

Luke 23:33-43

Sunday of the Passion + April 14, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls
Paradise Restored

The Word of the Lord from Luke 23:39-43: "One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, 'Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying, '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.' And he said, 'Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.' And He said to him, 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise.'" This is the Word of the Lord.

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

We begin with three, with God and two others – Adam and Eve – in the garden. This is in the beginning, when all is good and all is perfect. This new creation is vibrant, verdant, full of life and promise. The Lord has just made the woman out of the man and brought her to him. The Lord gives the two His blessing, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it," so that the earth might be full of those who sing His praises. He gives the two a stewardship, entrusting them with dominion over all creation. He provides all sorts of food, for the two are given to eat the fruit of every tree in the garden – every tree except one.

What shall we say of that one tree? We know what God says of it to Adam: "Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:17). Why is it even there? I might suggest that it is there because God will not force His gifts upon anyone, because coerced love is no love at all. He will not force Adam and Eve to be His people, no matter how much He desires it; but why would they not desire it too? Luther puts it this way: he looks at that tree next to the tree of life, and he says that this is where Adam, Eve and their kids will worship God. They will worship by eating from the tree of life, and by *not* eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

So we begin with three, with Adam and Eve in the presence of God, naked and not ashamed in a world without sin. A world without death.

But then there is sin, and death through sin. How much has been lost! So much has been lost that you and I cannot even conceive of what the garden of Eden was like, or what it is like to know only good and not evil. And in a fallen world, everything is wrong, backwards – a perverse, distorted version of what life was supposed to be...

Here in Luke 23, where we have three – God and two others – once again. It is not a garden called Eden, but a hill called Golgotha – a place called "The Skull." There are three trees at center stage here, planted that day by the Romans with a crossbeam on each for branches: and each of them – God and the two – is nailed to one of them, naked and shamed. Around them are descendants of Adam, rebellious children who call for the death of the Lord incarnate. The earth is filled with those who curse Him. Instead of treasuring their dominion over creation, they want dominion over their creator.

Here on Golgotha, you have God in the hands of angry sinners.

These children of Adam have delighted in their compliant prisoner. They've put Him on trial and accused Him of all sorts of sins: they've brought up all sorts of terrible things that *they've* committed, and put it all on Him. He hasn't put up much of a fight, either; in fact, He really hasn't put up any. He's continued what began at His baptism, taking the place of sinners. He's taken those accusations silently,

as if He's accepting the guilt. Where He's been silent, the people have filled the air with shouts of "Crucify!" And now that He is immobilized and weak, they jeer that He should demonstrate His power: "He saved others," they cry out. "Let Him save Himself, if He is the Christ of God, His Chosen One!" The soldiers join in too, mocking in worship and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!"

You know the bitter blindness of the mocking as these children of Adam revel in their "clever" wit: You know He *could* save Himself. This is the Lord of heaven and earth who stills storms and speaks demons away, who feeds 5000 with so little and summons the dead forth from their graves. A word or two would loosen the spikes and have Him standing on the ground. A word or two would have His enemies bowed down before Him, awaiting the judgment they so richly deserve.

But He is not on that cross to save Himself. He is on that cross to save them, and the only way to do so is to shed His blood, bear their guilt and shame, suffer God's wrath and die in their place. How awful is it that the people scorn Jesus precisely for redeeming them? Let this be a lesson to the church today: if we are to suffer scorn, let it be for sharing Jesus' salvation.

+++

For just a verse or two in our text, the focus sharpens from the rebellion of mankind to those three who are lifted up: the incarnate Son of God and the criminals crucified with Him, one on His right and one on His left.

One of them joins the crowds in mockery, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!" Consider his words, examine yourself and guard your heart. He doesn't believe that Jesus is the Christ. Lost in sin, though, he knows nothing else but to be spiteful to his last breath. In that respect, he has the heart of a bully that dwells within all of us: even though he is dying a shameful, painful death for his crimes, all he knows to do is to try to make himself feel better by belittling the One who dies beside him.

