

YOUR PLACE

Luke 23:27-43

Christ the King Sunday (Series C)

November 24, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for Christ the King Sunday comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 23, verses 27 through 43. It is on page 748 of the pew Bible.

Today is the last Sunday in the Church calendar. Next Sunday we start the year over again with the first Sunday in Advent. For the last Sunday in this year's calendar, the lectionary does something interesting. To make sure that we didn't miss the point of the whole Jesus story, it gives us a text we would expect to see on Good Friday. It takes us to the central event in the Bible—really, the central event in all of human history—and shows it to us again, because this is how King Jesus comes into his Kingdom.

Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 23, beginning at verse 27, we read in Jesus' name.

²⁷ And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. ²⁸ But turning to them Jesus said, “**Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.** ²⁹ For behold, the days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’ ³⁰ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us,’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ ³¹ For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

³² Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³ And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ And Jesus said, “**Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.**” And they cast lots to divide his garments. ³⁵ And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!” ³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine ³⁷ and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” ³⁸ There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹ And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴² And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” ⁴³ And he said to him, “**Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.**”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

The repentant thief on the cross next to Jesus is fascinating. Luke is the only one of the four gospels to record this magnificent conversion. It's a remarkable story. Here is Jesus, the Creator of the universe, the King of Kings ... rejected. The leaders of his nation wanted him dead, and

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they were getting their way. The people he came to save ... they cried for his blood. His disciples abandoned him and ran away. They all failed to realize that this death was what he really came to do. So while he was hanging there, doing his work of saving the world, he was alone. He had no one faithful to him ... except this one criminal, a man who was rightly sentenced to die. For this moment, the Church of Jesus Christ on earth appeared to consist of just one man, and he was about to die.

This sermon will be a bit different than what I'm used to, and probably you too. It involves a bit of imagination. I would like you to imagine yourself in this man's shackles. And let's imagine the entire scene from his perspective. I sincerely doubt that everything happened exactly how I envision it, but the critical events are the same as what Luke records, and the rest is an educated guess. If your imagination of the events surrounding the biblical details is different than mine, that's okay, because we will end in the same place. We will end in the same place as Luke, with the last word of the text: "Paradise."

It's Friday morning in Jerusalem as you sit in your prison cell. You're waiting for your execution. I don't know exactly what you did. You stole something, I guess. Maybe you did other things too. I don't know the extent of your crime, but you do, and you know that you deserve what you're getting. But you don't embrace it willingly. You're afraid. You have at least a few more days to think about it. The Passover is going on, and tomorrow is the Sabbath, so the Romans will refrain from killing anyone in the next two days. So you have some time, some time to think about what you did, some time to think about what is about to happen to you.

Then, suddenly, a Roman soldier comes to your cell. He unlocks it. "Get up!"

"What? Why?"

"Let's go," he says.

You're puzzled. "Where?" you ask, "What's going on?"

"It's time to die, thief."

"Whoa, whoa. Wait a minute. Did I lose track of days? I thought it was the Passover."

"Yeah, well, Pilate says we have a real important criminal to kill. We just finished his trial, and he has to die today, so we might as well do you too."

"Oh great," you think to yourself. "Probably some insurrectionist. Now I have to die today. I am not ready for this." "Who is this guy anyway?" you ask the soldier.

"Some guy named Jesus. I guess he's from Nazareth. Apparently your priests really want him dead. Now let's go!"

Now you're confused. Jesus of Nazareth? You've heard of him before, but you can't figure out why anyone would want him dead. What did he do? The stories you've heard of him are amazing. People say he's a miracle worker. Supposedly he fed 5,000 people with a boy's lunch, restored the sight of blind people, and made crippled people walk again. Some people say he can even raise the dead. You don't know if it's true, but if you're about to die, at least you get to meet this Jesus. There's a lot of time to talk when you're hanging on a cross. Crucifixions can last for days.

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When they lead you out of the prison, the other robber is there too. They give you both crosses. You have to carry them through the streets so all the people can see you. It's supposed to be a warning to them of what happens to people like you, but nobody pays much attention to you. Instead, there's a huge crowd following the guy in front of you. This must Jesus. There are so many people that you can't even see him. They're weeping and mourning as if all their hopes are vanishing before their very eyes. Every once in a while you can see a few drops of fresh blood on the street.

