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 St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY
 Lent I – Midweek
 February 24/25, 2010
 Text: Luke 23:39–43 The Promising Word¹

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

The Biblical text for tonight's message is from Luke 23:39–43, "One of the criminals who were hanged railed at Jesus, 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." Thus ends our text.

The second word spoken by Jesus as He hangs on the cross is a word of promise and salvation: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). These words are spoken not to a religious man or to a fine, upstanding citizen, or even to one of His disciples. They are spoken to a convicted man guilty of a capital crime. He and his fellow convict were hung on crosses with Jesus between them. Jesus is the innocent one among the guilty, the righteous among the unrighteous.

We do not know the exact nature of their crime. "Criminals; thieves" are what they are called. Perhaps "insurrectionist" or even "terrorist" might strike somewhat closer to the truth. Under Roman law, there were no common robbers or petty thieves, only those who presented a threat to Roman security. Their graphic, public crucifixion was intended to ward off other potential criminals. Beware, lest your fate be the same.

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. Assuming this is true, 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 not a prayer of faith but of derision. What kind of Christ are You? What sort of Messiah are You going to be? Flex some of that divine, messianic muscle and save Yourself and us too. Or are you an impostor, a phony Christ? If you're for real, spare Yourself from this death, and us while you're at it.

¹ Adapted from the sermon Series "Words of Life from the Cross" published by Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Missouri, 2010.

This thief on the left is the spokesman for the unbelieving world. His mocking “prayer” comes in the form of a demand. If Jesus is worth His salt as a Messiah, He would come down from that wretched cross and save Himself and save His fellow criminals. But that is not the way of salvation at all. That is 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 . . . ”

The thief on the right instead 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, says Solomon in the book of Proverbs (9:10). To fear the Lord is to put all other fears in their right 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.

This thief is a penitent. He confesses his sin; 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). The thief recognizes his sin and confesses it.

The thief is not only penitent, he is also faithful. He correctly confesses Christ: “But this man has done nothing wrong” (Luke 23:41). Behold the unblemished Lamb of God! He is pure, holy, and innocent. We are guilty, justly convicted. Did the thief understand all the implications of what he was saying? Did He fully understand who Jesus was for him? What did he actually know of Jesus? We don’t know. All we know is his dying prayer: “Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom” (Luke 23:42). Of all the people to speak to Jesus, he’s the only one to use Jesus’ name without some other title. Simply “Jesus.” Familiar, direct, no flattery—Jesus. This is no time for playing games. Eternity is in the balance.

“Remember me when You come into Your kingdom.” It’s a simple word of faith. The faithful, believing, penitent thief sees this broken, bleeding, dying Man next to him and takes the sign over His head literally. Jesus is a King with a kingdom. All this criminal asks is to be remembered in that kingdom. Not spared the agonies of death, not rescued; no request for vengeance against his Roman executors is made—simply remember me. And this tiny little mustard-seed-sized faith is acknowledged by Jesus and our Lord declares Him justified, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43).

Some people wonder and speculate. Was this criminal baptized by John the Baptist or by one of the disciples? Some would make out of him the grand exception that makes a rule: Holy Baptism with water in God’s name isn’t necessary. Such a conclusion misses the point. The thief doesn’t need baptism because the Sacrament of sacraments is there next

to him, the Lord Jesus Himself is there nailed to the cross. What more does he need? He's already heard Jesus say, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." The superscription written in Latin, Greek, and Aramaic nailed above Jesus' head speaks the truth. Jesus is the King of the Jews. Even the jeering taunts of the crowd are true. He is the Christ and the Son of God. The word of truth is proclaimed and Jesus is there. Sounds sacramental to me!

What sort of Man is this who promises Paradise to a dying thief who admits the guilt of his crime? 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." 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. Jesus promises to you and all repentant sinners the Paradise of His kingdom giving us all the more reason to pray daily, "Thy kingdom come..." Let us pray:

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

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.