

Scoffers on a Hill

REIGN of CHRIST

November 20, 2022

Luke 23:33-43

³³ *When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.* ³⁴ *Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots to divide his clothing.* ³⁵ *And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!”* ³⁶ *The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine,* ³⁷ *and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”* ³⁸ *There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”*

³⁹ *One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”* ⁴⁰ *But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?”* ⁴¹ *And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.”* ⁴² *Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”* ⁴³ *He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”*



As we end the Christian calendar year we come to “Reign of Christ” Sunday. The overarching question for today’ worship is this: What does it mean to speak of the Christ who reigns

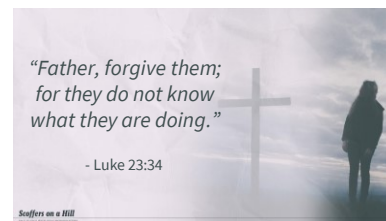
both in the world and in our hearts? As we consider the scope of the gospels, it is clear that Christ came as a new kind of king. This day we remember that the one we worship as king is the one who was tried as a criminal and who faced a horrific death, orchestrated by the powers of this world. This is the one that we pledge allegiance to, the one that we worship today and every day. As we begin, let us pray...

Have you ever looked up and stared at the night sky or stood and looked across the ocean, awed by the handiwork of God? Have you been there when a baby took its first breath, amazed at the intricate work of God's hand? Have you ever had a way provided when there seemed no way or had a door closed as God acted preveniently in your life? Have you ever been in worship or a time of prayer and been absolutely overwhelmed by God's presence at that moment in your life? God is so good. Amen?

And yet there are folks who would say there is no God. There are people who would scoff at our faith, who would dismiss our experiences as made up or as unreal. In this way, our world is no different than the world that Jesus or any other prophet lived in. Jesus himself spent three years speaking to a largely unbelieving audience. Sometimes I think they must have felt like long years at certain points. Typical in the crowd were religious folks who refused to acknowledge Jesus' divinity, in spite of the miracles and God-inspired teaching. These were the ones who orchestrate the scene in our passage today where we find Jesus on the cross. These were the ones who would strike the shepherd and scatter the sheep.

This is not an uncommon occurrence in the scriptures. In our Old Testament passage for this week we read about this happening in Israel. In Jeremiah 23, verse 1, God gives a warning to those scattering the sheep. In the verses that follow today's passage, the disciples will flee. They will hide behind locked doors, fearful of those who killed Jesus. He is the one the prophet refers to in Jeremiah 23, verse 5, the righteous branch that will be raised up, the one who will do what is just and right. The scoffers in our Luke 23 passage come face to face with this branch of David. They cannot look into Jesus' righteousness. Turn with me to Luke 23 as we explore this ghastly scene.

We begin the story late in what we know as Holy Week, on Friday morning. Jesus is crucified between two criminals, likely to be zealots. The Romans would call them ‘terrorists.’ In verse 34 we hear Jesus’ first words from the cross: *“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”* To me it is amazing that Jesus’ first words to the cross are to God, not to us or to those standing there at the place called “The Skull.” Jesus uses the first words that he can muster to intercede yet again for us. Yes, these words are not just for the religious authorities who devised and executed this plan or for the Romans who played their parts in this drama. These words are also for you and for me.



These are not easy words to hear. As bystanders to the story, maybe those there could ignore these words. Just doing my job, you know? Just protecting our religion from this one who claims to be God. No harm done, right? We cannot make these statements. This statement is spoken out loud. Although primarily aimed at God, these words are overheard and then recorded in the scriptures. Those there and all who would later read them, like we do today, become a part of Jesus’ audience. So, we must ask, what do these words mean for our generation and for us as Christians?

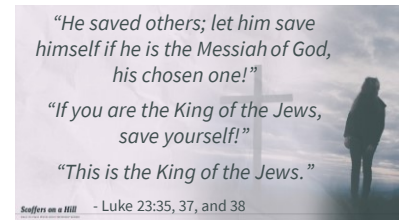
Jesus spoke these words aloud, so they were indirectly spoken to those gathered around the cross. Most of these would be soldiers and the religious leaders. They are like much of the world today. As human beings, knowledge is important to us. To hear Jesus say that we do not know what we are doing would be and is difficult to hear. We strive for knowledge. For the religious leaders, knowledge of God earned them their place of power and honor.

