

Luke 23:39-45 – Lent 1 Wednesday – With Me in Paradise – February 25, 2026

+In Nomine Iesu+

We don't know their names—these two thieves crucified alongside Jesus. They are totally lost to us in history. We don't really even know their crimes. We usually call them thieves—and that's fine.

The vocabulary that Luke uses suggests something serious. They may have been rebels—radicals—enemies of the Roman Empire in some capacity. Clearly, the Romans considered them worthy of execution. But the details are long forgotten.

But the *three crosses* upon Golgotha—Calvary—have been an image of our faith for millennia. And we want to address each one. Now, Jesus' cross matters most, of course. This is the salvation of the world—although it doesn't look like it—not yet, at least. Here Jesus is lifted up—He is exalted—and He calls the world to Himself—as we will hear this coming Sunday.

But these two thieves are interesting. They respond to Jesus in such different ways. We wouldn't think this is a moment for faith. Even the Disciples have scattered. Only John is there at the cross. And it feels like the end. It looks like Jesus has lost. His path has come to an end. It seems there is no future for Jesus and the kingdom of God.

The first thief sees the cross as an exposure of Jesus' failure. And he is free with his thoughts. He is about to die. He can say whatever he wants. What difference does it make at this point? Our translation says he *railed* at Jesus. But this word is probably too gentle.

The Greek text says he *blasphemed* against Jesus. Blasphemy can mean slander or a verbal attack. The thief hurled insults—as some translations read. It is abusive language. But it is often used for mocking God—or the things of God. In other words, he violates the second commandment. *You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.*

And it is very much like what we heard last week from the rulers and soldiers. If Jesus is the Christ—the Chosen One—the King of the Jews—he should be able to handle this moment. He should be able to save Himself. They tempt him to act—even though they don't think He can.

And now this thief wants to be saved as well. Not his soul. He is not looking for the forgiveness of sins—the renewal of his heart—or even eternal life. He would just rather not die. He wants to be saved from the cross—not through the cross.

But the other thief handles this moment quite differently. And I want to spend most of our time with him—and with Jesus' response. The second thief begins with a rebuke of the first thief. And it's worth hearing again.

“Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.”

What an amazing statement for such a man. He recognizes his guilt. He doesn't make excuses. Justice has brought him to the cross. But he sees Jesus' innocence. And it's a strong statement. Jesus has done nothing wrong. And on the surface, this could just mean Jesus has done nothing *deserving crucifixion*.

But his statement to Jesus could mean even more. Jesus is obedient to God. He is perfect as His heavenly Father is perfect. His righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees. The innocent Lamb of God has done *nothing* wrong. It's quite an insight into the salvation of the world.

And the reason I think he is saying more is because of his request. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He is going to die. Jesus is going to die. And yet, this is his statement.

He isn't railing against Jesus. He isn't blaming God for his condition. He understands that the kingdom of God is not of this world. It doesn't arise out of human government. He can see that Jesus is King—even nailed to the cross. The kingdom is the rule and reign of God. It transcends space and time. It is present with him there. And it continues beyond the grave and into eternity.

What a miraculous thing—this kind of faith. He trusts the King of the Jews even as He is also being crucified. He hasn't witnessed the resurrection. Maybe he hasn't even heard Jesus talk about it. But he has heard the words of Jesus up to this point on Good Friday. And as always, faith comes by hearing the Word of Christ.

Now, some use this passage to say Baptism is not necessary for salvation—or maybe even unimportant—as if it is merely some outward and optional ritual. All because the thief on the cross has not been baptized—and yet he clearly has faith.

That's a sad misuse of this text. We need to remember where we are in salvation history. The whole book of Acts is about the transition between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. Really, only Jesus has had a full Baptism at this point. And His Baptism is utterly unique—and unrepeatable. Baptism will not be the full New Covenant reality until after the resurrection of Christ and the coming of the Spirit.

So yes, God can grant faith apart from Baptism. But that is no excuse for us to minimize the importance and necessity of Baptism. This thief didn't reject or neglect Baptism. He merely couldn't be baptized—coming to faith on the cross. Not to mention that Baptism wasn't even fully realized yet. So let's not make him an excuse to minimize the necessity of Baptism.