Worse, he thinks "salvation" means a longer life in this dying world. If Jesus would indeed get them down from their crosses, what is step two of his plan? Another crime spree until the Romans catch up with him? More days of mortality and fear and waiting to die another time? This seems a despair that he shares with the crowds below, that salvation is nothing more than a longer life here; but the Son of God has not become flesh to give you a longer life here before you perish. He has come to make you a new creation, to deliver you to a new heaven and a new earth.

It must be a new creation, for how much has been lost! The impenitent criminal is a poster boy for how far humanity has fallen.

On the other hand, there is the other crucified criminal, and he is evidence of a miracle. He knows that the wages of sin is death; and if he's managed to ignore this throughout life as so many do, it's tough to get around it during his slow execution for the crimes he has committed. This robber is a blessed example of contrition: he does not seek to justify himself, nor does he claim that the judgment is unfair. He doesn't seek to salvage some sense of self-worth by lashing out at his executors or scorning the One beside him. Instead, he publicly confesses his sin. Before God and unsympathetic man, he declares that he is only getting the due reward for what he has done. In a world that howls and scuttles to pin the blame on everybody else, that criminal declares that his death is just.

By itself, that's astonishing; but there is more. Not only does he accept the justice, but he defends it: he rebukes the other criminal for his complaints. But even more than that, as he defends justice, he defends Jesus. He publicly confesses that Jesus has done nothing wrong.

That is a miracle, for that is by faith and not by sight. By sight, Jesus doesn't appear innocent. If you see a man in handcuffs, you automatically assume that there is reason for his arrest: the reason that

we have to keep reminding the world that someone is "guilty until proven innocent" is because we automatically assume guilt. Likewise, casual passersby will not look at Jesus at Golgotha and say, "Clearly, a man so abused must be falsely accused;" no, they will automatically think, "He must be worse than most to be so terribly mistreated." Pilate, after all, has laid the lash heavy to make Jesus look as pathetic and powerless as possible; and his enemies delight that He looks nothing like a king.

And yet ... this penitent criminal declares to all who will hear, "This man has done nothing wrong." All the accusations that Jesus has accepted, all the guilt that is laid upon Him and all the shame that He bears is not His.

It is yours.

Then this penitent criminal says the most miraculous thing of all. He says, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." Against all he sees and all he hears from the crowd below, he speaks by faith.

By faith, he declares that Jesus is King.

By faith, he confesses that Jesus will live again to come into His kingdom.

By faith, he trusts that Jesus will even remember him. Even though, in his dying, he is getting what he deserves; and even though he has nothing at all to give to the King; he still trusts that Jesus will remember him. And when the King who raises the dead remembers you, well...

Christ the King says to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

Paradise. It's a Persian word. It means "garden;" and most specifically, it comes to mean *the* garden, the garden of Eden before the fall. All that is wrong with this fallen world, all the guilt and the shame, the death and the horror, all the things that alarm and dog and terrify you even now and today, all that has been wrought by the curse of sin – Jesus comes to undo. He comes to reverse the curse. Where the first Adam brought death into the world, Jesus – the second Adam – destroys death by dying Himself – and in doing so He swallows up death forever.

"Today you will be with me in Paradise." Within some of the last words of the dying Jesus is the promise that, by His death, Eden is restored. Remember the faith of the penitent thief and join in his confession: for no matter the world's scorn of Christ and self-justifications, by faith the Christian says, "death is the due reward for my deeds; but Christ, who did nothing wrong, died my death for me; and He promises to remember me."

So He does. He said so at the font, and He will not forget His penitent people. He will raise them up – He will raise you up – to His kingdom, where there will be far more than three. There will be the Lord and you and all His saints, angels and archangels and all the company of heaven; and all will sing His praises, for Paradise is restored.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen