

Lenten Series -Words From the Cross:
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Today you'll be with me in Paradise
February 25, 2018
Luke 23:32-33, 35-43, Psalm 27

³²Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. ³³When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."^[c] And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

³⁵The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One."

³⁶The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar ³⁷ and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."

³⁸There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

³⁹One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

⁴⁰But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

⁴²Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."^[d]

⁴³Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Once again we find ourselves at the foot of the cross. It is a hard place to be...and yet last week we discovered the abundance of God's amazing grace, even there. Today, we will discover hope!

(Read scripture. Pray.)

Because my mother was a 4th grade teacher --who, in CA, taught CA history--she was always interested in visiting historic sites, etc.

Any trip we ever took always included detours to some of these sites, some of which were actually interesting to my sister and me. Many we would have gladly bypassed. So my sister and I devised a plan to distract mom whenever we caught sight of a historic marker coming up.

One day while driving north on Hwy 1 along the California coast, I spied an old pioneer cemetery up on a hillside. Before any sign appeared, I pointed to it and said aloud:

"Look---I wonder how you get there.."

Without missing a beat, my sister turned to me and said:

"You have to die!" (and if looks could kill, I probably would have been dead at that moment.)

We stand on death row—in front of us are three wooden crosses—Jesus is nailed to the one in the center, between two thieves. We are not alone. This is a very public place. Crowds are milling around. Roman centurions are doing their jobs, erecting these crosses, carrying out orders.

Jesus is being mocked by the rulers, the soldiers, and by one of the two criminals.

In the Roman Empire, crucifixion was reserved for capital crimes, for traitors, for revolutionaries. Jesus fit that profile, if one understands his preaching on the Kingdom of God to be a rival kingdom to the Empire.

These two other men? What were their crimes? Mark's gospel describes them with a word in Greek that translates: "criminals or evildoers" [kakourgo] but Luke uses a word which can be translated "robber or revolutionary" [lestai]. Perhaps they, like Jesus, were revolutionaries who dared to dream of a better world. We do not know for sure.

The one on the left, perhaps encouraged or emboldened by the others mocking him, shouts out to Jesus: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" Perhaps this is his last ditch effort to find a way of avoiding death. Can you identify with this voice? Defiant, disillusioned, desperate. To me this voice sounds very similar to the voices of the friends, parents, teachers who testified before the Florida Legislature and our President, exactly one week following the school shooting in which 17 students and teachers died. It sounds like the voice of Unicef which last week gave this single sentence press release: "We no longer have words to describe the children's suffering and our outrage" regarding the conditions in Syria.

There are occasions in this world when we indeed cry out to God in defiance of the human condition. The author of Psalm 27 is beset with foes, enemies, and armies who seek his destruction, yet he holds fast to his hope in God.

This dying criminal mocks the One who could offer hope.

In contrast, the criminal on Jesus' right, responds to this man, rebuking him: (v.40-41)

"Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

This guy –pardon the expression – nailed it. He got it right. He knows who he is, what he has done, what the consequences are. No question in his mind; he clearly and correctly assesses his situation. He is equally clear in his assessment of Jesus—“he has done nothing wrong”--yet Jesus is also nailed to a cross, suffering and dying.

Turning his attention away from the other criminal, ⁴² he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” The condemned, calls Jesus by name. This is the only place in the entire NT where the name Jesus is used without any additional title such as “Christ Jesus” or “Lord”. The name Jesus means “Savior”. This man, having already acknowledged his sin, now confesses faith in Christ as his Savior!

This is a stunning development. We have no idea as to what, if any, history there is between them. Did this man consider himself a follower of Jesus prior to this? Had he heard Jesus preach or perhaps he had been in the crowd of 5000, whom Jesus fed with five loaves and two fish? We do not know.

What is clear from this brief conversation is that he now confesses faith in Christ’s ability to save, and by calling Jesus by name, enters into a personal relationship with him.

