

A Greek Orthodox bishop, named Demetrios of Mokissos, reflecting on these murders concludes, "The ISIS murderers seek to demoralize Christians with acts like the slaughter on a Libyan beach. Instead they stir our wonder at the courage and devotion inspired by God's love." The terrorists who killed that young man did not know what they were doing.

On this Sunday called Christ the King, we are confronted by a king who dies on a cross. Instead of saving himself, Jesus saves others. Rather than crying out in anger, he forgives the people who kill him. Both then and now, Jesus brings good out of evil.

What a difference it makes when people see Christ as their king, even though that king is hanging on a cross. The criminal next to Jesus did this when he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (v. 42). The young African man on the Libyan beach did this when he pointed to the Coptic Christians and said, "Their God is my God." Both the criminal and the young African man saw Christ as king. They grasped his power and trusted him to save them. In the face of death, they put their complete faith in a crucified Lord.

Such stories stir our wonder. They also leave us with a question: *Are we living our Christian faith in such a way that people will look to us and say, "Their God is my God"?* The challenge for us is to speak in ways that reveal authentic faith and act in ways that show real courage and devotion. Only when people are inspired by what Christians say and do will they be willing to accept Christ as their king.

Rodger Nishioka, a seminary professor and Christian educator, is convinced that actions speak louder than words, and that Christian service provides new ways of knowing Jesus today. Nishioka tells the story of a young couple who moved from New Jersey to Iowa to start their careers. They visited a couple of churches but didn't join a congregation. Then the wife discovered that she had Stage 4 breast cancer. She entered the hospital for surgery, and was visited by the pastor of one of the churches they had attended.

Once home, the young wife received a visit from one of the women of the church who brought a casserole and shared that church members prayed for the couple. The wife thanked her and asked how much she owed for the casserole. The woman said, "Sweetheart, this is free." As they talked the church woman helped by cleaning the house.

Next day, there was another knock on the door. This time it was a man from the church bringing another dinner. The young wife offered to pay him, and he said, "No, this is free. This is what we do." Then he went out and got his tools and fixed her screen door.

Church members brought a meal to this couple every day for six months. The two had so much in their freezer that they invited coworkers over for a meal. Their colleagues asked, "Where did you get this food?" They replied, "It comes from our church." Note the pronoun: *Our* church. Their colleagues then asked, "What church do you go to?"

What made the difference was actions, not words. What these Christians were living and doing spoke louder than their words. In this Iowa community, young adults were looking at authentic Christian devotion and saying: *Their God is my God*. And once again, Jesus the King was bringing good out of evil and life out of death.

Mitsuo Fuchida served as a captain in the Imperial Japanese Navy Air Service. Fuchida is best known as the bomber pilot who led the attack on the U.S. fleet anchored at Pearl Harbor. Following the defeat of Japan, the Allies called Fuchida to testify as a witness against some of the military leaders accused of war crimes. Fuchida believed this to be a case of "victor's justice," the Allies flexing their might to punish the Japanese, and he vowed to find evidence to support his belief.

Fuchida sought corroboration from POWs returning from American camps. Much to Fuchida's surprise, however, POWs reported being treated well by the Americans: none testified to torture or abuse at the hands of their captors. Fuchida's former flight engineer, Kazuo Kanegasaki, went on to speak of a young lady, Peggy Covell, who served the prisoners with deep love and respect, despite the fact that her missionary parents had been killed by Japanese soldiers in the Philippines.

Fuchida could not understand this: according to the *Bushido* code it is the responsibility for an offended party to seek revenge and restore honor. The murderer of one's parents would be a sworn enemy for life. Fuchida became almost obsessed trying to understand why anyone would treat their enemies with love and forgiveness. The grace, forgiveness, and service shown by Peggy Covell piqued Fuchida's curiosity of the Christian faith and a few years later, after reading the Bible for himself, he became a Christian, declaring to the world, "Their God is my God."

Such stories stir our wonder. Nishioka surmises, "Maybe in the 21st century, folks are looking for a group of believers who act for the glory of God." Not for themselves, but for the glory of God. Not for themselves, but for Jesus. Not for themselves, but for others. Believers like the Coptic Christians on the Libyan beach. Believers like the men and women of the Iowa church. Believers like Mitsuo Fuchida who learned a better way to live.

We are challenged to act in ways that will cause people to look at us and say, "Their God is my God." Hosting the homeless on cold winter nights so they won't die of hypothermia. Mentoring teens who are trying to find their way in the world. Building medical clinics in developing countries, so that lives will not be lost to AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis. Taking the time to teach children the stories of Jesus and to show them the love of Jesus. Fighting the cancers of racism and prejudice by building relationships with neighbors of different colors and creeds, all of whom carry within them the image of God.

Evil comes in many forms - some is delivered by sinful people, while some is the result of the spread of cancerous cells - but Jesus has the power to overcome it all and to bring life out of death in every time and place and situation. Our mission is to act in ways that show that Jesus is our king, and that we are willing to follow him with courage and devotion. If we act as followers of Christ, Jesus will remember us and welcome us into his kingdom. And for some people around us, our God will become their God.

Prayer: Almighty and Merciful God, you break the power of evil and make all things new in your Son, Jesus Christ, the King of the universe. May all in heaven and earth acclaim your glory and never cease to praise you. May we bear witness to the world, in word and deed, that You are our God. This we ask through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Sources:

- Demetrios of Mokissos. "ISIS is guilty of anti-Christian genocide." *The Wall Street Journal*, February 12, 2016, wsj.com.
- Mitsuo Fuchida, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mitsuo_Fuchida. Site visited November 17, 2017.
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Their God Is My God

Christ the King Sunday, November 20, 2016
The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Luke 23:33-43

The people who crucified Jesus did not know what they were doing. Although they attempted to anger him, Jesus responded with forgiveness. Although they mocked him with a sign that said, "King of the Jews," Jesus showed that he was the King of all God's people, their Savior. Although they challenged him to save himself, Jesus chose to save the criminal next to him. Jesus turned evil into good; and he continues to do the same today.

Last year, Islamic State terrorists brutally executed 21 Coptic Christians in Libya. The Copts are the largest Christian community in the Middle East, and one of the oldest in the world: Copts trace their church back to Mark, who introduced Christianity in Alexandria, Egypt, just a few years after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The Islamic State, also known as ISIS, executed these Coptic Christians because of their faith in Jesus Christ. ISIS released a video entitled, "A Message Signed with Blood to the Nations of the Cross," to send a message of hatred and fear to Christians around the world. But like the people who killed Jesus, ISIS did not know what they were doing: instead of weakening the Christian faith, they strengthened it.

The 21 men were tradesmen working on a construction job. All were Egyptians except for one: he appears to have been a young African man, perhaps from Chad or Ghana. The executioners demanded that each hostage identify his religion. Under threat of death, they could have denied that they were Christians; but instead, each of the Christians declared their trust in Jesus. Maintaining their faith in the face of evil, each man was beheaded. But the story of these horrific executions has an unexpected and inspirational ending.

The young African man with the Egyptians was not a Christian when he was captured. But when the ISIS terrorists challenged him to declare his faith, he replied: "Their God is my God." What a statement! "Their God is my God." For those words, the terrorists killed him, but in that moment, the young man became a Christian. Jesus said to him, as he said to the man on the next cross, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (v. 43).