

Luke 23:39-43
Fifth Midweek Service in Lent
Sermon Series: Ironies of the Passion
Don't You Fear God?

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“³⁹One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴²Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” ⁴³Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”

You’ve all heard the expression, “Famous last words,” right? Sometimes we say it when somebody says something foolish like, “I don’t need to buckle up it’s not that far.” Sometimes we say it jokingly when somebody says something we know isn’t going to happen like, “I’m never eating pizza again for the rest of my life.” But how many last words are there that are really that famous? I can think of some fictional last words like Julius Caesar’s “Et tu Brutus?” or Master Yoda’s “There is another Skywalker.” But when I sat down to think of any actual, famous, last words I couldn’t think of a single one.

Many congregations take time during Lent to focus on the famous last words of Jesus, the seven statements that he made from the cross. Today, however, while we do hear some of Jesus’ last words, we’re going to be focusing on the last words of a man who was being crucified right beside Him. His question to his companion—**don’t you fear God?**—is tonight’s irony of the Passion.

So it why is it ironic? Well, here we have these two men, convicted criminals. Scripture doesn’t spell out exactly what they were being executed for but the words used to describe them imply that they were robbers and not unaccustomed to violence. Whatever their crimes may have been, we know they were sufficient to receive the sentence of death by crucifixion.

Crucifixion was a rather involved process; a detachment of soldiers was required to stand watch for the hours or days that the convicts hung on the cross in order to ensure that the gathering crowds wouldn’t interfere. Because of that, it wasn’t uncommon for the Romans to imprison offenders after sentencing them to crucifixion, until they had enough to make it worth their while. Because the Jews were insistent that Jesus be crucified immediately, they decided it would be an opportune time to bring these men out as well.

So now, we have that scene which has found a permanent place in our minds: three crosses up on top of a hill. The focus, of course, was on Jesus. We’re told that crowd gathered before him continued to ridicule and torment Him. Calling out insults and inciting Him to save Himself if He truly was the Messiah. The holy evangelists Matthew and Mark tell us that those two criminals joined right in with the rest of them in heaping insults on Jesus.

But now, all of a sudden, as the one keeps on slighting away the other cries out, “Enough! **Don’t you fear God,**” he said, “**since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.** Don’t you fear God? I mean, where does that question come from? If either of these men had feared God, they wouldn’t have been having this conversation, they wouldn’t have been in that situation, they wouldn’t have lived the way they did! Granted, they were about to die. And

because God has written His law on the hearts of every human creature, it isn't all that surprising that as he's struggling for breath and facing his imminent death this hardened criminal would get the fear of God knocked into him.

It wouldn't have been the first time that someone, in the moments before death, had looked back at their life all the evil they had done and been filled with terror at the prospect of meeting the maker. But that's not really what we're seeing here, is it? The emotion that was filling the heart of this dying criminal wasn't terror it was hope. Was he guilty of the crimes he stood accused of? Yes, he was. But right there alongside him was a man who had never sinned in His entire life. A man who even as He was being executed had just moments before lifted up His eyes to the heavens and cried out, "Abba! Father! Forgive them. For they know not what they do." This criminal knew what he had done. He knew he was guilty to the core and that his only hope for forgiveness was this man dying right next to him.

He may not even have been able to turn and look Him in the eyes but he called out none the less, **Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.** And then, through the tumult of wails and jeers he heard what were without a doubt, the sweetest, most precious words that had ever been spoken to him: **I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.**

Where in the world did that faith come from? Trick question, right? That faith came, not from this world, but from the Holy Spirit working in that man's heart through the words of love and forgiveness that he had heard straight from his Savior's mouth. That faith came through hearing the gospel message. This man had been spiritually dead his entire life, and now mere moments before he physically died, God brings him to spiritual life. It is an amazing, heart-warming instance of God's grace.

As beautiful as that case may be, it is no more precious than the dozen or so examples of God's grace that are gathered here for worship tonight. At the same time, there is no less irony in your lips singing out about that "amazing pity, grace unknown, and love beyond degree!" than there was in that hardened criminal softening and crying out: **Don't you fear God?**

Our sins may not warrant the death penalty in the eyes of the American judicial system, but before God, those crimes of rebellion against our maker are more than enough to convict us. But the fact that a score of rebellious sinners is gathered under this roof tonight to cry out together to the very Savior we have so often rebelled against, **Jesus, remember us when you come into your kingdom,** is not irony. It is grace. It is by grace that God's Word was first brought to your ears and by grace that you were brought to be washed in the waters of baptism. As you continued to learn of that grace, you were strengthened and confirmed in your faith as you came to fear God. It is because of His grace—His unconditional, free, and total love—that Jesus was there suffering hell for us on that cross. His death and crucifixion stand as a testimony to the fact that He has indeed remembered us.

So brothers and sisters, rejoice. Your sins have been forgiven. You will not die, but live! Jesus died for you, and just as He promised that man on the cross that they would be together that day in paradise, so too He has promised to one day bring us to paradise as well. In the meantime, He promises that He will be with us, today, tomorrow, always, to the very end of the age.

Amen.