

"The Words of Lent 2"

(The Power of Prayer)

Psalms 55:1-3

Luke 23:42-43

Scripture Lesson from the OT: "Give ear to my prayer O God; and do not hide Yourself from my supplications. Give heed to me and answer me; I am restless in my complaint and am surely distracted. Because of the voice of the enemy, because of the pressure of the wicked; for they bring down trouble upon me; and in anger they bear a grudge against me."

Scripture Lesson from the NT: "And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom. And He said to him, "Verily I say unto you, today you shall be with Me in paradise."

This is the word of the Lord for the people of God.

There is a story told of the time when three pastors were discussing the right position for powerful prayer. As they were talking a telephone repairman was working on the office phone system in the background. The first pastor said that the key to powerful prayer is in the position of the hands. He always held his hands together and pointed them up toward heaven. The second pastor said that a truly powerful prayer must always be conducted while you are on your knees. The third said, "No, no, no, you guys have got it all wrong." The only position for powerful prayer is on your knees with your face down on the floor.

By this time the phone repairman couldn't hold back any longer. He interjected, "I found the position for the most powerful prayer I ever prayed was when I was hanging upside down forty feet in the air with my work belt snagged on a telephone pole foot spike."

You may remember from last week's message that the first word spoken by Jesus from the cross was a prayer. He prayed for heaven's best gift for hell's worst criminals. The second word He spoke was an answer to a prayer prayed by one of the men beside him with whom He was destined to share eternity.

Our Lord spoke to this man like he was the only man in the world. And what words of hope and encouragement His words were! Of the seven words spoken by Jesus from the cross, none is more satisfying to the heart and soul than these: "Today you shall be with Me in paradise."

So, who was this man who prayed the prayer that inspired these words from our Lord? The mysterious man to whom Jesus spoke these wonderful words of life is one of the least understood characters found in the pages of the Bible.

The scriptures call him a thief, but he is not a thief in the sense of the word as we understand it today. He was really more of a brigand, a member of a band of outlaws with a cause. In this case, the outlaws were the Jewish political sect known as the Zealots. This man and his companion were part of an underground movement to overthrow Roman authority in Judea. As guerilla fighters, they were not strong enough to openly challenge the legions of Rome in a head-to-head battle, so they were forced to resort to acts of hit-and-run brigandry.

They might be compared to the colonial militia of the American Revolution as they fought the British for American freedom. As the brigands of Judea fought for freedom from Rome, so the brigands in the American colonies fought for freedom from England.

It has been suggested by some historians that this man may have known Jesus before the day of their execution. One possible reason for this thinking is seen in the way the man addressed the Lord as simply "Jesus," calling Him by the name that personal friends and family would have called him. There is no other record anywhere in the scriptures of anyone else ever having addressed Him in this way who was not intimately connected to Him.

There have been many people throughout history who have called on the name of "Jesus" after their own ideals of what that name means, and have claimed to know Him, but in truth know Him only with their own preconceived ideas about who He is, and thus know very little about Jesus as the Son of God.

However, if we take the text at face value and assume these two men never met before, then like many people of His time, about all the man knew of Jesus was what he had learned from having heard Jesus pray:

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Yet somehow this was enough to turn his heart toward the Lord. Friends, we must never underestimate the power of righteous prayer. And we must never stop praying for heaven’s best gift to be granted to our worst enemies.

And yet, as I listen to our prayer requests week after week, I hear few if any requests that heaven’s best gift be granted to our enemies! I hear requests that we pray for our families and our friends. I hear requests that we pray for Israel and Ukraine. But I do not hear any requests that we pray for Russia and Palestine and China and North Korea. I do not hear requests that we pray for our enemies.

Whether this is because of our disbelief in the power of prayer to make enemies into friends, or the lack of faith that God can turn their hearts toward Him, or whether in truth the desires in our hearts are not for forgiveness but rather for revenge, I do not know. But this I do know, *we have not and do not pray for our enemies as Jesus did!*

Jesus says that we are to forgive our enemies, and not just when we feel like it, but every time that forgiveness is needed. And that means we may be praying for a long time to come.

But Jesus says, “Do it anyway,” despite whether you are feeling it or not, or whether they deserve it, but because that is what I did for you when you were my enemy. Say what, Bro. J, did I just hear you tell me that Jesus said there was a time “when I was his enemy?” When was I ever *the enemy of Jesus?*

In James 4:4 we read that, “Whoever is a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.” What does it mean for us to be a “friend of the world? How does being a “friend of the world” make us an “enemy of God?”

When we choose relationships with family and friends that are unhealthy over and above our relationship with Jesus Christ, we become a friend of the world.

When we let an injustice against another person pass rather than speak up about it because we don’t want to make waves, we become a friend of the world.

