

March 19/20, 2013
Luke 23:39-43

Midweek Lent 6
Names of Wondrous Love –The Way

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, our Lenten King. Amen

How do you plan your trips? How do you decide what highways to travel, what roads to take? Do you log on to the internet, bring up Google maps, and let it lay out your route? Do you make sure you have the Rand McNally book of maps either in your spouse's hands or on the seat beside you? Or do you have one of those Global Positioning Systems (otherwise known as a GPS) in your vehicle to direct you? We surely don't just turn the key, back out of the garage, and start driving. We plan the way very carefully.

How about the way to heaven? How are we going to get to that most important destination? Hopefully each of us can answer, "There is only one way." Hopefully each of us knows those important words of Jesus, "I am the way...No one comes to the Father except through me." Tonight, in our series of sermons on the wondrous names of Jesus, we have a text that reminds us of a most-important name for him—the way.

This name of wondrous love is for sinners who have lost their way and Jesus is the only way.

The two men crucified on either side of the Savior belonged there. They deserved crosses on which they hung. They are described as criminals, men guilty of gross misdeed and serious crimes. One of them put it this way: "We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve." Whether murder or rebellion, whether a member of Barabbas' gang, as some have suggested, or who knows what, that criminal recognized that his punishment fit his crimes. He and his partner were sinners who in the eyes of God and of human law had lost their way.

But not the One on the center cross! When the thief's partner joined in the cruel mockery of Jesus, he rebuked him saying, "This man has done nothing wrong." Looking at Jesus' silent suffering, listening to Jesus' remarkable prayer seeking forgiveness for those who so afflicted him, the thief had reached a conclusion. This Jesus was not a sinner who had lost his way.

Yet Jesus belonged on that cross. "We all like sheep have gone astray," the prophet Isaiah reminds us, "each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." The holy Son of God was guilty, so guilty that the Father his back on him. The hair stands on up on the back of our necks as we hear Jesus' horrible cry, "My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?" Yes, guilty because of the sins of the whole world were heaped upon him and hell was extracting its full dues from him. Guilty because he who never lost his way was paying for every wayward thought, word, and deed of every sinner of every time and place.

For a moment tonight, let's put ourselves into that dying criminal's place. We can't climb up on his cross, but we can stop to think how much like him we really are. We all were dying criminals, and we all had coming what our deeds deserved. You see, in God's judgment there is no scale of values when it comes to sin. Murder and muggings are not at the top of the list and immorality and idolatry down on the bottom. The heavenly judge doesn't arch his eyebrows in holy horror at adultery and abortion but merely wink at gossip and greed. Sin is sin in his eye, and each sin has earned the sinner all the horrors of hell. Do we really believe this? Each time we push God into the attic or put him on ice; each time we reject his will or trade him for this world; each time we gossip about our neighbor or get greedy ideas about his money, fame, or spouse; each time we hate and hurt and hit back at our fellow man; each time we have done such things, we, like that dying criminal, have fully earned hell. The more we realize how lost in sin we were, the more we'll appreciate the wondrous love that held the innocent Jesus to that center cross.

The criminal not only saw that Jesus was innocent. With eyes of faith, he also saw that Jesus was his only way to heaven. Don't ask how the penitent thief received faith. Was he trained in the promises of the coming Savior by pious parents in his youth, and now in his dying moments did he recall what he had once learned? Had Christ's words and actions on the way to and out on Calvary preached a mighty Gospel sermon to him through which faith was worked? We aren't told, but it's not important because faith is always the Holy Spirit's working.

With eyes of faith the thief now look at Jesus and prayer, "Jesus, remember me when you coming into your kingdom." Look what he asked for—a share in Christ's kingdom. Not the top position on the highest throne, just a thought of remembrance from Jesus, just a crumb of mercy, just a drop of his love. Gladly would he seize the crumbs from the master's table. Gladly would he serve as a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord. "Just remember me," he prayed, "don't let my sins bar the door, but remember me in your mercy." Alone that thief had to be deathly afraid to enter eternity and face the judgment of a holy God. But with Jesus remembering him, with his hand in the hand of Jesus, he would dare to face his God. The way to heaven, the ONLY way to heaven—that's what the thief saw with eyes of faith opened by the Spirit when he looked at Jesus on the center cross.

The penitent thief asked for heaven, and look what the Lord gave him. "I tell you the truth," the Savior said. When he who owns heaven and earth speaks, it's as good as done. "Today you will be with me in paradise." Three, four more hours that thief would draw his last ragged breath in pain on that cross, but that very day---not years down the road after some painful stay in a fictitious purgatory—that very day, his cross would be exchanged for a crown and his soul would be lifted up to heaven's glory. "With me," the Savior said. All heaven is in those two words. For what more do we need to know about heaven that that it is to be with Christ and share eternally in his love. "In paradise," the Savior concluded. That morning had seen the thief led out of his prison cell to pay his final debt to society. That afternoon saw him dying on the cross and fast approaching hell's yawning jaws. But that evening same him enjoying paradise with His

Savior. Even his body, bloodied on the cross, with leg's broken later that day to shock him into quicker death, buried who knows where in some pauper's grave, would that same day hear the Savior's voice and share his heaven. That was the promise from the Savior, who is the only way to heaven. And this is the glorious promise we have from the Savior, our only way to heaven. On that last great day when he returns, his mighty shout will empty all graves, glorify the raised bodies of all believers, rejoin them with their souls to be with him forever in heaven.

By God's grace we know the way to heaven. We've heard our Savior's words: "I am the way...no one comes to the Father except through me." We know what they mean. Jesus is not just some marker pointing us in the right direction like the ones out on our highways. He is the road itself. And what a highway he is. Straight as an arrow. Smoother than freshly cured concrete. Never a detour and not one orange barrel. No toll booths to clog up the traffic flow and collect our cash. He is the way, the only way to the Father's house above. With his death and resurrection as payment for all sin, he made himself the FREE WAY to heaven, one that asks nothing from us because it took everything from him.

The way, what a name of wondrous love our Jesus has! May the God of all grace keep our faith focused on him as we journey to his heaven. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior, our Lenten King, the only way to heaven. Amen.