So, here we are…the last Sunday in the church’s calendar year. The year draws to a close and we sum up all we have learned and explored and experienced over the past year with these three words: Christ the King. Divine Kingship is not about hierarchy. It is about community. Divine Kingship is not about being ruled. It is about being held. Divine Kingship is not about adherence to law. It is about forgiveness. It is about new life. We close the year with Jesus’ last words before he commends his spirit to God. The criminal hanging on the cross next to Jesus confesses that he is guilty. He acknowledges the he has made mistakes, that he has committed wrongs. He says to the other criminal, “We have been condemned justly.” Then, he says to Jesus, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He confesses his dependence on God, his source for new life. Jesus replies, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” Forgiveness incarnate. Forgiveness eternal.

Why is forgiveness the last statement? Why is forgiveness so integral to our life story? Two of the stories we explored this past year are illuminating; so let’s revisit. Let’s take one more look at the story of the Good Samaritan from earlier in this season after Pentecost. A man is beaten and left at the side of the road to die. A priest walks by and ignores him. A Levite, an assistant to the priest in the temple, walks by and ignores him. Then, a Samaritan comes along and tends to him. Who is Christ in this story? The man who is beaten and left at the side of the road had been traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. Jerusalem stands 2,500 feet above the level of the Mediterranean and Jericho lies 825 feet below it. The man is descending into trouble, just as Christ does on his journey to his passion and death. The man left to die on the side of the road
is Christ, and we are being asked to imitate Christ by living into the mystery of death and resurrection. We are saved in dying to ourselves.

After finishing the story about the Good Samaritan, Jesus tells his listener to go and do likewise, to do what the Good Samaritan did, who drew alongside the man who was beaten. He equated himself with this man who was left to die. The Good Samaritan recognized his own humanity, his own weaknesses, his own faults, his own ability to fail. He recognized his need for God. Once he recognized this need, the door opened to new life. The open door is forgiveness (Robert Farrar Capon, “The First of the Misnamed Parables,” *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002, pgs. 209-218).

Let’s take one more look at the story of the Prodigal Son which we explored during Lent. The Prodigal Son takes his inheritance and sets off for fun and adventure. But, things don’t go as planned. He behaves irresponsibly and becomes destitute. And, as he is feeding the pigs to make some money, he realizes that his father’s hired hands are treated better than he is being treated. He imagines that he could return home and say to his father three things: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.” So, he decides to return. But, while on his way home, something takes root within him, the seeds of transformation. He comes to recognize his own humanity. By the time he arrives home, the issue is no longer about being treated like one of his father’s hired hands. He says to his father, simply, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” Period. No mention of how he wants to be treated. He realizes he is human…that’s it. He has died to himself. He realizes he is dependent on God, meaning he knows he needs God to live life as we are meant to live, loving and righteous. Once he acknowledges his dependence, once he dies to himself, he is free to be all
that he can be (Capon, “The Party Parables,” pgs. 293-301).

So, how does this work? How do we die to our self? Sometimes, this mystery of death and resurrection intercedes in our darkest moments, in moments of deep distress or sadness. For me, once such moment was after my second miscarriage. I was heartbroken. My first miscarriage happened very early in my pregnancy – it hadn’t become real, yet. But, my second miscarriage happened at 13 weeks. By then, I felt pregnant, my body was beginning to react and adjust to the pregnancy. This baby was very real to me. I was heartbroken when I lost him or her. To this day, I remember, vividly, sitting in a chair in my living room – it was a high wingback chair. I remember slumping over and crying. It’s those moments of deep sorrow when our soul searches for comfort, but, sometimes, nothing seems to ease the pain….and so we keep searching, as I did in that moment. And, maybe, because it felt like there was nowhere else to turn, I let go. I stopped trying to control the circumstances of my life, and then, God was right there – unconditionally, loving me incessantly, forgiving my ignorance, showing me a path forward. We die to ourselves, and are granted new life.

Like all of us, I fall back into trying to control all aspects of my life. We need each other to live faithfully. So, together, we start a new calendar year. We listen to the stories, once again: Jesus’s birth and life and death and resurrection. The stories remind us that we are human, that we will wander away from God’s love. And, the stories will call us back, once again, to confront our controlling self, and to encourage us to let go. Our dependence on God is not a weakness; it is a release of wasted energy; it is living how we are meant to live; it is the door opening to newness of life. We may wander away from God’s love, but God will never wander away from us. We die to ourselves and God shows us the path forward. In a world that believes power is derived from success, the Gospel shows us “…the power that, in a mystery, works through
failure, loss, and death” (Capon, pg. 313). Forgiveness is the last statement of the church calendar year, because it is the path to new life. Next week, our calendar starts over. We begin with the season of Advent, in which we prepare, once again, for Christ’s birth. Today, our Scripture shows us that our church year is not simply a repetition year to year – it is always about new Creation, it is always about new hope through Christ Jesus. Amen.