When we tell comfortable lies because we know that for every person who won’t tell the uncomfortable truth there are ten who wouldn’t want him to, we become a friend of the world.

Jesus once said that you can't serve the world and serve heaven at the same time without making one or the other an enemy. And our personal relationship to one or the other will make all the difference.

Having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ made all the difference to this man. I believe that had he never met Jesus and heard Him pray to His Father as He did on the cross, the man would not have believed in Him. But we can see that with even a limited understanding of the person of Jesus the man believed in Him and put his complete trust in Him to utterly save his soul in this dark hour.

Historical evidence indicates that Jesus and this man had much in common. They were both patriots of a kind, striving for a greater cause. They were both men of courage and action who had accepted the reality of their own coming deaths. In many ways, they were allies working together to better their country.

Although they had much in common, there was one point of great difference. The man took up the sword and became an enemy of God. Jesus said that men who live by the sword, will die by it, and proclaimed that it will be the meek as the friends of God who will inherit the earth.

To the man of the world, this is sentimental hogwash. The way he sees it, the strong rule the world, and the strong man is not about to give over his rule to the meek. To the strong, force will be met with force, and violence with violence.

Jesus, on the other hand said that we should not resist evil by doing evil because that will only lead to more evil. Thus, while these two men had much in common, their means to achieve their end were vastly different.

It seems that as to which of these two men's "means" was right in 33 AD, we are still not in agreement with today. Sadly, as may be noted by the events in Israel and Palestine and in the embattled nation of Ukraine, the courts of the world still weigh heavily on the side of the man of violence. Yet, in the courts of heaven the verdict remains steadfastly on the side of Jesus.

Jesus was certain that the men of the world will not have the last word. He once beheld the city of Jerusalem and wept over its fate. The sound of His weeping is still heard throughout the pages of history at places like Gettysburg, and Waterloo and Verdun, and now recently at Ukraine and Israel.

Does He weep for the human causes that are decided in these places? No, He weeps because the people who have called themselves by His name have been too filled with fear and anger to choose the way that leads to justice and peace. They are sure that force must be met with force and violence must be answered with violence, the words of the Son of God be damned.

Jesus knew that in meeting evil with evil by means of the tooth and claw, would only produce greater evil in an endless never-ending cycle. That was the reason He told the disciples that the great buildings of stone in their city would soon be coming down unless they repented of their hatred of Rome.

The sad truth is that even right here this morning we who claim to believe in Jesus are still not convinced that the meek will ever inherit the earth. And thus, we have allowed worldly men to bully us into believing that it is folly for us to trust God and cease to be violent. And that if we ever were to trust God, there would be no earth left for the meek to inherit.

In Luke 23:42 we read that one the men on the cross next to Jesus was inspired by Jesus' prayer to His Father to thus he prayed, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Why did the man pray this way?

Did he pray because he was dying, and he was hoping for a quick end to his life?

Did he pray because like the other man prayed before him, his was a plea for Jesus to do something to relieve him from his pain and suffering?

No, unlike the other man, this man did not repent of his pain and suffering from being where he was. He knew he deserved to be there and to receive the punishment that he was getting. He repented only for his bad choice in having become the man he was.

His words to Jesus do not speak of a man wishing to escape his fate. Having been nailed to the cross, he had taken the place of Jesus before he took his own, and he asked not to be spared of its pain and suffering, but only that he might be remembered for it. His only hell being the guilt of his sin rather than his suffering for it.

Had this man had a mind to compare himself with his compatriot, he might have thought well of himself. Perhaps even thought himself to be the better of the two.

But having seen himself for who he was, there was no room in his heart for such pretense. My prayer today is that we too may see our own circumstances in such a light as did this man.

I think it bears mentioning that despite his desperate condition, he was able to see in Jesus not simply a man who would be king if that were possible, but a man who was already king. The regal authority of Jesus and His kingdom was after all, the question of the hour.

It was a frivolous charge of blasphemy brought by Caiaphas and Annas that had brought Jesus before Pilate. Pilate well knew the charge was false. Herod too conveniently avoided the issue by passing the buck back to Pilate. The howling mob and the soldiers joined in the charade by taking up the charge and poking fun at the very idea of it.

But to this one man, this one condemned man, dangling precariously from a telephone pole like the man in our opening story, the kingship of Jesus Christ was no joke. And somehow this condemned man saw in the man dying beside him a King of kings, and a Lord of lords who was able to grant eternal favors beyond death and the grave. Therefore, he prayed, "Jesus, remember me when You come into your kingdom."

A prayer of faith such as this man prayed will always be answered with assurance from God. In fact, a more daring prayer than this is not to be found anywhere in the Bible, for he does not pray "Remember me *if* ever you do come into Your kingdom," but "Remember me *when* You come into it."