Today we live in the information age. We pride ourselves on knowing. We also live in the age of technology. If we lack certain knowledge, we can turn to Google or some other font of knowledge. When Jesus says these words, a part of us recoils at the thought of not knowing something. We like certainty too. We talked about this at our Sunday discipleship class. We like black and white, we like knowing things for certain. That is why faith can be so hard.

We are followers of the man who made this statement. We claim to believe in Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Yet at times I think we find ourselves a bit wayward, a little lost. That is the story of Israel again and again in the Old Testament. That is why God needed to send a Savior. In the Biblical story line, we believe that Jesus came to reveal God to humanity, to live a life that showed what God's love looked like when lived out. While doing that, though, Jesus also reveals a side of us, this prodigal side that we all have. From this perspective, Jesus came to show us what we were doing and to then to teach us what to do if we wanted to live a life worthy of his example.

For those who were brave enough to stand near the foot of the cross, they got it. They were drawn by pure love – John, Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Salome. But the rest, they were afraid. In this way, these words were for the other disciples and followers of Jesus. Forgive them father, for they do not know what they are doing. Fear is guiding them right now. We sometimes fall into this kind of thinking too. At times we are afraid to speak up in certain situations. At times we allow our faith to be quiet. At times we choose inaction because that seems the easier course. In these times and moments when we fail to measure up to the example that Jesus set for us, Jesus speaks these words over us too: *“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”*

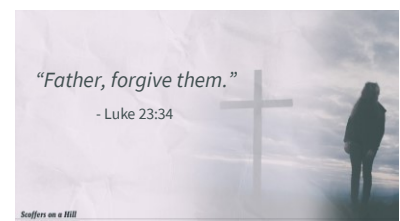
As the soldiers cast lots for his clothing and other's watch or weep, the leaders begin to taunt Jesus. These scoffers indirectly say to him, *"He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!"* They are proud that they were able to orchestrate this killing. They thought they had triumphed over Jesus. The soldiers pile on too. After teasing him with some sour wine, they say, *"If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"* Even the inscription above the cross was a kind of taunt, both at Jesus and at the Jews: *"This is the King of the Jews"* it read.



Jesus could have washed his hands of us at this point. He could have exerted his divine power and come down off that cross. That is what the scoffers are asking for: prove who you are. Stoop down to our level and display some real power, Jesus. Walk away from the role you claim you came to play, save your own skin, and leave us on our own. Those there and those sitting here today, we understand selfishness. We can understand that, can't we? We live it or wrestle with living it every day. It is this sacrifice that we can struggle to know, to live out. It is yielding of self for the other that can be such a challenge to us and to our lives of faith.

But Jesus did not give up on us. So he began his dying by asking God to help us live.

"Father, forgive them." From the cross Jesus was trying to save us, trying to help us get back or maybe keep in right relationship with God. Father, forgive them. Father, heal them. Father, hold onto them. Father, stitch them back together. Father, regather my followers and empower them to continue the mission.



Even as he was dying, Jesus sought to connect us to God, to heal the breach that fear created. To do this, he stretched out his arms on the cross and shed his blood for our sins and failures.

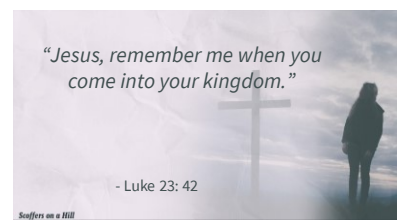
Before we leave the story, though, we see that there were others there that day. There was one crucified on each side of Jesus. One of these criminals joins in with the scoffers on the ground, questioning who Jesus says he is, challenging Jesus to save himself – and those hanging beside him on their crosses.



Show us your power by saving your skin – and ours too! This criminal defaults to something we can default to as well: self-preservation.

