“Jesus Christ, King of kings and Lord of lords!”

Luke 23:33-43

The rapper Eminem has a song, “Kings Never Die,” inspired by the movie *Southpaw*. It ends with the words, *Here to stay / Even when I’m gone / When I close my eyes / Through the passage of time / Kings never die.*

But he’s wrong. Kings die. They really do.

Elvis Presley was the “King of Rock ‘N’ Roll,” and he died at age 42 from cardiac arrest. Martin Luther King Jr. was killed by an assassin at age 39. Jesus was described as “King of the Jews” (v. 38), and died on a cross in his early 30s.

Kings die. All the time.

But what if they were able to avoid such tragic ends?

The Atlantic magazine (September 2018) recently asked the question: “Whose untimely death would you most like to reverse?” If you could turn back time and save a great leader, who would you pick? And what difference would it make?

Buddy Holly wasn’t the King of Rock ‘N’ Roll, but is often described as the *Father* of Rock ‘N’ Roll. His great songs — including “That’ll Be the Day,” “Rave On,” and “Peggy Sue” — make you

wonder how many other classics he would have written and recorded if he had not died in a plane crash at age 22.

Although not a true king, Robert F. Kennedy was a member of a family considered to be political royalty. Author Thomas Cahill wonders what America would look like today had he not died in 1968.

Actor Ashley Eckstein would like to reverse Walt Disney's death. "Disney changed the world," she writes. "Imagine how much more happiness and magic he could have spread had he not passed away early."

And producer Alison Sweeney writes that "Abraham Lincoln's assassination changed the trajectory of the United States. We'll never know what could have been if he'd been able to finish his second term."

Elvis. MLK. Buddy Holly. RFK. Walt Disney. Abraham Lincoln. All were kings in their respective fields, and the world would certainly be different if they had not suffered untimely deaths.

And Jesus? On this Sunday called "Christ the King," Luke tells the story of the death of Jesus on the cross. A sign over the head of Jesus reads, "This is the King of the Jews," and soldiers mock him, saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" Even one of the criminals crucified next to Jesus said, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" (vv. 36-39).

The crucifixion was an excruciating and humiliating way for a king to die. And in the case of Jesus, it was an unjust sentence. The criminal on the other side of Jesus rebuked his fellow criminal, saying, “We indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong” (vv. 40-41). Jesus was killed for crimes he did not commit.

So what if the untimely death of Jesus had been reversed? What if Jesus the King had gone on to live a long and happy life? Would the world be a better place?

You have to wonder. Since the crucifixion of Jesus was such an abomination, it is tempting to think that the world would certainly have improved if his death sentence had been overturned. But sometimes, terribly shocking tragedies can have unexpectedly good results.

Think back to November 1963, 56 years ago, and the assassination of John F. Kennedy. This killing was a hinge point in history, on par with Pearl Harbor and 9-11. It pivoted America from the calm of the 1950s to the upheaval of the 1960s.

John F. Kennedy was no Christ-figure — far from it. Jesus was sinless, while JFK had deep, personal flaws. But his death, like the death of Jesus, changed history.

Initially, reaction to Kennedy’s assassination was nationwide shock and sorrow. Then the American people rallied around his vision of putting a man on the moon by supporting the Apollo program. JFK’s call for civil rights was amplified by his successor Lyndon B. Johnson, who invoked Kennedy’s memory as he advocated for the Civil Rights Act.

In the end, the death of JFK was not only a tragedy but a catalyst. His murder led to advances that might have become bogged down, or not occurred at all, had Kennedy served two full terms during the chaos and conflict of the 1960s.

We'll never know if Kennedy would have been effective in a full presidential term — or two. In the same way, we'll never know if Jesus would have expanded his ministry beyond Israel, although he always was quite clear that his kingdom was "not from this world" (John 18:36). As the great Christian thinker Henri Nouwen observed, "For Jesus, there are no countries to be conquered, no ideologies to be imposed, and no people to be dominated. There are only children, women and men to be loved."

All we know for sure is that the earthly ministry of Jesus ended on a cross. And because he died and then rose on Easter, we followers of Jesus Christ now make up the world's largest religious group, with more than two billion Christians. We accept the tragic death of Jesus as part of our religious history, and we understand — in a variety of ways — that the evil that was done to him eventually resulted in great good.

On a practical level, Christians *are motivated to fight injustice* because it was a completely innocent Jesus who was nailed to a cross with criminals on either side of him. Across the country, people are now working with the Innocence Project to exonerate wrongly convicted individuals.

In South Africa, after the apartheid era, Christians such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu led the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which allowed victims and perpetrators to speak in public hearings and move toward reconciliation. Such a Christian focus on forgiveness comes from what Jesus

said about his killers from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (v. 34).

Could such enormous good have been done without the cross? Perhaps. But the crucifixion of Jesus, like the assassination of JFK, is both a shock and a stimulus.

Kennedy’s death motivated the American people to work for progress, while the crucifixion inspires Christians to fight injustice and do the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation. Both tragedies point us toward the faith that death is not the end, and that good can come out of evil.

The death of Jesus *also forces us to confront our own mortality* and to prepare for eternal life with God. After the second criminal defends Jesus from the cross, he says, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And Jesus replies, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (vv. 42-43).

No earthly king can make this kind of promise, because no earthly king can offer us forgiveness and eternal life. But Jesus the King is both human and divine, so his words give us the assurance that we will be with him in paradise. The struggles of this world will be over, and we will be forgiven and made whole, eternally united with God and with each other.

Each of us is going to come to the end of our life with feelings of guilt and regret. We will have done some evil things that we should not have done, and we will have failed to do some good things that we should have done.

And if we haven't done anything really *evil*, then surely we've done some spectacularly *stupid* things we now regret.

Even if we work hard to fight injustice and do the hard work of reconciliation, we are going to make bad choices and crazy, stupid mistakes. Life is chaotic and complicated, and no one can live it without sin.

Some of us will even feel as guilty as the criminal on the cross, who said to his fellow lawbreaker, "We indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds" (v. 41).

But if we trust in Jesus, we can be given forgiveness and eternal life. The criminal shows his trust by saying, "Jesus, remember me," and Jesus rewards this trust by saying, "today you will be with me in Paradise" (vv. 42-43). The criminal can do nothing from the cross to change his past. All he can do is put his faith in Jesus to be his Savior, completely relying on God's grace. And fortunately, that is enough.

Enough for him, and enough for us.

The criminal believes that King Jesus is going to continue to live and to come into his kingdom. And more than anything else, the man wants to be with him. He teaches us to accept that our lives are going to end, and that we can be given forgiveness and eternal life by a king who continues to rule from heaven.

So maybe Eminem is right after all. Jesus is *Here to stay / Even when I'm gone / When I close my eyes / Through the passage of time / Kings never die.*

May the peace of God . . .

#855 – Crown Him with Many Crowns