So greatly did he believe in the prayer Jesus prayed on the cross, and so greatly was he moved by it that he was convinced that merely holding a place in the heart of Jesus by His future remembrance of him would be heaven's best gift, and that would be somehow enough for his eternity.

A prayer coming from the lips of a penitent man will always be answered with heaven's best gift, and the answer to his prayer came to him immediately from the lips of God Himself, "Verily I say unto you, today you shall be with Me in paradise." No honest man could speak such words of grand and blessed assurance unless he was certain of the truth of them.

And right here in the valley of the shadow of death, the Lord gave blessed assurance of heaven to a dying outlaw that are as dear to us this morning as they were to that man two thousand years ago. Let us take a few moments to consider the breadth and depth of these precious words.

1. Jesus said to this man, "Today you will be with Me in paradise." As physical death will not end me at this hour it will not end you in your hour. All who look to Me for life will live with Me as I live and be with Me wherever I AM!
2. "Today-you..." and you, and you...and me too, will survive and live on as not some ethereal essence in some distant cosmos, but as the real persons and personalities we are today.
The human race on earth will not be immortal, but human existence will be immortal, because we have been "made like Him, and like Him we will rise" and "because He lives", we too will live!
3. "Will be with Me..." Jesus assures us that if we "abide with Him He will abide with us." The thief on the cross hung so near to Jesus that had their hands not been bound they could have reached out and touched each other. Together now, as they were bound in death and in this new after-life they would continue on through eternity and time.
4. "In paradise..." With these words Jesus assures of our heavenly home beyond this world. He called this place "paradise." It is interesting to note that the language describing the Garden of Eden uses this very same word.

The early church fathers have often been accused of focusing too much attention on spiritual matters without concern for physical life on earth. I regret to say this charge could not possibly be brought against us in our current anything-goes religious culture drunk with the comforts of the modern world. And there is a price to be paid for our negligence in this regard, which I also regret that we have yet to pay for in full.

As a result of our pride, our *hubris*, through the human glorification of the myth of "having it all now," we have become a church of miserable unsaved fear-mongers filled with sick psychologies who desperately need to revise our 21st century worldview to include the existence of heaven.

Personally, I take great comfort in the knowledge that when Jesus went home to be with His Father, He had a thief with Him for a companion.

Finally, Jesus assures us that those who turn to Him “today”, will be saved by Him “today.” Friends, the compartmentalized teaching of the church that heaven is some place “up there,” wherever “there” is, and we must wait until we die to go to it, was not the teaching of Jesus, nor is it the testimony given of heaven by the writers of scripture (If you don’t believe me read your Bibles).

The triumphant shout of the saints of God has always been Revelation 14:13, “Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord.” Which is to say, those who believe in the Lord at their death are forever blessed in the assurance of their salvation by having formerly repented, or “turned” from their sin during their lifetime.

We do not have to wait until we die and go to heaven to be saved from our sins, this day, today, *we can be in paradise with Jesus*. Because of the promise Jesus gave to a dying criminal, we can take fast hold of all that heaven offers us this very morning, even before this service ends!

Some years ago, I had a conversation with a proud man of the world who thought he had the answers for everything. When the conversation turned to religion, I quickly saw that he knew very little of the ways and means of Christianity. After a few moments of linguistic maneuvering to take hold of the higher ground, I asked him a “preacher question!”

“Did you know that God has already set a definite date for your salvation? The boldness of my assertion took him completely by surprise. “I don’t think so,” he sputtered back. “Well, He has”, said I, “and I can prove it!

I’ll tell you what, if I show you that God has set the date for your salvation, will you honor His timing and show-up to receive it?” After a momentary pause to weigh his response, he tacitly said, “Well, if God had in fact set a date for him to be saved, which he highly doubted, and God would keep his part of the bargain, he would honor God’s timing and show up to receive it.”

“All right,” said I, “Get ready to be saved because God says “now” is the date of your salvation, and you have already honored God’s timing because “now” is all

you've got!" God says that "now" is the accepted time of your salvation, because in this life, there is no guarantee of tomorrow.

And He says because you have kept your part of the bargain by having showed up on time, God will keep His part of the bargain by giving it to you.

All you have to do is tell God you want it, and *"Today you will be with Me in paradise."* Well, folks, how about you? Does being in paradise with Jesus today sound like something you want to have?

Doesn't the thought of you going out there in the world without it make you a little nervous? Is God making you an offer this morning that something deep down inside is telling you not to refuse?

I'm going to ask y'all to bow your heads, all eyes closed, and take this moment of silence we have right now to tell God what you want from Him. Let's think about this for a moment and then we'll pray together.

"Today you will be with Me in paradise!" Can y'all say "Amen" to that?

Amen and amen.