

“New Year’s Eve”
Luke 23:32-43
Christ the King Sunday

November 23, 2025
Westminster, Greenville
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Has anyone else here been enjoying the Ken Burns documentary on the American Revolution that aired this past week?

I’ve caught parts of it, haven’t watched all of it.

But one of the things that has really stood out for me is how much I thought I knew about the founding of our country—and how little I actually do know.

For example, two years ago, I was at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in NY City, standing in front of a famous painting: Washington Crossing the Delaware. And I thought...yeah, nice painting. How did I not know the story behind the painting?

How Washington’s army was on the brink of collapse in December of 1776. How he was literally days away from having most of his soldiers return to their homes. How Americans were swearing their allegiance to King George III, left and right.

As the historian David Hackett Fischer writes:

“No single day in history was more decisive for the creation of the United States than Christmas 1776. On that night a ragged army of 2,400 colonials crossed the ice-choked Delaware River from Pennsylvania to New Jersey in the teeth of a nor’easter...After marching all night, they attacked and defeated a garrison of...1,500 soldiers at Trenton...”

Then they went on to defeat British reinforcements at Princeton. I spent three years of my life in Princeton.

Paid no attention to the Battle of Princeton.

As Fischer puts it:

“These victories saved the American Revolution from collapse...

“Washington’s crossing of the Delaware was an apparent act of desperation. But...without [it] there would have been no United States as we know it...”¹

I want to go back to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and take another look at that painting of *Washington Crossing the Delaware*.

I want to stand in front of that painting, and imagine what it was like BEFORE the crossing.

When General Washington was still trying to decide what to do. He almost called the whole thing off because of the storm.

I don’t know what he was thinking, but I can imagine the internal debate:

Is it too late? Have we missed our chance?
I hope it’s not too late.

Have you ever said those words to yourself?
Is it too late?
I hope it’s not too late.

I raise the question today because of our text.
The crucifixion of Jesus.

¹ David Hackett Fischer, “Washington’s Crossing,” New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Perhaps this seems like an odd text to hear, four days before the Thanksgiving holiday.

We'll get to that in a moment.

In our text, you'll recall the dialogue between the two criminals and Jesus.

It's a dialogue that's only found in Luke.

One of the criminals says to Jesus:

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

But the other rebukes him, saying, “Do you not fear God...we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.”

Then he says:

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

To which Jesus replies:

“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

In other words, to the one crucified next to him,
who is literally running out of time,
Jesus says: “It’s not too late.”

* * * * *

It's one of the most HOPEFUL messages in all of scripture.
It's a message that Luke loves to tell his readers.
It's not too late.

Do you remember the parable of the prodigal?
Only appears in Luke.

When the younger son returns home, before he even gets there, the father rushes out to greet him. What is the father telling his younger son—with the robe and the ring and the feast and the fatted calf?

I love you. I forgive you.
It's not too late.

Or perhaps you recall the story of Zaccheus?
Zaccheus was a rich tax collector, a chief tax collector.
Ostracized by so many of his people.

But not by Jesus.
Jesus sees him up in that sycamore tree.
And Jesus calls to him and Jesus says to him:
I'm staying at your place tonight.
And Zaccheus pledges to give half of what he owns to the poor!

What's the message here?
You know the message.
Even for someone like Zaccheus, it's not too late.

What goes through your mind, when you hear those words?
It's not too late...

I'll tell you what goes through my mind.
Sometimes, it IS too late.

You see, I remember the good old days when I could beat my older son at basketball and my younger son in a race. What do you think would happen now if I challenged my younger son to run a mile against me on the track, or my older son to a game of one-on-one in our gym?

What odds do you give me?

I don't mean odds at winning.

I'm talking about the odds of whether or not I end up on the operating table.

Of course, losing one's athletic abilities in middle age is one thing.

But there are other things that are more important, opportunities we don't want to let pass us by...

In his marvelous book *Old Friends*, Tracy Kidder records interviews conducted at nursing homes. In one interview, a man named Art had recently lost his wife to a stroke. Many people Kidder talks with suffer from memory loss, but not Art—he suffers from what he remembers.

Art remembers the day that he and his wife were newlyweds, and by accident she dropped a frying pan, and he yelled at her. Sixty years later, he still remembers it—he yelled at her.

“If she could come back to life now, she could drop a hundred of them and I wouldn't give a darn.”

Art remembers a disagreement that lasted their entire marriage.

His wife wanted him to say more often that he loved her.

Art wasn't comfortable with that.

He wanted to show it, not say it.

“I understand that,” she said, “but sometimes a wife wants to hear it.”

“It doesn't run in my family to be like that,” he replied.

“And I never said it,” he says, “and then she had her stroke, and I sat by her bed every day, and I said, ‘I love you, I love you, I love you—
and she never looked up and said,

‘I hear you. I forgive you.’”²

Have you ever wanted to roll back the clock like that?

Today is Christ the King Sunday.

The last Sunday of our liturgical year.

Which makes today, in the Christian calendar, New Year’s Eve.

A day to reflect on the way that our faith, and our trust in God, needs to grow this year. A day to say, “This is what I want to do differently, this is how I need to love differently, this is how I hope God will change me, in the coming year.”

