

## Reflection for Reign of Christ Year C

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Jeremiah 23:1-6, Psalm 46, Colossians 1:11-20, Luke 23:33-43

Sunday, November 20th, 2022

In New York City's Central Park stands a statue of William Shakespeare. Four thousand dollars towards its funding was raised at a benefit performance of *Julius Caesar* in late 1864; and there is a direct link between that statue, that performance, and one of the most famous assassinations in American history.

Most people associate the Booth name with John Wilkes Booth, the actor who shot Abraham Lincoln on April 14, 1865. Prior to the president's assassination, however, the Booth family was the most prominent acting family in America.

Older brother, Edwin, and father, Junius, are regarded as two of the foremost Shakespearean actors in history. All three performed *Julius Caesar*, with John in the role of Brutus, Caesar's assassin, an ironic twist that foreshadowed what would happen less than a year later.

What is lesser known in history, however, is that John Wilkes Booth's older brother, Edwin, once saved the life of President Lincoln's son, Robert.

In late 1864, Robert was boarding a train in Jersey City, New Jersey. He recalled waiting at the edge of a very crowded train platform, and, as the train began moving, he started to fall into the open narrow space. Suddenly, a man seized his coat collar and pulled him to secure footing on the platform. Young Lincoln recognized Edwin Booth, but Booth did not know the identity of the man whose life he had saved until some months later, when he received a letter from a friend, the chief secretary to Ulysses S. Grant. The fact that he had saved the life of Abraham Lincoln's son was said to have been of some comfort to Edwin Booth following his brother's assassination of the president.

What an example of irony: two brothers, same parents, same upbringing, same profession, and yet one chose to kill the president and the other chose to save the president's son.

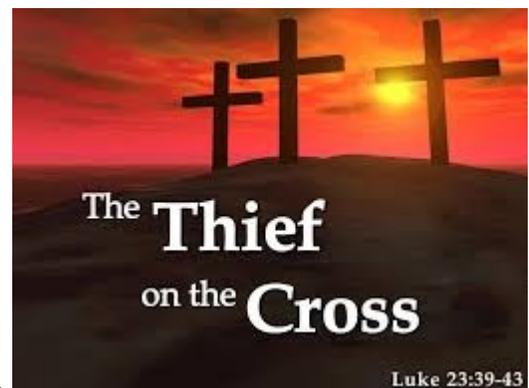
(adapted from "The Forgotten Story of John Wilkes Booth's Family" by Ryan Fan, November 3, 2020, medium.com; "The Actor and the Assassin: Edwin and John Wilkes Booth" podcast by Michael Witmore, Folger Shakespeare Library; Edwin Booth biography, wikipedia.org)

So, what made the difference? One word...choice.

Today on this Reign of Christ Sunday we look back to Good Friday, back to the Cross. Standing nearby were people who had chosen to be there: Mary, the mother of Jesus, her sister, Mary of Clopas, Mary Magdalene, and Mary, the mother of James and John. (John 19:25)

Only one disciple chose to be there, John, "the disciple whom Jesus loved." (John 19:26-27) The religious leaders who

had plotted for this moment chose to attend. (Matthew 27:41-43; Mark 15:31-32; Luke 23:35; John 19:20) Soldiers stood carrying out their orders (Matthew 27:54, Mark 15:39, Luke 23:47), and a crowd was there to witness



the gory spectacle, entertained by the blood and intensity of the Roman Empire's preferred method of execution, that of crucifixion.

And also on Calvary were two criminals. (Matthew 27:44; Mark 15:27; Luke 23:32; John 19:18) Although they had not chosen to be on these crosses, each had chosen a life of lawlessness that led them there. ("Who were on Golgotha during the crucifixion of Jesus?" Grace Fellowship Church, March 19, 2020, graceomaha.org blog)

And today, we are gazing upon a tragic tableau.

The setting is The Skull, also known as Calvary, over two thousand years ago.