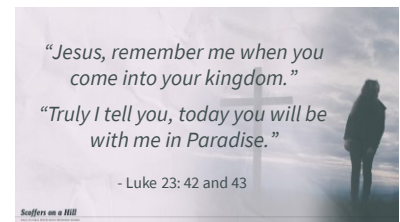
But the other criminal, he rebukes the self-serving man. He correctly assesses the situation, saying, *"We indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong."* This is justice. We are hanging here for the crimes that we committed. We deserve to be here. But this man, Jesus, he is innocent. He has surveyed the scene; he has heard the scoffers. He has heard Jesus pray for forgiveness. He has observed Jesus, the words he spoke, and he has noticed the words that Jesus did not speak. He recognizes who Jesus is. He knows the sacrifice that Jesus is making. Realizing all this, he asks for something from the one he comes to identify as Lord.

Turning to Jesus, this criminal says, *"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."* It is amazing to me that this is his request.



Believing Jesus is Lord, he could have asked for rescue. That is what the other criminal asked for. Instead he asks to be remembered. What do you think this man was asking for? Maybe all he meant was to remember him for his belief. Don't let my life be summed up by what got me to this cross, Jesus. Remember me as the one who recognized you at last. Remember me as the one who was more than the sum of his sins. Remember me one day, Jesus.

What he got from Jesus was a whole lot more. In response, the criminal hears these words from Jesus: *"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."* A lot of us focus in on



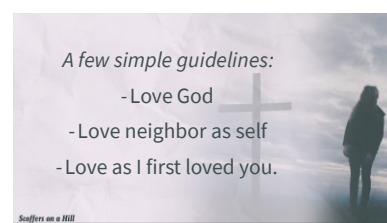
that last word: Paradise. Paradise is the promise of unending joy, of unspeakable peace, of perfection, of wholeness, of healing from the brokenness of this world. Yes, this is certainly part of what Jesus means here for the thief on the cross.

Yet this other word is there: *"Today."* It could be literal. Jesus was just moments from death. We can assume the criminals were nearing that point too. Before the sun sets, the Romans would break the legs of those being crucified, speeding up the suffocation process. In this sense, maybe Jesus is saying to hang on. This messy dying stuff will soon be over and then we'll find our way to the garden. That would have been the literal translation of the word we read as "paradise" in our Bibles.

But I think that this understanding misses part of the mark. The word "today" seems more immediate. It carries the sense of "right now." Maybe that seems too much. How could Jesus be inviting this man who is also dying on a cross into paradise right then and there?

Maybe the answer is in the rest of this phrase: *“you will be with me.”* Today, my new friend, you are with me. Today, fellow child of God, you are with me.

Friends, we do not know a lot about paradise. Jesus did not seem to think that we needed to know exactly what heaven will be like. In fact, he did not seem too intent on giving us specific steps to get there. Jesus does not give us five easy steps, as Matt Maher sings. Jesus did not leave a detailed manual or self-help book for how to live a better life program. He offers us a relationship and a few simple guidelines: love God, love neighbor as self, love as I have first loved you. Jesus says, “Follow me” and strive to live as I lived. Yes, the invitation is personal. And yes, these guidelines are pretty simple to lay out. They are just very difficult to live – especially in light of this moment on the cross. That is love lived out to the deepest level.



To the criminal Jesus says, *“Today you will be with me in Paradise.”* Eternity is not about a place. It is not about the destination. Eternity is about a person. Eternity is about a relationship. For the criminal, today meant right here, right now. Right here, right now as he hung dying on the cross. In that moment, he found life. He found paradise as he entered into a relationship with Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, this same promise, this same offer is ours. Maybe you are in the midst of a struggle right now. Maybe you are fighting whispers from the devil or the lies of the world. If that is where you are at, reach out to those nail-scarred hands. Realize that you are not alone. Look face to face into the eyes of the one who offered his life for all. Take his hand. Accept his love. Trust in Christ to guide you through.

My friends, when we enter into a personal relationship with Jesus and declare obedience to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, we begin to live in paradise, here and now, today. On this day, we worship and declare that the reign of Christ is our present reality, today and forevermore. With that truth in our hearts, may we go forth to love God, to love neighbor as self, loving both as Christ first loved us. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. As a way to further declare Christ the King of your life, what can you do or say this week that offers another a personal relationship with Jesus?
- 2) *Pray*. Where are you or someone you love struggling with whispers and lies that are not of God? Take it to the Lord in prayer. Listen for God's answer.
- 3) *Study*. Read Luke 23:44-49. How does Jesus bear witness to being the King of Kings? How does the centurion bear witness? How do you?