See if the office secretary maybe pulled the wrong set of bulletin covers from the package on the shelf. But no. This is the right gospel reading and the right bulletin. Christ the King Sunday. The last Sunday of the church year. And what do we see and read, but Jesus nailed to a cross between two criminals. Isn't that the last place you'd expect to see Christ the King? The story of our faith – the story of Jesus' faithfulness – takes an unexpected turn and we're left trying to make sense of a king who is crucified, major and minor keys juxtaposed, and our ideas about power and glory and victory turned all upside down. It's a jazz riff on what it means to be the savior of the world.

The soldiers in the scene don't get it. They put an inscription up, "King of the Jews." And they're right in a way. Jesus is King of the Jews by God's own anointing. And yet, it's not

right at all, for this one is the King of all creation. Hm. The leaders don't get it. They know about Jesus' ministry of healing and forgiving and casting out demons. But they jeer at him for not using his powers of life over death on himself! Little do they realize that in death Jesus is able to overcome death, not for himself, but for us who are given peace with God through him.

The first criminal doesn't get it at all. He can hear and see the crowds mocking Jesus, the soldiers jeering, the leaders scoffing at him. The criminal joins in the shouting, self-interest oozing with every word – "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" This one's got no imagination for what God has in mind about Jesus' death. For this one, deliverance is one more chance to get back to life as he knows it – such a narrow view of salvation. And by his rotten luck he happens to be strung up beside a Messiah who doesn't care about his own life. Rotten luck indeed.

The second criminal realizes part of the truth of Jesus. He knows that Jesus is unjustly condemned because he has done nothing wrong. At the same time the criminal acknowledges his own wrongdoing and the just punishment that he and his partner have received. He doesn't bargain for his life. He doesn't taunt or cajole Jesus. What is it that the second criminal sees in Jesus that makes this man ask to be remembered when Jesus comes into his kingdom? Is it Jesus' prayer for his executioners? Is it his calm against the storm of mocking and deriding? Is it the utter obedience that Jesus demonstrates to the destiny that God sets before him?

In the end, whatever it is that reveals Jesus' kingship to the criminal, Jesus responds to the man with a promise. "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." It's not what we expect, a promise of paradise from a dying savior. But it's what we have come to believe, and trust, and count on for our sake and the sake of our world. And we have nothing to base it on but the stories passed down in written text and spoken word; in songs and liturgies; in plays and passion narratives and oratorios. Because in these stories and songs we hear the promise that the Jesus we meet is the same Jesus the second criminal saw – praying for us, calm in the midst of the storms we experience, faithful to God's call to bless and redeem us, a faithless and foolish generation.

Jesus offers us Paradise through him, through his dying and through his rising. And as God's only son and the Messiah king, Jesus can deliver what he promises. For Paradise is God's promise that in Christ Jesus, no matter where we go, no matter what we do or don't do, in life or in death, God is with us, to hold us and love us, now and through death into eternal life. Paradise is trusting in God, as Christ Jesus did even as he hung on a cross, even as the second criminal trusted in him. And Paradise comes in knowing that no matter our place, no matter our failures, God still and always will love and receive us.

This turns our notions of a Messiah king upside down. But in order that we don't grow discouraged, our King Jesus gives us gifts, tangible signs of his presence and his promise. He claims us in water and word as we are baptized in the name of the Triune God. He feeds us in bread and wine, his own body and blood, a seal of his presence in and with us. And he meets us daily in the encounters we have with sisters and brothers in the faith,

known and unknown, the ones who offer us support in faith, as well as the ones who receive our generosity and so allow us to express our faith in sharing our abundance with others. So indifference is turned to engagement. And self-interest is turned to generosity. And so each day we live in the promise of Messiah king, that today we are with him in Paradise.

So how does Paradise sound? For some it's a Bach chorale; for others it's Handel's Messiah; for others still it's an ever-changing, ever-surprising jazz number that keeps us on our feet, living and responding in faith in the midst of everything that life has to offer.

But no matter how we hear it, we need never doubt that Jesus is remembering us, through the best and worst that life has to offer, as we live in the unfolding kingdom of God.

May God make it so. Amen.