Because according to Jesus, it’s not too late.

- It’s not too late to let go of the grudge, and forgive someone who wounded you.
- It’s not too late to say you’re sorry to someone who is close to you.
- It’s not too late to take a chance with your faith, and say—this is what I think God is calling me to do.

Four hundred years ago, Martin Rinkart could have been excused for losing hope in what God was asking him to do. He had every reason to be angry, to give in to despair, to come to the conclusion that for him, it was just too late.

You see, Rinkart was the pastor of the small German town of Eilenberg in 1618 just as the slaughter and chaos of the Thirty Years War was beginning.

² Tracy Kidder, *Old Friends*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1993. This story is quoted directly from the book, with the exception of the last quote, which is my paraphrase.

This was a period so catastrophic that the population of Germany
fell from 16 million to 6 million
over the course of those thirty years.

Eilenberg was a walled city, a crowded city,
a city vulnerable to famine and disease.

In the year 1637 there was a terrible plague.
Four of the other pastors had died in that town.
Martin Rinkart was the only clergy remaining.

He conducted 4000 funerals that year.
At times, that meant 40 funerals in one day.

As the tide of slaughter, famine and plague began to recede in the
1640s, Martin Rinkart, who had lost half his household, including his
wife—he could have been forgiven for becoming a bitter and brittle old
man.

But for reasons we can only guess at, it was at that moment that
Rinkart sat down and wrote one of the most famous hymns in the
German language.

Viewing the wreckage of war,
and the folly of his fellow human beings,
and a pestilence that no one could control,
Rinkart wrote a hymn of joy, of love,
of thanksgiving, of peace.

Do you know what hymn I'm referring to?
Take a look in your bulletin.
It's the final hymn that you and I will sing in worship today.³

³ The story of Martin Rinkart can be found on various sites on the Internet.

Do you think Martin Rinkart could have dreamed that his story would still be told 400 years after living through such a catastrophic time?

That his hope would become embedded in a beloved hymn, to remind all of us that when it comes to the love of God...it's never too late?

In her book *Grace (Eventually)*, Anne Lamott tells the story of driving by a small carpet store, where she noticed a carpet remnant rolled up outside, leaning against the fence. It looked just perfect for the children's room at her church, so she pulled over, walked inside, and paid the man behind the desk fifty dollars for the rug.

She brought it to her Presbyterian church and dropped it off in the room where the little kids meet.

But the next day, one of the mothers called Anne to let her know that when they unrolled the carpet, they found a moldy spot in the middle.

The mother had returned the rug to the carpet guy.

"Did you get our money back?" Lamott asked.

"No, his bookkeeper wasn't there. But he'll have the money later today. "

So Anne goes back with her receipt, asks for the money.

But the carpet guy points to his ledger and tells her that someone came by to pick up the money an hour ago.

"That's not possible," she replies.

She calls the mother—did you pick up the money?
 No, I thought you were picking up the money.
 Lamott goes back to the man.

“Look,” she says, in her sternest Sunday-school-teacher voice, “I don’t want to make trouble. But no one picked up the money. And I’d like it. Now.”

He points to the ledger that says \$50.

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Lamott says.

“I’m from a *Sunday* school. This is for children.”
 For good measure, she added, “with *asthma*.”

Well, it only escalated from there, with the man refusing to give back the money, and Lamott calling another friend from the church, and he calls the man, and there’s more anger, and more arguing, and bad language...finally the man writes a check for \$50.

And Lamott immediately goes to deposit the check, only to be told by the teller that she can’t deposit the check, because the rug company has insufficient funds.

Lamott writes, “I sat outside the bank for a while...and started to laugh... Now what am I supposed to do?” she asked God, and after a few minutes, she knew.

So she took the carpet guy some flowers, with the bounced check and a note. The note said: “I am very sorry for the way I behaved.
 Anne.”

“You want to know how big God’s love is?” she concludes.

“The answer is: it’s very big. It’s bigger than you [and I] are comfortable with.”⁴

What if you took that message with you into the holidays this year?

The love of God is always bigger and broader and deeper than you and I are comfortable with...

You see, I suspect there will be someone at your holiday table in the next 6 weeks that just might have a hard time loving. Someone who always gets under your skin. Someone you would rather ignore.

Do you know who I’m talking about?

Don’t do it.

Don’t write them off.

It’s not too late for them.

It’s not too late for you.

The love and grace of God is always bigger than you and I are comfortable with.

Rachel Naomi Remen once wrote, “There is often more wisdom to be found at the edges of life than in its middle. [The unexpected in life] may shuffle our values like a deck of cards. Sometimes a card that has been on the bottom of the deck for most of our lives turns out to be the top card, the thing that really matters. Having watched people sort their cards and play their hands...for many years, I would say that rarely is

⁴ Anne Lamott, *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith*, New York: Riverhead Books, 2007. I am indebted to a sermon by the Rev. Dr. John Buchanan, “Show Great Love,” preached on June 17, 2007 at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL, for reminding me of this story in Lamott’s book.

the top card perfection, or possessions, or even pride. Most often the top card is love.”⁵

How will you play your top card this holiday season?

Amen.

⁵ I am indebted to the Rev. Tom Gibbons for this quote.