Author Max Lucado, in his book, *He Chose the Nails*, makes an interesting observation: He asks: "[Why only three crosses?] Why not six or ten? Ever wonder why Jesus was in the centre? Why not on the far right or far left? Could it be that the two crosses on the hill symbolize one of God's greatest gifts? The gift of choice." (*He Chose the Nails*, pg. 55, Multnomah Books 1989)

There are many, many examples of this gift in the Bible: Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden ~ God gave them the choice to obey or disobey; their sons, Cain and Abel, who chose to worship God differently; fellow travellers in Canaan ~ Abraham and Lot; Abraham who chose God and Lot who chose Sodom; two kings of Israel, David and Saul: David chose to follow God, while Saul chose his own way; and two disciples, Peter and Judas, who both denied Jesus, but later, Peter chose restoration and Judas chose death. (adapted from "Two Thieves" by Jeff Rapp, April 17, 2021, seeyouinheaven.life)

This reading for Reign of Christ Sunday makes us think in an entirely different way all our images of royalty and kingship. And yet, in this very passage, we see the truth of the Kingdom of God.

We look at Jesus today, as he hangs on a Roman cross, condemned to die by order of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, still offering God's love, forgiveness, and compassion. Mocked by the empire as a so-called king, Jesus exhibits the characteristics of a true king anointed by God. When asked by another also condemned, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," he mercifully promises, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." (42-43)



It is about the awesome power of love, as Jesus forgives his executioners. It's about the strength of God's power as shown on the cross.

In one of the darkest hours in human history, Jesus turns it into humanity's biggest triumph. Jesus takes away the sin of the world and offers salvation ~ amazing grace, unconditional forgiveness, and atonement.

Looking at the three crosses on Calvary, we see God's plan of redemption. It is summed up simply through the three men dying on their crosses: One man dies with guilt in him and on him. The second man dies with guilt in him but not on him. The third dies with guilt on him but not in him. (various sources including "Two Thieves." ourdailybread.org)

Jesus gave both criminals the same choice. One said, "Remember me." The other said nothing. To quote author Max Lucado, once again, "There are times when God sends thunder to stir us. There are times when God sends blessings to lure us. But then there are times when God sends nothing but silence as he honours us with the freedom to choose where we spend eternity." (adapted from *He Chose the Nails* by Max Lucado, 2017)

What God will do next is, of course, the heart of the Gospel. In raising Jesus from the dead, God will vindicate him as Messiah and Lord, not to condemn, but to reign in mercy.

Today we are given the gift to renew our faith on this last Sunday of the church year.

Next week marks the first Sunday of Advent, a season of preparation and expectant waiting.

Already, we are getting ready for Christmas, inundated with commercials, advertisements, holiday movies and music, frenetic shopping...but...let's take a deep breath and turn our hearts and minds inward.

Reign of Christ Sunday gives us the opportunity to refocus, a reminder that needs to be heard before we get lost in all the wrapping paper and decorations of December's festivities.

The important reminder is that the end of the story is what makes the beginning so special. The important lesson is that Easter is what gives meaning to Christmas, not the other way around. What gets easily overlooked in the images of a wee baby born in a stable is the overshadowing power of the man who died on a cross.

The six Sundays of Lent often seem less significant than the four weeks of Advent. So it's important for us to hear this story today. It's important for us to remember the context of Advent. It's vital for our faith to recognize the priority of Easter over Christmas. (adapted from a sermon "*Getting What We Deserve*" by retired Rev. R. L. Quinn, West Heights United Methodist Church, 2008)

When we come to the end of a calendar year, we often make New Year's resolutions, to make personal life choices. Unlike the calendar new year, you don't need to make a long list of resolutions to prepare for the new church year. You only need one. This year, every day, make Jesus your King.

Then, when you reach the end of this life, may you hear Jesus say to you, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

(adapted from "*Common Criminals*" by Jo Anne Taylor, apastorsings.com)

Amen.

