

He Shall See His Seed

Easter Week Services 2014

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Our Scripture today is from Luke 23:39-43. You have a copy of a translation of that in your worship folder. We'll read a little bit different translation but I think you can follow it well. Let us hear the word of God.

Now one of the criminals hanged kept blaspheming him saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other answered, rebuking him he said, "Do not you fear God because you are experiencing the same condemnation and we suffer justly for we are getting back what matches our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom." And he said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Now think of all you don't know about him, you don't know how he got to this point. You may imagine that he grew up in the Jewish home and, I suppose, when this baby boy came to that home his parents were delighted in coming months with his babbling and his antics and so on. It may have been a pious Jewish home. It may have been regular at the synagogue and at festivals and so on, but a time came when as a lad sometime, or a young man, he left father's house and got into a little more turbulent fare. It depends, some people think that he joined a kind of an anti-Roman guerrilla type group, looting, plundering type of folks, and here certainly if that was the case, there was excitement, there was adventure, there were thrills, there was plundering, there was blood, but now here there's death. Now there's a Roman cross. Now there are nails and ropes and fever and suffocating and flies and anguish and agony and muscle cramps and death.

Perhaps he's not as old as the young man on the center cross. We don't really know, but oddly enough this man is a fulfillment of Scripture. In Isaiah 53:10 we read about the suffering servant of Yahweh and we read, it says, "He shall see his seed," and many of us take that as an indication that after suffering, the servant will be raised again. He shall see his seed. Death will not be the last word for Yahweh's messianic servant. But Jesus saw his seed while he was still on the cross. He saw this criminal defy the crowd and the context and place his faith in the one who was despised and rejected by men.

Why should this concern you? Well, I think his faith should concern you, that I want you to meditate on that with me today. I want to underscore several considerations with you. I want to point out, first of all, the simplicity that faith displays. You have it there in verse 42, "Jesus," he said, "remember me." What music that must have been to our Lord's ears, to have his human name used and perhaps the only time that day when his name was used without scorn and without abuse. "Jesus," how wonderful that must have sounded.

You notice here, though, that it's not a deeply informed faith, is it? It was centered entirely on Jesus. He did know that his eternal welfare depended solely on Jesus. He didn't know anything about presbyteries or synods. He didn't have a doctrine of sanctification worked out. He didn't know if he was a charismatic or a non-charismatic but he had the root of the matter, everything rested on Jesus.

And you notice how alone his faith is. He had received no sacraments. He didn't get baptized. He didn't get to take the Lord's Supper. No clergyman visited him. He had no good works to plead. When you're nailed to a cross, you can't go make restitution for past wrongs. There was nothing he could "contribute." No, no, just, "Jesus, remember me."

The simplicity faith displays and we could say, too, in this simplicity there was no garbage in that faith. What do I mean by that? Well, something like if he were an American, I can almost imagine him saying something like this, "Jesus, you see, I'm not really a bad person. I mean, I've had my days and I've made my mistakes but, hey, I was in the choir and in your choir and synagogue and I guess I got in with the wrong bunch and, well, you know what peer pressure is like." None of that kind of trash here. No, no, just, "Jesus, remember me." Here you have a glimpse of what faith alone looks like.

But not only that simplicity, but secondly notice the miracle faith demands. The miracle faith demands. Some would say that his faith is perfectly explainable. I mean, look at it this way, the guy's about to die and that's enough to make anybody soft and religious and pensive and thoughtful, I mean, given his circumstances. Well, no, it's not. It didn't work out that way for the other criminal that was hanging there. He didn't respond that way. True in verse 40, the repentant criminal indicated that his colleague should have reacted differently but he didn't. Here is this unrepentant criminal, he is at the supreme crisis of his life, he is teetering on the edge of eternity and he wants no truck with Christ. He's not afraid to blaspheme as he faces the end. There are people like that.

