

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

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Reign of Christ, Luke 23:33-43

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

Well, we Allens have made the plunge ... and next month we will bring home a puppy. The decision to welcome a new member of our family has not come lightly. We *love* Teddy – our eight-year-old, Doodle-ish dog – and we worry the addition will upset the T-Bear. Likewise, we feel mostly at peace with the rhythms of our house, and we wonder: *Do we really want to train a new creature through the teeth of a Boston winter.* Despite these mostly rational reluctances, the preternaturally cute Cocker Spaniel-Poodle mix we met yesterday melted whatever resistance remained among us.

For me, the prospect of a new dog, conjures memories of our old dogs – or, more to the point, how much I have loved all our pups ... and how much it hurts to say goodbye to them. That is, I've hesitated at the prospect of a new puppy because I know only one way to love a dog, and that is with my whole heart. Therefore, welcoming a new companion into our home assures that somewhere, out there, in the future, lies an inevitable and forceful heartbreak. And, instinctively, I guard my heart against it.

As may be true for you, our pets have marked our life's seasons, and this new addition has me remembering our beagle, Buddy. Buddy lived to a grizzled sixteen. I brought home "The Beags" four weeks after Missy and I married, and he accompanied us through our first jobs and seminary; through South Louisiana and a pair of LSU National Championships; and, finally, to Austin, where he spent five years in the backyard of that rectory, barking like a seal at whomever walked by its gate on their way to church. His rascal nature nudged Missy and me from newlyweds to new parents, and he bayed our children from cribs into adolescence. He was a mess, but a mostly sweet mess, and there are moments – very early mornings, late nights – when I still half-expect him to saunter around the corner of our kitchen.

At the end of Buddy's life, we began preparing ourselves for what his veterinarian informed us was swiftly approaching, intending to make the best of our remaining hours together. On a beautiful Saturday, my wife, our (at the time) elementary-aged children, and I spent most of the day with him: picnicking on his blanket for lunch; throwing the football while he watched; pressing his front paws into stepping-stone molds. We bought him the biggest, softest bed Costco sold, and he barbecued with us for supper. As doggie-hospice weekends go, I can't imagine a much better one.

After church the next day, I picked out a sunny spot with a view for his final resting place at our property outside of that town, and I dug his grave. I say that I “dug” it, but the digging stopped at about six inches – from that point down, it was cussing and breaking Texas Hill Country rock. When I couldn’t go any further, I dropped my feet in the hole, drank a cold beer, and thought about it all. I mean, God forbid I just dig a hole or commit to bring home a new dog! No, as I have been doing *now*, so I did *then*: I thought about The Beags and our family ... about the fast-moving freight train of our lives ... I thought about the meaning of life and the reign of Christ.

This evening, *we* reach an ending and *we* near a beginning as we celebrate the final Sunday of our liturgical year [that was a transition, by the way]. Marked in our church calendar as “Reign of Christ,” today we give thanks for the seasons now passed and we anticipate Jesus’ return, the promise of a cosmos fully ordered according to God’s hopes. In that renewed realm, the faithful citizenry will live “with gladness and singleness of heart,” covenanted to one another and to God in love and in mercy, by the breaking of bread and by the prayers, for the care of the creation and for the dignity of every human being.ⁱ

Between now and then, our Gospel appointment challenges us with reminder of the Empire that arrested Jesus, demanding we consider those Kingdoms subjugating us and those to which we subject ourselves. Observe that when we consider Jesus’ “kingship” in this context, we tend to overlay the Crucifixion with our political evaluations rather than our ethical judgments. This strategy declaws the moment and relocates its power to our head, rather than our heart. Yet, before this scene is political, it is *deeply* personal – look no further than Mary grieving at the foot of the cross. Seeking to discern the relief between the world that was, the world that is, and the world that will be, the unnamed criminals hanging on Jesus’ right and left argue about the man dying between them and the fate all three share.

The first man – let’s call him, “The Crier” – barks at Jesus: “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”ⁱⁱ Easy as it is to hear the snicker in his snarl, listen, too, for the panic. Enduring a brutal death, the man pleads in terror and desperation: *Jesus, save us!*

Instead of addressing the Lord, the second man – let’s call him, “The Rebuker” – chastises The Crier and blandishes Jesus from the side: “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.”ⁱⁱⁱ The Rebuker chooses to hear The Crier as derisive.

