

SERMON: Penitence and Promise
TEXT: Luke 23:32-43

3-27-22

Two young friends were talking one day, sharing their memories as they mourned the loss of another friend who had died in a car crash. “The saddest part of all,” commented one, “is that we won’t see him in heaven.” The other friend responded with a look of confusion and concern. “Well, he wasn’t saved, you know,” replied the first. “He’s not going to heaven.”

I wish I had been a part of that conversation. I would have shared some of my own comments and questions. First of all I would ask, “How do you know that he wasn’t saved? By the way he lived his life? By the way he talked? Because he didn’t go to church? Unless you know what was in his heart at the moment he died, you don’t know whether he was saved or not.”

Second, I would argue, “Even if you and he had talked about salvation ten minutes before that car crash, and he told you he didn’t believe in Jesus, you still can’t say for certain whether he was saved. There is such a thing as the eleventh hour confession or conversion. Furthermore, you are not God. The decision is not yours to make.”

My third and final point in our debate would have led us into a very long and complex theological discussion about the meaning of salvation. Also, the question of heaven, the story of God as presented in scripture, and the purpose of the earthly ministry of Jesus. It's probably a good thing I wasn't there for that conversation after all.

Jesus was not alone in his crucifixion. Two criminals were also crucified, one on his right and one on his left. But with the mocking and the insults that ensued, I imagine Jesus felt very alone. "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!' The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!'"

Even one of the criminals who hanged there "kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'"

That's a lot of talk about salvation. But in this case, being saved is about being rescued or spared from this brutal punishment and impending death. The

scoffers are taunting Jesus to come down off his cross and to let the criminals go free as well.

The other criminal also asks for salvation, but in a much different tone. He knows this is it; the day he will die. There is no turning back. Any chance of rescue has diminished to none. Yet, he seems to have accepted his fate. He acknowledges that he deserves this punishment, and in his *eleventh hour*, he appears to feel remorse. He replies to the angry criminal with this rebuke: “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 [Jesus] has done nothing wrong.”

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

Remember me. This is not so much a request for salvation as it is a request for mercy and goodness. Think kindly of me. Answer my prayers. If there’s any way that you can make things better for me, please do. Keep me in your favor.

“Jesus, remember me.”

This criminal appears to have renounced the dark side and turned toward the light. He acknowledges his guilt and expresses penitence. But we tend to be suspicious of the eleventh-hour confession; it's just a little too convenient. It sends the message that you can live your life on your own terms, with no regard for law or morality or even common decency. And then make up for it in a few words of remorse and a plea for forgiveness at the end.

But let's give this criminal the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he is simply tired of fighting and being angry. Maybe he's had enough running and hiding. Maybe he's ready to be released from the burden of trouble and shame. Maybe he yearns for a peaceful death; full of the peace that he senses in Jesus. And maybe - even just in his last few hours - he really has come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah and can grant him eternal life.

"Jesus, remember me," he pleads. In just three words, Jesus feels the heaviness of guilt and shame in his heart and senses true penitence. So Jesus gives him more than he asked for and promises, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Though the physical pain of crucifixion only continues to worsen, Jesus has healed the emotional pain of the criminal. Imagine the change in his state of mind, the feeling of being saved through forgiveness, and the peace that fills his soul as he finally succumbs to death. In contrast, imagine the emotional anguish and the agony of death experienced by the criminal who angrily taunted Jesus “Save yourself and us!”

One Bible scholar explained that this passage connects “Jesus’ death with the promise of life to those who trust in him... His promise to the dying criminal” offers him eternal life. And he describes this scene as “a Gospel in miniature: Jesus the dying Savior among the wretched; one who taunts him cynically and thereby rejects his mercy; and one who receives salvation because he looks forward to the kingdom of God. Thus the story invites the same response as the Gospel as a whole: Turn to the Lord for mercy and then spread the good news of God’s kingdom among the poor by doing for them as Jesus did during his ministry.” (The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX, Luke, John) As Luke wrote in Chapter 19, “For the Son of man came to seek and save the lost.”

We’ve all been lost at least a time or two in our lives, and there are any number of ways we can be saved in this life, before we reach our dying day. We

can be saved from hate when we experience unconditional love. We can be saved from anger by learning empathy. We can be saved from loneliness and shame when we find acceptance and belonging. We can be saved from condemnation when we receive grace.

Psalm 32, which we heard earlier in the service, follows closely the theme of PENITENCE AND PROMISE. Let's hear it again, this time from the Voice, a newer translation of the Bible. In a preface to the Psalm, it is described as "a model confession for those who are painfully aware of their sin." Also note that the name used in place of *God* or *Lord* is "the Eternal."

How happy is the one whose wrongs are forgiven, whose sin is hidden *from sight*.

How happy is the person whose sin the Eternal will not take into account.

How happy are those who no longer lie, to themselves or others.

When I refused to admit my wrongs, *I was miserable,*

moaning and complaining all day long so that even my bones felt brittle.

Day and night, Your hand kept pressing on me.

My strength dried up *like water* in the summer heat;

You wore me down.

When I finally saw my own lies, I owned up to my sins before You,

and I did not try to hide my evil deeds *from You*.

I said *to myself*, "I'll admit *all* my sins to the Eternal,"

and You *lifted and* carried away the guilt of my sin.

So let all who are devoted to You speak honestly to You now,

while You are still listening.

For then when the floods come, surely the rushing water will not even reach them.

You are my hiding place.

You will keep me out of trouble and envelop me with songs

that remind me I am free.

I will teach you and tell you the way to go *and how to get there*;

I will give you good counsel, and I will watch over you.

But don't be *stubborn and* stupid like horses and mules

who, if not reined by leather and metal, will run wild, ignoring their masters.

Tormented *and empty* are wicked *and destructive* people,

but the one who trusts in the Eternal is wrapped tightly in His gracious love.

Express your joy; be happy in Him, you who are good and true.

Go ahead, shout and rejoice aloud, you whose hearts are honest and straightforward.

In response to our genuine penitence, Jesus promises life and salvation even at the moment of our death. This is the Good News. May we share it... to the glory of God!

AMEN.