It was that way with a fellow by the name of Claverhouse who in the killing times in Scotland about 1684 or so came to John Brown of Priesthill Cottage, caught him there, and said, "He should say goodnight," as it were, "to his wife and bairns because he was going to die." That was the way you treated, the government treated Covenanters in those days, they caught Brown, they gave him time to pray, gave him time to kiss his wife and his children goodbye, and then Claverhouse gave orders to about six of his henchmen to shoot Brown and they apparently were, by one story, were so impressed with Brown's prayers that they couldn't do it, and so Claverhouse drew his own gun and blew John Brown's brains out there in front of his cottage. He then intimidated Brown's widow and in that interchange his widow asked Claverhouse, "How will ye make answer for this

morning's work?" And Claverhouse said, "To man, I can be answerable, and for God, I will take him in my own hand."

There are some men that just aren't impressed with heavy moments. There are some men who can face eternity and still go on blaspheming and it doesn't soften them at all. There are some who can wipe out God's servants and it doesn't phase them. So the trauma of emotional upheaval does not explain this repentant criminal's faith. That doesn't necessarily bring it on at all. It is a remarkable faith when you think of his repentance and of the convictions that form the collage of his faith here.

Now please understand, I think we have to be careful here. We're not dealing in this interchange on the cross, we're not dealing with people calmly discussing something and you know this, as if they're sitting on their back deck sipping sweet tea and calmly discussing things. There is agony and anguish, there is excruciating pain, there are in this time every word probably that is said has to be gasping for breath and so on. This is an intense time and so you might say, "Well, Davis, when you try to analyze, as it were, the elements of his faith, aren't you being a little bit clinical?" I don't think so. We recognize the intensity of the scene but Luke wrote it down, Luke wrote it out so we could read it, so we could meditate on it, so we could analyze it for all its intensity and anguish and try to think through what's being said here, and it is a remarkable faith.

Notice what he's saying, but one thing, he believes that Jesus' opponents were wrong and wicked. You notice what he says in verse 40 to his blaspheming colleague, "Don't you even fear God?" Now, you ought to be fearing God at this moment when you're on the edge of death, but there's a little emphasis on the pronoun "you, don't you fear God?" You in contrast to whom? Well, in the previous verses, verses 35 and following, you have the Jewish leaders who were mocking Jesus, you have the Roman soldiers who ridicule him and so on, you have all of this going on and, you know, it's as if he is saying, "Look, don't you fear God? Just because the Jewish religious leaders don't fear God, don't you fear God?" But by that he seems to be saying that he believes that in the wrongness and the wickedness of those who are responsible for crucifying Jesus. That's a part of his faith.

Then, secondly, he confesses the justice of God. You notice there in verse 41, "And we indeed suffer justly for we're getting back what matches our deeds." We indeed suffer justly. He confesses the justice of God.

A third element is that he confesses the righteousness of Jesus. Last of verse 41, "but this man has done nothing wrong." Now he apparently put that together from just hearing perhaps what had gone on or by his own conviction by Jesus' demeanor, but actually in Luke 23 it's interesting that you have three different times that Pilate himself declares the guiltlessness of Jesus, "I find no guilt in him." Three times Pilate says that and in verse 47, the centurion, the Roman centurion says, "Surely this man is innocent." And here's the testimony also of this criminal, repentant criminal as he said, "This man has done nothing wrong." He confesses the righteousness of Jesus.

Then you notice that he confesses also the kingship of Jesus, "Remember me when you come in your kingdom." He believes that Jesus is seemingly against all evidence to the contrary, he still believes that Jesus is the King. Maybe, maybe Pilate's little inscription up there over the cross was something that he really took seriously too. We don't know how it came about but he confesses the kingship of Jesus.

Then you notice that when he says, "Remember me," he believes that he has a future beyond his coming death. He wants to be remembered. He knows he's going to die but he knows there's still going to be an I and a me after his death and he asks Jesus to remember him. He assumes that death does not mean annihilation.

Then he confesses, doesn't he, the saving power of Jesus where he says, "Remember me." Not just make a mental note of me. You know it doesn't mean that. It has the idea is if you look at instances in the Old Testament of that verb and so on of, "take up my case and take up my situation for me," or "intervene and supply what I need in my desperate circumstances," and so on. So he's appealing to assuming the saving power of Jesus when he makes that statement.

