

This Sunday's Sermon

I PROMISE...YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE ~ LUKE 23:35-43

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The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One." The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the jews. One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."



Dear fellow children of God's promises,

During the year I spent in Michigan training to be a pastor, I remember a new show debuting. This show debuted immediately after the Saints beat the Colts in Superbowl XLIV, the show was called *Undercover Boss*. The premier show featured the president of Waste Management going undercover in his company to see how it really worked, look for ways to improve it, and also reward hardworking employees he came in contact with. During the show, he posed as an employee in training, and it was only at the end when he revealed his true identity. Since then, a number of other high management officials have gone undercover in their own companies for this show.

In a way, that is similar to what Jesus did in coming down to earth. He is the ultimate undercover boss. But he didn't come to take stock of the world and hand out bonuses to those who had been good, he came to save it. Throughout his ministry and his message, he revealed he was the Messiah promised from God, but even with that, many people did not see the whole picture. Many people did not recognize the true nature of what this Messiah had come to do. Nowhere is this more clear than in the gospel we had for this morning. To an unobservant traveler wandering the roads outside of Jerusalem, Jesus looked nothing like a king, nothing like a God, nothing like the Messiah, instead he looked like a beaten and destroyed criminal hanging on the cross.

Many human eyes viewed and still view this as the ultimate shame and disgrace, not a crowning moment of glory. But God's eyes view things differently. To God's eyes, this was a king on the cross. A king that many mocked, but a king with an amazing promise. This morning, I pray that God's view of this king becomes our view.

The view of Jesus which was so plain to see that morning on Golgotha's hill was one of a defeated man, one of a broken man, one of a man who would amount to nothing. This man of course was Jesus. Many, if not all of you know the story so well, we hear about it every Easter. Judas, one of Jesus' own disciples, betrayed him into the hands of the Jewish religious leaders. They held a kangaroo court in the middle of the night to find him guilty, and marched him out to Pontius Pilate early Friday morning where he waffled a little bit before bowing to social pressure and ordered him crucified. He was beaten and mocked by the Roman soldiers before he even got to Golgotha, and then was hung up on two beams of wood between two criminals. A very public, painful and shameful torture.

It's no wonder then that so many mocked him, especially if they knew what he taught. For the last three years he had gone around preaching and teaching people that he was the Messiah sent from God, one chosen by God to save his people, his very name meant "he saves." But to the Jews, Jesus didn't fit the description of the Messiah – he advocated peace and healing, not war and destruction upon Israel's enemies. This was a primary reason so many in Israel turned against Jesus, he wasn't who they expected the Messiah to be. And up there on the cross, it certainly didn't look like he was able to save anyone. He wasn't even able to save himself.

That mocking cry to "save yourself" was repeated again and again as Jesus hung on the cross. First by the leaders of the people, **"Save yourself, come down from the cross, then we'll believe you're the Messiah."** "Save yourself" the soldiers cried, "if you are indeed the king of the Jews." Even the thieves on the cross mocked him and said, "Aren't you the Messiah? Then save yourself, and while you're at it, save us also." This would be the supposed proof it would take for these people to believe that he was the Messiah, and it certainly would have been an amazing proof to have Jesus come down off that cross, stop the charade of being just a puny human.

But think about what that would have done. Had Jesus come down off that cross, he certainly would have had a number of immediate followers, but followers who would drift away at the next sign of doubt, that is what happened throughout his ministry, when he performed miracle after miracle as proof of who he was. But if he would have come down off that cross, he would have saved himself, yes, but what about us? He was on that cross, not because he couldn't get off, he stayed on that cross for us, to save us.

