

Luke 23:32-43

I think it's true that this story of the thief on the cross is one that we all cherish. It warms our hearts. St. Luke is the only evangelist who tells it to us. And how wonderful that he does. Everywhere in the Passion History we see evil at work as Jesus is betrayed, arrested, denied, slandered, abused, scorned, and crucified. But right in the middle of all this evil we are privileged to hear a conversation between a thief and Jesus. And our spirits leap. Because this man, a criminal it says of him, is at this very moment in heaven with Jesus.

The way this thief enters into Paradise is the only way that anyone enters in: by the grace of God. Did he deserve a place in heaven? He admits that he does not. A more important question for us is this: Do you? Do you deserve a place with Jesus in Paradise?

How foolish for us to say, "Yes!" We began our Divine Service confessing that we are poor, miserable sinners deserving, not a place in heaven, but both temporal and eternal punishment. As we say these words to God we join ourselves with this thief. And then we are privileged to hear, as he did, the words of Jesus assuring us of a place in heaven.

Was this man just plain lucky? Of all the thieves and criminals in the world at that time, how does he end up next to Jesus? When it comes to salvation no one is lucky. Just as when it comes to perishing no one is unlucky. The other thief was also placed next to Jesus. What luck? No. He throws away the day of salvation for him by refusing to repent. But our thief does repent and believe. In the nick of time? No. For already back in eternity God had chosen this man as one of Jesus' sheep. This is why we call him the thief hanging on Jesus' right. For in the Judgment, it says, the goats will be placed on His left, but the sheep on His right.

And because this man is one of His sheep, he listens when Jesus speaks. "*My sheep hear My voice.*" "*Father,*" says Jesus from the cross, "*forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" And this thief is listening. He hears these words and they enter into his heart. This man believes what he hears from Jesus' lips. He does not ask Jesus to save him, for he already knows who his Savior is. "*Jesus,*" he calls Him; *Savior* in the Greek.

The other thief asks Jesus to save him. "*Save yourself and us!*" Save him from what? His sins and eternal punishment? He has no sin from which to be saved. He admits no wrong in his life. He is unrepentant. "*Save yourself from this bloody cross!*" are his words to Jesus, "and if you can do that, then save us!" No faith here. Just unbelief. He is not one of Jesus' sheep. He hears the same words from the lips of Jesus as does the other thief, but they end in his ears and never reach his heart.

"*Father, forgive them.*" Our thief hears these words, but does he know what they mean? Forgive who? The soldiers who are nailing Jesus to the cross? This thief does what all of Jesus' sheep do. He hears His words with faith - Jesus' words creating within him the very faith it takes to believe them. Jesus' sheep know that when their Shepherd speaks gracious words of life, He is speaking to them. "*Father, forgive them,*" says Jesus from the cross. "He means me," believes this thief; "Jesus is asking the Father in heaven to forgive me." And He means you. For every gracious word Jesus speaks is also for you. See yourself, as does this thief, as one of Jesus' sheep.

This man now speaks out of the faith in his heart. “*Jesus (Savior), remember me when You come into Your kingdom.*” “Remember not my life of sin, for You have asked the Father to forgive my sins. But remember me. You know Your sheep. You call them by name. You remember them, all of them. And so remember me, too, for I am one of Your sheep, and I claim a place in Your kingdom because my sin, also, is forgiven.”

And what this thief hears in response are the sweetest words he could ever hear, for the Gospel always gives more, much more, than we can ever imagine. “*Today,*” Jesus says to him, “*you shall be with Me in Paradise.*” This thief was surely stunned upon hearing these words. Joyfully stunned. “*Today?*” He says, “*When You come into Your kingdom, remember me.*” He means that at that time way down the line, perhaps at the final judgment...whenever that time is that You, Jesus, enter into Your kingdom, remember me. And Jesus tells him, “That time is today!” Before the sun will set on this very day, this man will be in heaven.

This same Gospel is just as sweet for you. There is no better word from God than that our sins are forgiven. There is no word so sweet than that today Jesus is preparing our place with Him in heaven.

On Thursday some of you may have seen the Missouri River bridge at Washington implode. Or perhaps, like I did, you watched it on video later on. Around 10:30 in the morning I was in the kitchen, with the windows open for the fresh air, and I heard a loud boom. It was the bridge miles away. Seven hundred explosives going off at the same time. That sound, carried by the river, reached my ears very quickly even though I was not there to see the actual explosion.

In the same way the river of water of Holy Baptism carries Jesus’ words from the cross to you. You were not there to hear Him say the sweet words of the Gospel to that thief. But God makes certain, that across the miles and the centuries of time, those gracious words come to you. In your baptism Jesus’ word is for you: “*Father, forgive him...forgive her.*” In your baptism Jesus speaks to you the beautiful words, “*you shall be with Me in Paradise.*”

Today this word is for you. Today you are forgiven. Today your place is here with Jesus. Today His kingdom comes to you. Jesus remembers you, too, for you are one of His precious sheep. Amen.