His next request is compelling: ***“...remember me when you come into your kingdom.”*** Remember me.

I am going to share with you a joke that Edward, one of my former Kindergarten students told me, so humor me. Please play along and answer my questions affirmatively, ok?

Will you remember me a month from now? (Yes)

Will you remember me a week from now? (Yes) An hour from now/five minutes from now? (yes)

Knock, Knock

(Who’s there?)

What?? You forgot me already???

Memory and being remembered is important. It means that we matter, we are significant. The word “remember” is found over 230 times in scripture. God often remembers his covenant promises, and “forgetting” our sins no more”. God has a selective memory!

All of us know the heart break of a loved one suffering from Alzheimers, who no longer recognizes us, whose memory is lost. I’ve visited more than my share of cemeteries, and among the most beautiful were some in Scotland that were well over a thousand years old. Many once ornate monuments

and carved Celtic crosses were so old that any inscription of name or date were long ago worn off by time and the elements. My guess is that any descendants of those long buried individuals, were also long dead. And I wonder if any but their Creator remembers them still...

This criminal's request of Jesus, is simple but profound: "Remember me."

"Remember me, when you come into your Kingdom." He recognizes and affirms that the power of the Roman Empire, pales in comparison to the power of this King whose Kingdom will be eternal.

Jesus' response to this man's expression of faith is brief but equally profound:

Today—You with me—Paradise. That is the literal translation.

Today—You with me—Paradise.

Today—NOW—Today--no waiting period, no need to take a number, get in line, or be put on hold. Immediately. Instantaneously. Now! Today!

"You with me"—Jesus' promise to this man—and to us—is that we shall be together. We will be with Christ.

"America's pastor", the Reverend Billy Graham died this week in his sleep at the age of 99. He often talked about and wrote about heaven. I've seen this week several quotes of how he looked forward to being reunited with his wife of 63 years, Ruth, in heaven. But the Bible emphasizes, and Jesus teaches from the cross, that we will be with Christ himself. Nothing could be better than that.

"You with me" implies togetherness, a close relationship.

"PARADISE"—perhaps Jesus has just given us the definition of paradise: to be *together with Jesus* is paradise.

In truth, the Bible begins and ends in Paradise. In Greek, paradaysos, means simply "garden". It is no surprise that in Genesis, Eden is a lush garden (before the fall), where people have harmonious relationships-- with the Creator, the living God, with one another, and with Creation itself. There is no pain, no conflict, no evil. (Genesis 1-2)

Likewise, the Bible ends (Revelation 20-21)in Paradise as well, and its description includes a garden, along with a Tree of Life (also present in Genesis 1-2).

For thirteen years Rob and I were blessed to live next door to Ken and Clare Harris. Sadly they both died of cancer a few months apart. When Clare was in hospice care, we took turns—along with family members—staying by her bedside. After several days without food or water, her time was near. When I came home one day I went immediately next door. I was met by Clare's daughter who shared the following:

Mom's been sleeping but earlier today she awoke, and sat up in bed. She looked me straight in the eye and said with a big smile on her face:

"I've been down to the river--it is so beautiful there!
You must tell everyone to come down to the river!"

Then she rested back on her pillow, closed her eyes and went back to sleep. Lynell: what does that mean?"

I took Clare's Bible, from the bedside table and turned to the very last chapter of the very last book of the Bible, Revelation 22. (It is a continuation of the previous chapter, a description of the New Heaven and a new earth.)

*Then the angel showed me **the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb** ²**down the middle of the great street of the city.** On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³No longer will there be any curse...*

I told her: "I think Clare has caught a glimpse of heaven!"
She died peacefully the following day, entering Paradise to be with her Lord.

Friends, you know the truism: Only two things in life are certain: death and taxes.

More true are these words from the Apostle Paul: Romans 5:38-39
"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Romans 8:38-39

From the lips of Christ, on the Cross: "Today...you with me...Paradise!"
(Silent Reflection)...Prayer.