When you come to the hill they call "The Skull," you finally see Jesus. Here's the guy that's causing all this trouble. He's badly beaten. He can barely stand on his own. What did he do? Some people really love him. You can understand why, feeding people, healing people, raising the dead, but why do other people hate him so badly?

The soldiers nail a sign on the top of your cross. It says, "Thief." Rome wants everyone to know what happens to thieves. As they tie you to your cross, you barely pay attention to it. You want to see what sign they place above Jesus' head. You want to know what *he* did. You watch intently as the soldiers drive nails through his hands and feet. You're glad they didn't do that to you, but you still want to see what the sign says. Finally, another soldier comes up with the sign and nails it above Jesus' head. He steps out of the way, and you can finally see it. "This Is the King of the Jews." Uh ... what? Maybe it's supposed to say, "He claimed to be the King of the Jews." No; if that's what they meant to say, they would have written that. What kind of king is this? Amidst the blood and torn flesh, you finally notice a crown of thorns around his head. This is a strange kind of king.

They stand your cross up. Jesus' too. It's starting. You are really being crucified. It doesn't hurt so much at first. It's more uncomfortable than anything. Eventually you'll get tired and won't be able to stand up quite as much. Then tomorrow, or maybe the day after that, your legs will give out, you'll have to hang by your arms, you won't be able to breathe, and you will finally die. You look over to Jesus. He's in a lot more pain. He's been beaten so badly that you can tell he won't make it to tomorrow.

He's saying something. He seems to be praying. Is he praying for God to rescue him? People are shouting things at him, so you can barely make out his words. No, he's not asking to be rescued.

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

What a strange prayer. Hasn't he ever heard of "an eye for an eye?" But he keeps praying this. **"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."** Who would ever pray such a thing? Even when they're killing him, he loves them. You've never seen someone like this. You've seen a lot of bad men in your time. He's not one of them. He *must* be innocent. There is no way this man has ever done anything wrong. But then why are they killing him? Didn't he try to prove his innocence? Did he just keep his mouth shut at his trial?

This thought reminds you of something from your childhood. You remember your father teaching you a passage from the prophet Isaiah. If only you'd paid more attention to those teachings, maybe you wouldn't be hanging here today. But you can't do anything about that now. The words of Isaiah come back to your mind. "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a

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sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth” (Is. 53:7). The only reason you can think of that Jesus is dying today, is if he didn’t offer a defense. So, could this really be him? Is this who Isaiah was writing about?

You watch as people shout insults at Jesus. The rulers scoff at him. “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One.” How can they say such things? The soldiers mock him too. “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself.” You can’t believe their hatred, but now you know why they’re killing Jesus. He claimed to be the King of the Jews. He claimed to be the Messiah. But he doesn’t look like a liar. Maybe Pilate had a reason for writing, “This Is the King of the Jews,” above his head. Maybe it’s actually true. Maybe all the unbelievable stories you’ve heard about him are really true. You’re a criminal. You know all about liars. Jesus doesn’t look like one.

You remember more of what Isaiah said: “They made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth” (53:9). Suddenly you realize that when Isaiah said, “They made his grave with the wicked,” he was talking about you. Way to go; you made it into biblical prophecy. But this Jesus, the man hanging between you and the other robber, he’s innocent. There is no deceit in his mouth.

Even the other criminal shouts at Jesus. He says, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” There’s actually an element of sincerity in what he says. Jesus *is* the Christ. You realize that he could save himself, and maybe he would if it weren’t for what Isaiah prophesied, you know, all that stuff about suffering. But you and the other criminal? You don’t deserve to be saved. His words are so selfish. “Save yourself and us.” He’s out of line!

You can’t take it anymore. Jesus won’t defend himself, so you speak up. You can hardly believe the words coming out of your mouth. “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” There, you said it. “This man has done nothing wrong.” Even when he claimed to be the Messiah, he wasn’t lying. This morning you didn’t even know Jesus. Now you’ve outed yourself as a “true believer.” But what are they gonna do? Crucify you again? It doesn’t matter what people think now. In a day or two you’re going to be dead.

