

Good Friday

April 3, 2015

I Tell You the Truth . . . Today You Will Be With Me in Paradise

Text: Luke 23:39-43

Rev. George Ferch

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

There are those circumstances in life we refer to as a “moment of truth.” One definition is a critical point in time that makes a person face the truth. Is there a more serious moment of truth than the critical time I face the truth that I am going to die?

Death is a moment of truth not one of us can escape. I may not think about death much when I am young, healthy, or cautious. Yet all of us are a split second and single breath away from that moment of truth. It may come suddenly and unexpectedly in a car crash, or it may come slowly and with sure expectation at the hands of an incurable cancer.

The moment of truth was near for the criminals hanging from their crosses on either side of Jesus. They knew they were going to die. One of them insulted Jesus with unbelief’s false bravado. The other criminal took it seriously. “Don’t you fear God?” he asked. In contrition for his sins, the man looked to Jesus for forgiveness.

Jesus told him the truth about what was going to happen soon. “**I Tell You the Truth...Today You will be with Me in Paradise.**” Jesus’ words are the promise of today, the promise of companionship, and the promise of location.

He was about to die and face God. As his life past before his eyes that Friday afternoon, the criminal recognized and admitted to the other, “We are getting what our deeds deserve.” It was not the burn in his lungs or the blood trickling down his arms that brought him to his moment of truth. It was the “What happens next? What happens when I die?” So he pleaded in Spirit worked faith to the One hanging next to him, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

As this was apparently the second word Jesus spoke from the cross, perhaps his breaths were not so shallow yet. His voice was still strong. Imagine the relief the criminal felt in his fear when he heard Jesus’ words, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”

For someone who sat on death row for who knows how long, for someone who had just begun one of the slowest forms of execution—one that could extend three or four days—how comforting

that element of time must have been for this criminal. Jesus assured this man that before the sun would rise again his suffering would be done.

The promises we make to one another come with conditions. *If* this happens, *then* that will happen. *Someday* I am going to do that. Jesus’ promise of relief to this repentant sinner was not in the form of an if/then clause. Nor was it preceded by a “someday.” Jesus made a statement of truth: today you will be with me in my kingdom.

When the moment of truth comes to us in death, Jesus says the same. Death for the child of God is not just the cessation of breath. It is the end of suffering. No more hunger. No more pain. No more tears. No more sin, no more guilt. . . today.

Jesus’ promise is not just a promise of time. It is a promise of companionship, “with me.” Something drew him to the man next to him. There was something different about this thorn-crowned criminal. He recognized Jesus’ innocence, “This man has done nothing wrong.” Instead of cursing as the soldiers drove the nails, Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them.”

He saw the written notice above Jesus’ head, “This is the king of the Jews.” The differences between Jesus and everyone else on that hill were like oil and water. It was the difference between sin and perfection. The Holy Spirit used Jesus as the living Word of God to work on this criminal’s heart. Instead of wanting to run away from God in fear of punishment, Jesus drew the man in by his grace.

Jesus assured the criminal, “You will be with me.” Jesus’ forgiveness is so complete that it allows us to be in the very presence of perfection. Moses, the greatest leader of God’s Old Testament people, could not see the glory of God and expect to live. In heaven, we will dwell in that perfection because we will be not only with him, but also like him.

Jesus also makes a promise of location. In Revelation, God uses a palette of gold, jewels, and rivers to paint some beautiful pictures for John. Here, Jesus paints with the word “paradise,” a lush garden. For some that is a picture of tulips and roses. For others, a picture of palm trees near a coral blue sea. No matter. The One walking with you on the paths of paradise makes it beautiful.

The airport waiting areas and delivery room where I met my children were beautiful. I do not remember the wall colors, or the furniture, or temperature in the rooms. I remember that my wife and my child were

with me. That made the rooms beautiful. In heaven, in paradise, we will be with the Son of God who loved us enough to leave heaven and be with us on earth. The Bible promises us that heaven is a spectacular place. There is the story of a little girl who walked with her dad under a star-lit sky and said, “Dad, if heaven is this beautiful from this side, imagine what it looks like from the other side!”

When on our deathbed, experiencing our “moment of truth,” how do we know that very day we will be with Jesus in paradise? *“I tell you the truth.”* Do you know what one word is translated *“I tell you the truth”*? It is amen. Jesus left no room for doubt that repentant sinner would be in heaven. Through his Word, our Savior leaves no room for doubt that you and I will be in heaven. Amen indicates support, something to lean on.

Amen was a favorite word of Jesus. Whenever he wanted to drive home an important point, he would start out by saying, “Amen.” If there is any time we need something to lean on, it is at the time of our deaths. Jesus makes it clear that when that moment comes, it does not matter what we have done in the past, but through his Word we find something to lean on. We lean on Jesus’ “amen,” his “Amen. Today you will be with me in paradise.” We say again, “Amen.” <SDG>