What so many people viewed as powerless, Jesus hanging there upon the cross, was his ultimate power. Jesus could've shown a glimpse of his power by coming down off the cross, but he showed his power and love by staying up there. It wasn't the betrayal by Judas, it wasn't the mock trial at night, it wasn't even Pilate's decision that put Jesus on the cross, it was his own. He had earlier said, **"I lay down my life, only to take it up again, no one takes it from me, I lay it down of my own accord. I have the authority to lay it down and the authority to take it back up."**

But from the outset, this couldn't be seen. In fact, to the human eye, this isn't seen. The apostle Paul explains this in a letter he wrote a few decades later to the church in Corinth, **"The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing."** The only way Jesus can be seen as the king God sees him as is to have God open our eyes. And that is what God did to one person we hear about in our gospel for this morning. One of the thieves on the cross. His eyes were opened by God, and he was horrified by

what he saw. Not only did he see this king being crucified, but he saw why this king was crucified – for his sins. He rebuked the other thief and said, **“Don’t you fear God?”**

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That’s a question I want to focus on a little bit, and also want us to consider for ourselves. Because considering that question helps us on our journey to see Jesus as the king God sees. “Don’t you fear God?”

What reason did the thief have to ask about the fear of God? He asked it of himself first. He saw all the wrong in his life that had led to him being up there on the cross, but not only for his crimes against his humanity, but something far more serious. For his crimes against God, he was liable for eternal punishment in the fires of hell. He saw that is what his deeds deserved, and he asked those who were mocking Jesus to consider the same thing. Don’t you realize that not only do your sins condemn you, but you are mocking the very king who will judge you? That would be like going 30 miles an hour over the speed limit when you know a cop is right there, that would be like cheating on your final exam when you know your teacher is looking over your shoulder, it’s stupid to do. Are you so calloused that you still do that?

And then the question turns to us also. Don’t you fear God? At first it may seem like an odd question. Of course we fear and love God, that’s why we’re here, that’s why we give our offerings, that’s why...(fill in the blank) But I ask you again, don’t you fear God? There have been times in my life (and maybe it’s true in yours), where I have downplayed, or completely put out of my mind God’s just anger over sin. When my personal sin has become not so bad, when I acknowledge my sin, but don’t repent of it, instead I blame the surrounding influences in my life, when I refuse to acknowledge the help fellow brothers and sisters are showing to me when confronted with my sin.

And so often I have not feared God the way I should. Instead of seeing Jesus my king as my Savior, I see him as my good luck charm – just a way to get through tough times. Instead of seeing Jesus my king as a judge, I look to him for confirmation of my way of life. Instead of seeing Jesus my king as my substitute, I see him as a safety net that is there to catch me when I mess up and then continue on with my life. But when we fear God, we can only do what the thief on the cross did, lean on the mercy of our King, asking him to remember us when he comes into his kingdom.

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So often, we think of that one thief on the cross with being completely innocent of any mocking or wrongdoing on this day. But that may not be entirely true. In Matthew’s gospel, he tells us that both criminals mocked and rebuked Jesus. But why here the difference? In what we can only explain as a miracle of God, one of those criminals’ eyes were opened. Opened only by God. Maybe this man was reminded of his Jewish childhood growing up, about the promises of the Messiah, the Savior who would come. And he threw himself on the mercy of God

And that is not unlike what happened to us. Granted, I would assume many of us have not had the near death conversion experience as this thief on the cross. But we have had a conversion experience. To some, that conversion experience happened when God opened your heart in the healing waters of your baptism. To others, that conversion experience happened when you started hearing God’s Word, at home

or here at church. And our eyes are opened, our King is up there on the cross. And it is not a horrible sight, it is a beautiful sight.

Because we know why he is up there. He is not up there because he was powerless to stop it. He was up there for me and for you, he was up there taking the punishment for all of your sins. Because he was the Messiah, he did not think about himself and the pain he endured, he was thinking about you. And we ask for the same thing that thief asked for, "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom." The word remember, really carries with it the idea of having mercy. That is one of the reasons we ask for God's mercy at the beginning of every service, we are imitating that thief on the cross. And he does give us mercy. He promises **YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE**.

Think about that thief on the cross. He woke up in the morning, knowing he was going to die. He was marched out of his prison cell, going to his death. He was up there on the cross, prepared to go to hell. Then all of a sudden, like that, everything changes. "Truly I tell you, today **YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE**. So many people today, recognize their sins, they recognize their shortcomings, they, like the thief on the cross merely ask for God to have mercy, but God has more than mercy, he has a promise. A promise for me and for you. A promise we can take to the bank. A promise above any and all other promises. A promise that Jesus tells us on our last day, we don't have to wonder, we don't have to worry about where you are going, because he promises, today **YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE**. Amen.