Paul builds a firm connection between the cross and resurrection and Baptism in Romans 6, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."

It is interesting. The thief calls upon Jesus to *remember* him. And this word connects us with the Sacrament of the Altar. Jesus uses this same word in the words of institution. Do this in remembrance of me.

It is easy to see that, like these thieves, we will be forgotten by history. In just a couple of generations, no one will remember us. No one will know our names. Maybe we even strive to leave a legacy behind. We desperately seek recognition in the hope that we will not be forgotten.

But it is perfectly okay if the generations to come forget us. We simply need Jesus to remember us. And remembrance is quite literally to be re-membered. Through Baptism, we are claimed by Christ. We find our place in His body in Holy Communion. We are living members of Christ. Our future lies in this very moment—as His Word incorporates us into the life of Christ—and into the kingdom of God. We are not forgotten.

I like the way Paul says it in Galatians 2, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Anyway, I hope you share this kind of faith—awakened by God’s Word—the physical Word of Holy Baptism—the physical Word of Holy Communion—and the audible Word of preaching. I hope you can look at Jesus Christ and Him crucified—and see the power of God and the wisdom of God. I hope that –like this second thief—you can call on Jesus in your darkest moments and find your place in Christ.

And that leads us to Jesus’ response. And this is Jesus’ second Word from the cross, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” The promise of Christ here is *paradise*. It’s an uncommon word in the New Testament. You’ll find it just three times.

But we actually heard it just last Wednesday. Our reading from Revelation ended with these words, “To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”

The other use of it is equally mysterious. In case you want to know, it is found in 2 Corinthians 12, “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.”

Paradise has connections backwards to the Garden of Eden. The word literally means *walled garden*—an enclosed, protected place of flourishing—that keeps out animals and thieves. In Jewish tradition, God had raised the garden to Himself before the flood. It seems that this is the place Paul visits. But then, in Revelation, we see that on the Last Day, God will return paradise back to earth.

It is interesting to think that this thief will join Jesus in death—but that death transports them both to the paradise of God. Jesus says that this is something that will happen that very day—on Good Friday. And it gives us a sense of what happens to us at death—when we are faithful unto death—as the letter to the Church of Smyrna in Revelation today requires. This is the intermediate state. We are in a walled garden—something like a spiritual Eden—even as we await the resurrection.

And even more importantly, we are with Christ. He says, “Today you will be *with Me* in Paradise.” To be with Jesus means that we are not lost to the cosmos—we don’t cease to exist—we don’t end up in hell. He is the first and the last—the One who died and came to life. And we can trust Him for eternity.

And here we see that the *only remembering* that really matters is to be remembered by Jesus. It’s okay if the world forgets about us. In fact, it is nearly inevitable.

And remembrance in Scripture is always participation. And here, Jesus pulls us into His life—even in death. Paradise will be restored as the dwelling of God is with His people. We will not be forgotten in the kingdom of God—because Jesus is the King.

There were three crosses that day. Jesus' cross matters most. It is our only hope for the forgiveness of our sins—for our path to renewal—for paradise. But it is good to notice the other two as well. One mocked and neglected the work of Christ. The other—in these seemingly impossible circumstances—trusted in Jesus and His kingdom. Only one received the promise. It is as Jesus says, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.”

Next week, we turn to another conversation. This is Jesus' third word from the cross. Really, it is two statements—one to His beloved Disciple John—St. John the Theologian—the only Disciple present at the cross. And the other is to His Mother—the Blessed Virgin Mary—the God-Bearer.

And here we find Jesus thinking of others, rather than Himself. When we suffer, we often turn all attention to ourselves. All we can think about is our pain and difficulty. Everyone else is forgotten. Jesus does just the opposite. He cares for John and Mary. Even more, He has us in mind on the cross.

It is as the Prophet Isaiah says. And we will conclude with his prophecy about this particular moment. He says, “He was wounded for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.” In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+Soli Deo Gloria+