

“With Me in Paradise”ⁱ

Sunday, March 5, 2017

First Sunday in Lent



Luke 23:39-43 (NRSV)

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, *“Are you not the Messiah? 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 have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.”*

Then he said, *“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”*

He replied, *“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”*

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks, be to God.

[2ND Service: “Jesus, Remember Me”]

[MESSAGE]

He was nearing the end of his life; though it seemed too soon for it all to be over. He had fought a battle with cancer and the cancer was winning. I asked him what he was feeling and if he was afraid. He answered, “*No, I’m not afraid. Soon I will get to be with Jesus.*”

His great comfort was getting to be with Jesus.

The thing is I knew that, in a deep sense, he was already with Jesus.

He had lived each day of his life, for as long as he could remember, with Jesus; he was always doing his best to do what Jesus wanted.

For this man, being with Jesus was more than a future hope, it was a present reality.

Certainly, he hoped to be with the Lord in a fullness he had not yet experienced, but what he had now enabled him to look forward in confidence to what was coming.

He was able to let go of his earthly life in such confidence because he had not *waited* to be with Jesus.

His whole life was a time of training for Paradise. In a sense, he did not have to wait until he died to be with Jesus; He was already in Paradise *with* Jesus.

Let us pray...Lord, today your word shows us that, on the cross, you stretched your arms as wide as possible to embrace all of us. Help us to understand what it means to be with you in Paradise. In Jesus' name, we pray. **Amen.**

The great hope of us who call ourselves “*Easter people*” is that we will all one day be with Jesus.

Someday, in the future, the kingdom of God will shine forth in all its fullness; everything will come into sharp focus, we will see all things clearly, and God's promises will be fulfilled.

That's the beauty of the future: hope keeps pushing us beyond today into tomorrow.

That expectation of a better future keeps us going through whatever lousy day we're having today; "*tomorrow*" things will be put right.

And, "*eternal life*" begins *the day after tomorrow*.

The problem with that way of thinking is that it tends to keep all the "*good stuff*" in the future, a not-yet-attained ideal.

If that's true, then you never have to live it today, right now; you can keep speculating and never embody your dreams here or take responsibility for reality now, today.

When Jesus called us to follow him, we didn't know at the time that meant all the way to a cross.

When he said, "*The kingdom of God is among you,*" we thought he meant sometime in the future.

On Wednesday, we heard as Jesus first spoke to his Father, "*Father, forgive them, they don't know what they're doing.*"

Now he speaks to a criminal; he bypasses us, his followers, and talks to this thief hanging next to him.

Well, not so much a “thief” as probably a “troublemaker,” a “rabble-rouser,” perhaps an “insurrectionist,” maybe someone we might call “a terrorist.”

So, this guy said to him, “*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*”

I don’t think he had any hope of finding relief today; hanging there in horrible agony from the worst form of punishment ever conceived, any “*kingdom*” promised by this dying Jesus must surely be in some distant future.

Jesus surprised him, and us. “*Today you will be with me in Paradise.*”

TODAY. What seemed only possible in some distant future became present in this promise from Jesus.

We might have expected Jesus to say, “*Someday, after I’m gone, when God finally gets things together and sets this world aright; when this horrific miscarriage of justice is rectified, then you will be with me in my promised kingdom. Just wait till tomorrow.*”

Or, maybe we thought we’d hear, “*When I return again someday and judge everyone, **maybe** you’ll get to come back with me to my kingdom.*”

No, he said, “***Today you will be with me. Today, in Paradise.***”

Now, we might argue that what Jesus meant was that, because both of them were about to die, they would be together in whatever life after death looks like.

I think that’s too easy; I think that Jesus might have had this same conversation with someone who has their whole life ahead of them.

I believe when Jesus speaks of “*Paradise*,” he is not talking so much of a place where they may

go someday, as *a relationship that they entered today*.

I like to think that “Paradise” is *whenever and wherever you are with Jesus*.

I understand that most of us expect that relationship to be deeper, richer, and more complete once we have passed beyond the frustrations and limitations of this life and move into the next stage of life.

But that does not mean that our relationship with Jesus doesn't start here and now.

Our practice of our faith is our preparation for Paradise; better said, *our faith is our participation in paradise now, today*.

That is what this story of Jesus and the thief on the cross teaches me.

Our eternal, complete relationship with Jesus begins here, even though it is not its fullest.

We really don't know what prompted the thief to ask Jesus to remember him.

He might have heard some of the stories about this man from Nazareth who could heal the sick.

He might even have stumbled across a scene where Jesus was preaching and stopped to listen for a bit to hear what the excitement was about.

He may not have **any** prior knowledge of Jesus and taken his cue simply from what he saw that day watching Jesus on the cross.

We will never know for certain.

What we know is that he said, “*Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.*”

And it was enough.

This brief dialogue holds out the promise that, even in the worst situations of this life, it is possible to be with Jesus, here, now.

What situation in your life could be worse than hanging on a cross?

Our God is not One who stands on the sidelines, ignoring our struggle and pain.

Our God gets mixed up in the mess of this life,
even to the point of going with us criminals to
the cross.

With our God, things go from bad to worse and it
gets very, very dark; then, when you open your
eyes, God is right there hanging with us on a
cross.

“Today you will be with me in Paradise,” is not some
promise for a possibility in the distant future; it is a
promise of what Christ **can** be for us here and now.

Maybe we should talk less about the *“afterlife”* and
focus on *“eternal life”* – that life which is life
with the living God, here and now.

Even in the last moments of his life, that moment
when he saw Jesus for who he was, the thief
experienced Paradise.

He shined, even in that dark hour, suffering the
same agony as Jesus, he shined, his light made
brighter in the reflection of Christ’s eternal
light...So can you.

We might think that it would be more fitting for Jesus to offer this gift of paradise today to his closest followers.

That is certainly a typical objection from us close followers, isn't it?

We keep having trouble with Jesus' reach, particularly when he reaches so far beyond the inner circle of the church.

The truth is that few of us actually followed him up Calvary that day; most fled to hide.

All that talk of standing by him was fine last night, but here in the bright light of an angry mob we have nothing to say and Jesus has only this thief to talk to.

This, says theologian Karl Barth, was the very first church. Church, like Paradise, is wherever Jesus is with two or three of us.

See where he is now: on the cross.

Notice who is with him: criminals, sinners.

Here, with two or three gathered with Jesus, is more church than most of us can handle.

“Where two or three sinners are hanging out, I am there.”

Jesus told us that he came to seek and save the lost.

We didn’t know that the worst of us sinners are those who do not know their sin and the worst of the lost are those who do not know how lost we really are.

The Word made flesh was born among us, healed, preached, taught, loved, and worked miracles.

He was betrayed, suffered, and died because of us and for us.

This day, he took his one prize, a repentant thief, with him and he called it “Paradise”.

The Good News is that Jesus Christ promises criminals, sinners, all of us a place in Paradise, TODAY.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

ⁱ This worship series is based on the book, *“Thank God It’s Friday”* by William H. Willimon, © 2006 by Abingdon Press, Nashville