So, indeed, you look at all that coalition or collage of faith here and you have to say that that faith ought not to have been speaking naturally, for though to repeated stress in the previous verses before our text, on the ridicule of Jesus' messiahship, the rulers mock him, verse 35, the soldiers ridicule him, 36 and 37. The sign of the accusation that Pilate had put over his cross was meant perhaps to mock Jesus and certainly to anger the Jews. And look at the sneers of his companion in verse 39, who kept blaspheming him. He had a fourfold blast against the kingship of Jesus and he still confessed this kind of faith. He still said, "when you come into your kingdom."

So here was one who believed in a kingdom that he could not see, in a King who wore a crown of thorns, whose throne was a cross, whose robe was nakedness, whose glory was a body shredded by Roman whips and whose court consisted of cursing blasphemers, and whose enemies have apparently conquered him, and he said, "When you come in your kingdom." How do you explain faith like that? You can't explain faith like that except that such faith is a miracle. It is a gift of God. Jesus has taught us that, hasn't he, John 6:44, "No man," Jesus said, "is able to come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." It's the wonder that we have when we sing hymn #469 in the Trinity hymnal, as if we're saying, "I can't believe it. I can't believe, in a way, that I've been brought to faith." You know the hymn, "How sweet and awesome is the place," you remember how it depicts our salvation as the kingdom feast and you remember how it says, "While all our hearts and all our songs join to admire the feast, each of us says with thankful tongue, 'Lord, why was I a guest? Why was I made to hear your voice and enter while there's room when thousands make a wretched choice and rather starve than come? I can't explain being brought to faith in your Son.' Faith is a miracle. If you think that faith in Jesus is something you can turn on when you get into the right mood, you are terribly deceived.

So there is a simplicity that faith displays and there's the miracle that faith demands, then thirdly you see here the assurance that faith receives. You see that in verse 43 when Jesus says to him, "Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise." Jesus seems to delight to make his people secure in their faith and you notice how emphatically Jesus speaks here. He speaks of something certain. He says, "Truly I say to you." That's that word amen. It means you can put it in bold print, in italics, and underline it, you can bet your life on it, "Truly, I say to you."

There's something certain here and there's something immediate here, "Today you will be with me." Today as opposed to in the man's confession and prayer, "Remember me when you come in your kingdom," I know that that can be translated, "into your kingdom or in your kingdom," and there's some debate there. It seems to me that he seems to have the idea of when Jesus comes in his glory and consummates and sets up his kingdom and so on, but Jesus is saying, "No, no, no, today. Not just down at that point but today," something immediate, "you will be with me." Now that's important, you notice, not after a period of probation. He did not say that he has to endure some purgatory. No, no, "Today with me." I think it's the same teaching essentially as Paul alludes to in Philippians 1:23 when he says that his choice, if it were up to him, would be to depart and to be with Christ, he means to die and to be with Christ. That's what happens when the Christian dies, he's with Christ consciously, enjoyably, even though there's all sorts of unanswered questions you may have about what happens between that time and the resurrection of believers at Jesus' second coming, but when the Christian dies, he's with Christ in conscious communion with his Savior, and that ought to be enough for the meantime. "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord," 2 Corinthians 5. There's something immediate here that he promises him.

Then he promises him something personal, doesn't he? "Today you will be with me." There are two emphatic words in that statement of Jesus. One is "today" in order to counter the idea of just remembering him at the day of resurrection perhaps when he comes in his kingly glory. No, today but also the words "with me" are emphatic. "Today you will be with me," a personal element. That's the one thing necessary, isn't it, that we can be with Jesus?

Michael Green tells a story of a doctor that was once ministering to a man on his deathbed and the man apparently was in need of some degree of assurance. But anyway, the man was inquiring about the whole matter of his position after death and so on, but the doctor heard a scratching at the door and he said to the patient, "Do you hear that, that scratching there at the door? That's my dog. I left him downstairs but he's heard my voice and he came up here. Now he doesn't know what's inside that door, he doesn't know what's in here, but he knows that I'm here and that's what matters." And I'm not trying to be overly simple but that's what really matters, "Today you will be with me."

There's something personal and there's something wonderful, "You'll be with me in paradise." Sometimes that word "paradise" was used of a garden or a park such as a king would have at his disposal and might speak of the privilege of being with the king in his private gardens and so on. Oh, it's broader than that and so on but it's something certain,

something immediate, something personal, something wonderful. What security. What security and assurance the faith of this dying criminal received. Sometimes it seems like the most hopeless cases in our view receive the firmest assurance. Don't ever sell anyone short.

