

DYING WITH JESUS

Luke 23:27-43

Last Sunday of the Church Year (Series C)

November 20, 2022

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson for the Last Sunday of the Church Year comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 23, verses 27 through 43. 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.

Death is not to be feared, because death is not the end. For those who trust in Jesus Christ, you will never truly die. You might still fear, because it looks unknown to us, and that's kind of scary. But you do not have to fear death. Your Lord Jesus Christ is with you now. He will be with you in death. And he will guide you into the next chapter of life.

I've mentioned before that the last couple weeks of the church year always focus on the last things, or what we sometimes call the “end times.” It's kind of like a mini season at the end of the season of Pentecost. So we often hear Scripture readings about the signs of the end, or the return of Jesus Christ on the Last Day, or the resurrection of the dead on that day. But this

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Gospel lesson is different. It takes us to the crucifixion of Jesus, which seems like more of a Lent or Good Friday text. So I had to think about this a little bit to realize how it fits into this part of the calendar.

Now, of course, it is always appropriate to read about the crucifixion of Jesus, because that is the central event of Christianity. But this is also very appropriate as we focus on the last things, because this passage in particular has a few end times themes in it.

The first one of these that we see is Jesus' warning to his disciples about the trouble they will soon face. We heard about this last week. Jesus warned his disciples about the destruction of Jerusalem (21:20-24). He also warned them that they would face persecution (21:12-19). And his disciples did face persecution. And the Christian Church has always endured persecution somewhere in the world. So this warning is relevant to us, because violent persecution can happen anywhere. We should take Jesus' words to heart when he says, **"Do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children"** (23:28). As the world hated Jesus, so it also hates his Christians. So that's part of how this fits into the end times.

The second end times teaching it gives us is that Jesus' kingdom is now. There's a lot of confusion about this one. Christians, like everyone, are unfortunately in love with this world. We see there are things wrong with this world, but we don't want to give it up. So we're tempted to believe that, if Jesus would just come and reign as a king in this world, things would be better, much better. So some think that Jesus' kingdom is still off in the future, as if Jesus is coming to be an earthly king. But the criminal says to Jesus, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom" (23:42). And Jesus doesn't talk about some distant kingdom in the future. He says, **"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise"** (23:43). That day, the day of Jesus' crucifixion, is the day he came into his kingdom. That is the day he purchased it with his blood. The problem with this world is not the absence of Jesus, because Jesus is not absent from us. The problem with this world is sin, my sin, your sin, and the sin of the entire world. That's why we have injustice. And the solution would not be Jesus establishing a throne on this earth, because, right now, he reigns from his throne in heaven. He has just as much control there, if not more, than he would have if he established a throne on earth, because, right now, he rules over all the rulers of this world. Injustice continues in the world because God is patient with sinners. He desires all people to reach repentance and come to the knowledge of the truth (2 Peter 3:9; 1 Tim. 2:4). In order to eradicate injustice, God would have to eradicate all sin, and that would mean the death of all of us and the end of repentance. So we are not looking for a different kingdom of God on earth. Instead, we recognize that Jesus is the king now. He reigns over all things from heaven, and he reigns among us through his Word and Sacraments. He forgives our sins. That's the kind of kingdom he established at the cross. He purchased us for his kingdom by paying for our sin. And that kingdom is now.

The third end times teaching we see in this passage, and this is the one I want to focus on today, is dying with Jesus. This repentant criminal, who was crucified next to Jesus, had the privilege of dying with Jesus. He had the opportunity to talk with Jesus face-to-face as he was dying. And Jesus was able to tell him what would happen to him. And these words of Jesus are also for you and for all who trust in Jesus. This is especially comforting as we are dying. And this is part of our end times teaching.

The Christian teaching on the end times focuses on the return of Jesus Christ on the Last Day to raise the dead and judge all mankind. That's the focus of it. But it also includes our deaths and the "intermediate state," which we'll talk about as well.

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But first, the primary thing we should all see in this passage is the mercy and forgiveness of Jesus. We see his mercy toward the people who were crucifying him. And this includes those people who demanded his death and mocked him as he was dying. Jesus desires for all people to be saved, even those who hate him.

This is such a surprise. We assume that once we start to hate a person, or when we do something mean to them, we've burned a bridge and we can't go back. And we especially feel that way if we do something to another person that, if the roles were reversed, we would not forgive them, so we remain enemies. It's rather twisted, we continue being mean to other people, just because we have been mean to them in the past. We assume they won't forgive us. And with some people, maybe that's true. Maybe we can't go back. Maybe they will never forgive us. But we should not assume that every other person is as unforgiving as we are. And we should certainly not think that way about Jesus. Because we see that Jesus is the exact opposite. He prays for those who crucified him and those who demanded his crucifixion: **"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"** (23:34).

And this forgiveness is what his crucifixion is all about, anyway. In those hours on the cross, he was paying the price for those very sins. He was paying the price for those who hated him, demanded his death, and killed them. He was paying for those sins and every sin. He was also paying the price for your sin.

