

Immanuel Lutheran Church  
Shobonier, Illinois  
Lent 1 midweek  
February 24, 2017  
Luke 23:43

### The Promising Word

And He said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise." (Luke 23:43 ESV)

In the name of Jesus, the only Savior of the world,

After asking His Father to forgive those who were killing Him, Jesus speaks a word of promise and salvation: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise." What wonderful words those are! Even more so when we remember that Jesus did not say them to a religious man, a fine, upstanding citizen, or even one of His disciples. No, He spoke them to a man rightly convicted of a capital crime. Jesus was hanging on a cross between two criminals, the innocent among the guilty, a just Man between two sinners. These two have been given the privilege of being at Jesus' left and His right when He comes into His kingdom, a privilege the disciples bickered over but had no idea what they were asking. Who could have known?

Now, we don't know what those two men's crimes were, but we can be sure they were guilty. They're called, "evildoers, criminals, robbers." Though, perhaps, "insurrectionist" or even "terrorist" might be closer to the mark. They were not petty thieves, but violent and dangerous men who posed a threat to all, thus threatening Roman peace and security. Their public crucifixion was intended to act as a warning to others.

There they hung, one on Jesus' right, the other on His left. Legend puts the "good" one on Jesus' right, the "bad" one on His left, perhaps in view of Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats. The one on Jesus' left reviles Jesus and hurls insults at Him, joining the chorus of the religious leaders and the passers-by who had come to shake their fists. "Aren't You the Christ? Save Yourself and us!"

Strange, isn't it, that the man's mockery should come in the form of a prayer for salvation? "Save Yourself and us!" This is certainly not a prayer of faith but of derision and unbelief. What kind of Christ are You? What sort of Messiah are You going to be? Flex some of that messianic muscle and save Yourself and us too. Or are you a fake, an impostor, a phony Christ? Spare Yourself from this death, and spare us too.

Thus the thief on the left is the spokesman for the unbelieving world. His mocking "prayer" comes in the form of a demand, not a repentant "Lord, have mercy." If Jesus is worth His salt as a Messiah, He would come down from that wretched cross and save Himself, and while He's at it, save His fellow criminals too. But that's not the way of salvation at all. That's the devil's

way, the way that Peter represented when he took Jesus aside and rebuked Him for speaking of His death and resurrection. This mocking prayer echoes Satan's temptations in the wilderness: "If You are the Son of God . . . If You are the Christ . . ."

In contrast, the thief on the right rebukes his fellow thief, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" (Luke 23:40). The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. To fear the Lord is to put all other fears in their place. "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things," certainly in life and especially at our life's end, when we, too, find ourselves under the same death sentence of the Law. To fear the Lord under those circumstances is to be wise in the way of faith, trusting that in life and in death, Jesus is mighty to save.

There's something else very different about this man. He confesses his sin, his guilt; he tells the truth, "And we indeed [are condemned] justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds" (Luke 23:41). "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). This man recognizes his sin and admits it. There's no use denying it now. He's getting what he deserves.

Yet, he doesn't leave it at that. He also confesses Christ, "But this man has done nothing wrong" (Luke 23:41). Behold the unblemished Lamb of God! He is pure, holy, and innocent. Like Pilate, this man confesses that Jesus had done nothing deserving of death. He confesses his own guilt. He confesses Jesus' innocence. And then, with no mocking or ridicule in his voice, he prays, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom" (Luke 23:42). Of all the people who address Jesus, he is the only one to use Jesus' name without some other title. Simply "Jesus." Familiar, direct, no flattery—Jesus. Death is the great leveler; it puts everyone on a first-name basis.

"Remember me when You come into Your kingdom." A simple word of faith. He sees this broken, bleeding, dying man next to him and takes the sign over His head literally. He is a King with a kingdom. All this criminal asks is to be remembered. Not spared the agonies of death, not rescued—simply remembered. And this tiny mustard-seed-sized faith is acknowledged by Jesus and credited to the thief as righteousness sealed with Jesus' own Amen: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43).

What gracious words flow from the lips of Jesus! The One who gives the Sacraments their power here declares forgiveness, life, and salvation to a dying sinner. The sign over Jesus' head declares in Latin, Greek, and Aramaic who He is – Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. And while many mocked and taunted Jesus, calling Him the Christ and the Son of God, this man believed what was written and asked to be remembered. And Jesus promises life and salvation.

But how can this be? How can the dying words of a Man crucified as a criminal bring comfort and peace to a sinner? Who is this that can promise Paradise to another? Especially one who knows and admits his guilt? What sort of justice is this that speaks pardon to the unpardonable, that acquits the guilty, that saves those society deems unsalvageable and worthy of the cruelest form of death? This is the Savior of the world, the Redeemer of fallen mankind, the One who

reconciles the enemy as enemy and justifies the sinner as sinner. "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

"Today, you will be with Me in Paradise." Beloved, hear that word of promise for yourself. Hear it now, and at the hour of your death, for none of us knows the day and the hour of our "Today" when Paradise is opened to us in our death. Look always to that Jesus, trust in Him and His mercy, cling to His promise given to you. Glory be to Jesus.

Let us pray: For Your Word of promised Paradise, opening Your kingdom to sinners, rebels condemned to die as the just wages of our sin, we give You thanks and praise, most holy Jesus. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

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