There was a time in 1946 when it was after the second world war, when you remember perhaps reading about the Nazi war criminals who were tried at the Nuremberg trials. Well, the United States Army, I believe it was, asked Henry Gerecke who was, I think, a Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor and a chaplain in the Army to stay on over and stay on in Europe and to serve as chaplain to these Nazi war criminals during the Nuremberg trials. He got a lot of flack for doing that. He got hate mail for it and so on, but that's another story.

Henry Gerecke did, he served that and he met with these men, he met with Goering, he met with Keitel, he met with Ribbentrop, he met with a raft of them and he wasn't easy on them, he checked them, he wouldn't admit them to the Lord's Supper unless there was genuine evidence of faith, and some of them continued to reject the Scriptures, continued to reject Christ, and others seemed to be open to it, but he was very careful about the way he went about this. He was no dreamer but it seemed that Joachim von Ribbentrop, Hitler's former foreign minister, seemed to make a response to the Gospel. That can kind of irritate you, you know, because I never liked Ribbentrop. I mean, I never met the man, you understand, he's much older than I am and so on, but I read about him and he just seemed to be the essence of the swaggering, overbearing, arrogant kind of Nazi and so on, and I just disliked him from what I read about him in the history books.

But Ribbentrop went from apparent direct or overt skepticism to inquiring questions to apparently genuine faith and here is this Nazi war criminal then that comes, well, he was the first executed. It was about 1 o'clock in the morning when his time came. He told Henry Gerecke before he went to the gallows that he had put all his trust in Christ. You remember Gerecke had worked with him for some time. They got to the gallows. He walked up the 13 steps. He stands on the trapdoor. They ask him after they tie his legs together and so they ask him if he has any last words and he responds, "I place all my confidence in the Lamb who made atonement for my sins. May God have mercy on my soul." Then he turned to Henry Gerecke, the chaplain, who was standing nearby and he said, "I'll see you again."

Now of course, you may respond and say, "Oh, that's not right to have some character like that who's done what he did, involved in that kind of....!" Oh, don't, don't go there. Don't go there. You'll only hurt yourself. And here was one who seemed to be a hopeless case and yet was brought apparently to the firmest assurance just as this man who no one would think could have this kind of faith, and yet Jesus gives him such certainty and assurance as he faces the end of his life. This is the security that Jesus speaks to mere faith.

If Jesus gives such words of assurance and certainty to this believing unworthy criminal, why is it so hard for you to believe that he receives and welcomes you as well? Do this

man's words in verse 42 express your faith? Then why shouldn't you be able to take Jesus' words in verse 43 and adapt them to as if they were spoken to you as well? Why so slow to believe the assurance that Jesus seeks to give to faith?

Now there are circumstances that make some Bible passages unforgettable for us and that's the case with this passage. I remember a day when we were living in Maryland and we were, I believe, at the breakfast table. For some reason there were just three of us there that day, our two oldest sons, older sons, they were about 14 and 12 at the time and myself. Apparently we were working through the Gospel of Luke in our morning Bible reading and prayer time and that day it was Luke 23:39-43. It was March 5, 1987. It was the day my mother died and I think of that assurance that Jesus gave to this man, "with me in paradise," and I was confident that was true of my mother on that day, not because she had lived such a godly life though she had lived a consistent Christian life and so on, but she was as much a sinner as her youngest son is, the only reason she might have that assurance is because she had a faith as simple as Calvary's convict, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom," and isn't that our only hope?

William Cooper put it well, didn't he, he put it graphically, didn't he, in that hymn of his, "There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Immanuel's veins," and then in the second stanza, "And the dying thief rejoiced to see, that fountain in his day. And there may I as vile as he, wash all my sins away."

Let us pray.

Father, we thank you that even on the cross, Jesus began to gather his people, that he saw the travail of his soul even then in the fruit his suffering was beginning to bear. Keep us from thinking that we are a cut above this repentant criminal. Help us to understand that we are simply vile South Carolina Sooners who must throw ourselves at the feet of Jesus. Amen.