There is no sin too great for Jesus' sacrifice. We see this in Jesus' gracious promise to the repentant criminal who was crucified next to him. Now Luke just calls these two men "criminals." He doesn't say what they did. We learn from the other gospels that they were thieves (Matt. 27:38; Mark 15:27). Now we don't execute thieves today. Rome apparently did, but not all the time. This wasn't some little thing like shoplifting or even grand theft donkey. This must have been something big, perhaps a series of crimes, or something violent. It was bad enough that the one criminal said to the other, "We are receiving the due reward for our deeds" (23:41). In other words, "We are getting what we deserve." At least in his mind, the punishment fit the crime. So this was a bad man. We can say that about him. He was a bad man. Now we should acknowledge that before God, we are also bad men. But even on a human level, this was a bad man. We can say that about him, because it's true, and he would not be offended to hear us say that. He acknowledged that he deserved to be put to death, not just by God, but also by the state. That's the kind of person we're talking about here. And yet, when he prayed, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," Jesus replied, **"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."** Wow! Think about how radical that is. All those sins that earned a death sentence for this man are wiped away by Jesus. As this man was dying because of his sins, Jesus was dying for his sins.

If you ever think that you have done something too wicked, or if you think you've done something too many times for God to keep forgiving you, you need to know that that is a lie from the devil. He's accusing you of sins that he has no right to accuse you of, because Jesus paid for all those sins. There is nothing too big.

So, in this criminal next to Jesus, we have a picture of someone dying with Jesus. And what was true for that man is true for every repentant sinner who trusts in Jesus. We don't deserve Jesus' mercy. But he gives it to us freely because he died too. He died for our sins. And Jesus is with us too when we are dying. He's not being crucified again. He did that once for all. But he is with us as we are dying, because he has been through it, and he has promised to be with us

always (Matt. 28:20). That certainly includes the hour of death. So just as he was with that criminal to guide him into paradise, he is also with us to guide us into paradise as we are dying.

Jesus' words to this criminal answer some of the questions we might have about death and dying. First of all: purgatory. It's not real, and it is not taught anywhere in the Bible. The Bible talks about heaven, and it talks about hell, but there is no purgatory where we have our sins purged in order to prepare us for heaven. If most Christians still need to have their sins purged before entering into heaven, a criminal who is being executed would certainly be among them. But Jesus says to him, **"Today you will be with me in paradise."** Therefore, no purgatory.

Second question is this: *What happens to Christians after they die and before the resurrection of the dead?* When we talk about eternal life, we emphasize that we will live eternally in both body and soul. We will not live forever as disembodied spirits. And we will not get a different body. God's promises concerning the Last Day are very clear. Jesus will raise the dead (e.g., John 5:28-29; 11:24; Acts 24:14-15; Rom. 6:5; 1 Cor. 15:21-23; 1 Thess. 4:16). These bodies will be raised. It will be new in the sense that it will be restored better than ever, but it will not be a different body. And this is what we focus on when we talk about eternal life: we will live forever in perfect body and perfect soul in the new creation forever. But what happens to us before the resurrection of the dead? Or what happens to our spirits while our bodies are dead?

Some have proposed the idea of "soul sleep." That is, our spirits go into a deep sleep while we wait for the resurrection. Another idea is that our spirits are instantly transported through time to the resurrection of the dead. So the body has to wait, but the soul doesn't. It's like you die and then you wake up in the resurrection. Both of these ideas are wrong, because they contradict the biblical passages. Our spirits do not sleep, and they are not instantly transported. But they are alive in heaven with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We call this the "intermediate state." It's a different form of existence between this life and the new life in the resurrection. We can't really explain or comprehend what it's like, because we don't know what life is like without these bodies. It's just not in our experience. We can say that it's not as good as life in the resurrection will be, but it is certainly better than this life. One of the passages where we learn about the intermediate state is this one, when Jesus says, **"Today you will be with me in paradise."** The word **"today"** teaches us that we will not have to wait for it. And the word **"paradise"** teaches us that it's going to be a whole lot better than this life.

We also learn about the intermediate state from the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). We talked about that just a couple months ago (Sept. 25). There was a rich man, and there was a poor man named Lazarus. They both died. Lazarus was carried by the angels to Abraham's side, while the rich man was in Hades. But they were both conscious and, in some sense, alive, even though the resurrection of the dead had not occurred yet. We see that there is some intermediate state where the rich man was in torment, and the poor man was being comforted.

And that, basically, is what we know about the intermediate state. We are alert, and, for those who die in Christ, it is described as comfort and paradise. To say anything more would probably just be speculation.

So we do not need to fear death. Death is not the end. It is bad. So we mourn the deaths of those we lose, and we are right to avoid death, but not at all costs. There are other evils far more dangerous than death. Losing the faith is far more dangerous. Teaching heresy is far more dangerous. But death is not to be feared, because death is not the end. It is only the end of this

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life as we know it. But it is not the end of life, because the dead in Christ never truly die. Jesus is with you, just as he was with that dying criminal. And on the day of your death, his promise to that criminal is the same as his promise to you: **“Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”** Amen.

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