But you start to wonder what Jesus thinks. Is Jesus going to say something to you? “Thanks man. I really needed that”? No. Jesus doesn’t need anyone to defend him. You glance over at him. The King of the Jews is looking back at you. There’s compassion in his eyes. You have his attention. What do you say? You figure it’s a long shot, considering your criminal record, but you make a bold request. “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” As the words are coming out of your mouth you realize how selfish they are. You’re just as selfish as the other thief. You don’t deserve a place in his kingdom. Surely, Jesus is going to say that he came not to call sinners, but the righteous.

It feels like several minutes, but it’s really just a few seconds while he struggles to find enough breath to speak. You can hardly believe the words that come out of his mouth. “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

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More gracious words had never been spoken to you. You play the words over and over again in your head. You consider them backwards and forwards. Paradise? Really? Me? Amazing! How gracious!

But there's one word that strikes you as particularly strange. It's the word "today." You asked to be remembered in his kingdom. What kind of kingdom is he entering into today? He's acting like this is his coronation! He's wearing a crown of thorns!

You keep thinking about the word "today." One thing troubles you. Jesus looks like he's going to be dead by sundown, but you? You can easily hold out for another day or two. What makes him think that the two of you will be together in Paradise *today*? You hope that what he said is true. Such gracious and merciful words! You keep playing them over and over again in your head. "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

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It's the middle of the day now, but it's unusually dark. It stays this way for several hours, until finally, Jesus cries out in loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" It took all the breath left in him to say this, because, having said this, he breathed his last.

All of this is so incredible. The darkness in the middle of the day, the way he was gracious to the very end. Even the Roman centurion, the man in charge of the crucifixions, is praising God. You actually hear him say, "Certainly this man was innocent!" And the people, even some of the people who mocked him, walk away now. They're beating their breasts in mourning. What had they done? They killed the Son of God.

...

The crowds disperse. Before long, it's just you, a few Roman soldiers, the other criminal, and the body of Jesus hanging lifelessly in the middle. The sun is starting to set. The day is almost over, you're not close to death, and you still wonder what Jesus meant when he said, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

Then a few soldiers show up with clubs. They say something to the centurion, and then they walk over to you. They swing the clubs. "Crack!" The pain is unbearable as they break your legs, but now you realize that Jesus knew exactly what he was talking about when he said, "Today." All your weight is hanging on your arms as they're stretched to the limit. You can hardly breathe. It won't be long now. You suffer through your final breaths, and you fall asleep.

It's over, and you wake up.

Paradise.

I'd love to keep imagining Paradise, because this is where the story must really get good, but, unfortunately, I don't have enough imagination to relate that experience.

I asked you to put yourself in the place of the thief on the cross, partly hoping that we could slow down our minds and really think about the scene, but more so because it really is our place. When the thief said, "We are receiving the due reward of our deeds," he might as well have been speaking for you and me, not for our crimes against the Roman government, but for our crimes against God. The cross is where we belong. And, to be precise, we don't belong on one of the

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crosses beside Jesus. The one in the middle is where we belong, because that's the one where the wrath of God was poured out. And that is precisely why Jesus was there. That is why he didn't offer a defense. That is why he didn't save himself and the criminals beside him from death that day. He stayed there to truly save the criminals beside him from eternal death, even if only one of them believed and would enter Paradise. He stayed there to save the crowds that cried for his blood and to save you and me from the condemnation our sin deserves. He stayed there so that he could say to the criminal next to him, **"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."** That same absolution is what he speaks to you. The word "today" may not ring quite as true as it did that day, but the rest of it does. You will be with him in Paradise.

Luke included the account of the repentant thief to show that no one is beyond the grace of Jesus. He included the story because, previously, he included the words of Jesus when he said, **"The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost"** (19:10). The story of the thief next to Jesus shows that Jesus was seeking and saving the lost to the very end. He spent his ministry looking for sinners. He went to tax collectors and prostitutes, and he didn't stop there. He went to death row to seek lost sinners. And there, on death row, he saved us all.

And so the absolution he spoke over that sinner is the same he speaks over you. You will be with him in Paradise. Just as that criminal woke up in Paradise, so will you. Just as the grave could not hold Jesus, so it will not be able to hold you. Just as he rose up from the grave in a glorified body, so he is returning again, and he will raise us. He will transform our bodies, and we will live forever with him in Paradise, the Kingdom he established that day. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.