Then, “he” says, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”^{iv}

I value the ambivalence a surface reading of our translation leaves with us here. Certainly, Luke sets the scene for us to hear “he” as The Rebuker, as though he pulls his craning neck back from its aim at The Crier, lets it rest as it can on his cross, turns to Jesus beside him with puppy-dog eyes, and pleads with full awareness of the inevitable: *Whatever comes next, Lord, be generous with me ...* a tidy reading, leaving no trace of life’s usual crumbs.

Tilting the narrative slightly, we can read that “he” as the voice of The Crier. In this reading, the story’s action casts shade on The Rebuker, the one who chooses to malign his neighbor rather than look within himself or appeal to the Lord. The Crier, having confessed his understandable horror, now clarifies the sincerity of his appeal to Jesus: *Lord, if you are not that kind of Messiah, the sort who can pluck us from this wood and make the world right in this moment, then be better to me than I deserve for what I have done.*

To whomever addresses Jesus – whether one criminal or both, to the crowds or us – the Lord replies, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”^v

On the day Buddy died, Missy made a box for his casket, and that afternoon, we decorated it with messages to him. Not surprisingly, I belabored the point and penned a paragraph, but Ginna – in her deliberate, First-Grade script – wrote all there was to write:

Dear Buddy, You loved me and I loved you. I still do. Love, Ginna.^{vi}

[Lord, have mercy!] With Buddy at rest in his special casket in the back of the truck, we made the last preparations for his grave. Once finished, each of us took turns laying our hands on The Beagle’s box, and Missy and I finally lowered him into the ground. We sat crisscross-applesauce around the grave, and we did what people of faith do: we told stories – overlooking the rough patches – recalling only the best days. We all took heaping handfuls of the rocky soil, and we cast them into the hard earth, pronouncing, “Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.”^{vii} We held hands and we said the Lord’s Prayer. And then we gave our good Buddy a final goodbye, filled his grave, and laid one of his paw-print stones, the companion of which now greets us in our Massachusetts backyard.

We live in a world within which parents grieve the death of children, sons bury their mamas; spouses, their partners; peers, their friends. In such a context, I appreciate that the death of a dog may mark a relatively small moment, perhaps not the kind all of us will one day confront, and as so many – *too many* – already have.

Even so, with this new puppy on the way to my house, I have – clearly! – been thinking a lot of Buddy. That “Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia”^{viii} of his burial (a long time ago now) is echoing past me – *through me*, really – into some future with our soon-to-be new dog, when my family will (on a day I cannot see, do not want to see) mark another season’s conclusion: perhaps our children’s high-school graduations and an empty nest, *their* graduate school adventures, *their* first jobs, companions of their own. And though we barrel toward those new seasons with freight-train inevitability, I deem elective the opportunities for new love, renewed love; rather than fully open myself to fresh surprises and joys, a part of me still flinches.

Though none of us are as immediately imperiled as the criminals hanging on Jesus' left and right, we have been through so much these last three years – *we*, Trinity Church; *we*, the whole world. Our hearts are tender for that experience. So, we prefer that tidiest reading of today's Gospel. We follow The Rebuker's lead, and, in our hurt and in our worry, we fuss at each other rather than search ourselves or turn toward God. Likewise, we close ourselves to the beauty already around us and the beauty that is to come.

Realize, friends, that looking forward to the possibility of something wonderful does not stand in judgment of all we have enjoyed and everyone we have loved in the past ... hear that again: *looking forward to the possibility of something wonderful, something new, does not stand in judgment of all we have enjoyed and everyone we have loved in the past.*

And wonders are already underway at Trinity Church! In-person attendance this fall is up an inspiring 25% since last year (if such metrics are a help), and, even more discernable, cheerful energy teems in our pews. Furthering this ebullient momentum, a new Advent coos at the door, and, before we know it, Christmas will sweep us into all the Incarnation's magic.

Giving thanks to God for all that has been, and giving thanks to God for all that will be, let us, then, bless one another with reassurance and open our hearts. Let us encourage one another to see the Spirit about us even now, gathering Sunday by Sunday as an ever more loving Trinity Church, an increasingly Beloved Community ... as a young prophet once wrote, *I loving you, we loving one another, and God loving us all.*^{ix}

With gladness and singleness of heart, I pray,
Amen.

ⁱ From the "Baptismal Covenant," of course, the *Book of Common Prayer*, pp. 304-305.

ⁱⁱ Luke 23:39.

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 23:40-41.

^{iv} Luke 23:42.

^v Luke 23:43.

^{vi} A little maudlin, I know, but 100% true. I can still see what she wrote and how she wrote it (in green marker).

^{vii} From "The Commendation," p. 482.

^{viii} *Ibid*, p. 483.

^{ix} So, not a direct quote of Mary Virginia Allen, but an honorable derivation.