

Luke 23 (32-43) – Which One Will You Be?

Who do you want to be? Who are you going to be? Because there are only two types of people in the world, and our text today points to both.

Today we celebrate Palm Sunday, the start of what we call Holy Week, or Passion Week. It is the week of the Passover Feast, and Jerusalem was packed with people who had come to celebrate. Jesus was staying at Martha, Mary, and Lazarus' home in Bethany, outside of Jerusalem. And people were watching his every move, because he had been doing miracles. And he had raised Lazarus from the dead. There were many witnesses. So, a growing number of people believed that Jesus was the deliverer that they had been waiting for. And the religious leaders were afraid, because Jesus was upsetting their way of life, and threatening their power.

John 11:45-48 – Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” Vs.53 – So from that day on they made plans to put him to death. But, would Jesus be in Jerusalem for the Passover?

Palm Sunday gave them the answer. After he raised Lazarus in Bethany, a great crowd followed Jesus into Jerusalem. And here comes Jesus, riding in on a donkey, in what we call his Triumphant Entry. This was the fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9, a messianic prophecy. The crowd was waving palm branches, a symbol of victory and joy. And they were shouting “Hosanna!”, which means “Save us!”, but also “Salvation has come!”

But what people were expecting Jesus to do in Jerusalem, was not what he did in Jerusalem. He didn't overthrow the local government or the religious power structure. He didn't lead the people in a revolt against Rome. What he did do was a great triumph, but it was wrapped in a tragedy.

After the joyful eruption of King Jesus riding into Jerusalem, the week moves on. And we see Jesus driving the money changing extortionists out of the Temple. We see Jesus giving his teaching on the end of times at the Mount of Olives. We hear the parables and controversy while Jesus gives his stinging rebuke of the religious leaders.

Thursday comes and we have the Last Supper, where Jesus washes the disciple's feet and Judas leaves to betray him. Then we have the Garden of Gethsemane and the blood, sweat and darkness of the night as Jesus prays his heart out. He looked at the cup of God's wrath against sin and yielded to his Father's will. His disciples slept and then were scattered as Jesus was taken to stand trial. He stands before Annas, the former high priest, then Caiaphas, the current high priest. Peter denies him three times. The whole Council condemns Jesus. And the tension builds.

It's Friday morning. Judas commits suicide. Jesus is sent to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, who finds no reason for him to be declared guilty, and sends him to Herod, the Jewish king. The priests and scribes accused Jesus as Herod and his men mocked him and sent him back to Pilate again.

Pilate took Jesus before the crowd and asked what should be done with him. The crowds shouted "Crucify him!" Pilate washes his hands, as if he is innocent of Jesus' blood, and releases Barabbas the notorious criminal while the Romans soldiers whip and beat Jesus to a pulp. They take him inside the governor's palace and place a purple cloak on him, with a crown of thorns. The soldiers sarcastically salute him and strike him on the head and spit on him. Jesus is so physically weak now that they have another man named Simon help to carry his cross. But it is the agony of having to bear the sin of the world that was breaking his heart.

Vs.32-39 – Now we look at Jesus on the cross, and see what our sin has done. Yet the people, the priests, and the soldiers were laughing, mocking, insulting, and taunting him. Jesus hangs there suffering but he does not threaten back, he entrusted himself to God his Father. All the others were

making demands of Jesus, like many of us do today. We put conditions on Jesus, “show me the way I want and I will believe”. But Jesus wasn’t meeting their demands; he was fulfilling the demands of his Father.

As he hangs there seemingly helpless, we see that Jesus was never too busy, too tired, or in too much pain to reach out and share the good news. From the cross he performed a miracle. On his left and right are two criminals. The account we have in Matthew says robbers, or thieves. In Luke we see the one thief trusting Jesus, but when we look again in Matthew, we see that it didn’t start out that way. Matthew 27:44 says – *And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way.*

So, both the robbers reviled Jesus as he was being scorned by all. It is like today when Jesus’ followers are mocked when it seems they are hung out to dry. Yet, as everyone else continued to berate Jesus, one of the thieves, who had previously been going with the crowd, is transformed.

What caused this man, this thief, on the cross and on his way to hell, to turn and trust Jesus? The Bible tells us in Romans 10:17 that faith comes by hearing the word of Christ. What was it that this man heard? In the silence of the moment, the thief who has no hope now hears Christ, beaten, bloody, crucified, dying for our sins, pouring out his heart of divine love, saying, *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”* (vs.34).

Think of it: Jesus appeals to God, not for justice, but for mercy. And not mercy for himself, but mercy for his accusers, the ones who are actually guilty. Others heard the voice of Jesus, but hardened their hearts. But this thief suddenly knew Jesus could rescue him even while others thought he couldn’t rescue himself. The merciful heart of Jesus changed this man.

In that moment, this thief doesn’t see Jesus as a failure or a fool. He sees Jesus and in him there is no hatred, no malice, no wrath, no judgment, only forgiveness, love, and holiness. He sees the Son of God. And he hears the heart of Jesus: *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”*

Suddenly, this man does know what he has done. He realizes the reality of what is truly happening. He sees his sin, and his savior. The rest of the crowd only sees failure, but this man sees faith. He only has moments to live, but the change has been made. What does he do now?

Vs.40 – He goes against the grain, against the crowd, and he rebukes the other thief. You are about to meet your maker and you want to mock like this crowd right before you die? It also indicates fearing God in the sense that this second thief now knew Jesus was God.

Vs.41 – He admits his guilt and confesses his faith. He admitted who Jesus really was, sinless. This is what you need to do today. If you never admit you're wrong and that Jesus is right, you are missing out on salvation.

Vs.42 – The thief calls on Jesus as his Savior and Lord. He knew that Jesus was indeed the Son of God, and that he had a kingdom, and came to Jesus on God's terms, and was saved. What do you see on that cross?

O that old rugged cross, so despised by the world, has a wondrous attraction for me; for the dear Lamb of God left his glory above to bear it to dark Calvary. So I'll cherish the old rugged cross, till my trophies at last I lay down; I will cling to the old rugged cross, and exchange it some day for a crown.

In that old rugged cross, stained with blood so divine, a wondrous beauty I see, for 'twas on that old cross Jesus suffered and died, to pardon and sanctify me. So I'll cherish the old rugged cross, till my trophies at last I lay down; I will cling to the old rugged cross, and exchange it some day for a crown.

Vs.43 – Time is short, death is near, but this is about eternity, and time stood still. The moment of truth had arrived. Even when he is dying on a cruel cross, as an innocent man, Jesus was thinking about people. Jesus looked at the man and pronounced his salvation! Hallelujah!

Some see this scenario and believe that it means they can just come to Jesus at the last second, when they are about to die. But not everyone knows exactly when they are about to die. Even if they do, this is not about that. This is about the moment of truth. And the truth is that your time is now! It is when you encounter Jesus; THAT is the time of salvation. When you hear his voice! And I am telling you by the authority of the word of God, you are hearing it right now! You don't set the day; he sets the day! He is the one who brings salvation! Hosanna in the highest!

You don't have to have it all figured out. The thief on the cross did not have his doctorate in doctrine. But he knew that Jesus is God and Lord, and innocent, while he deserved punishment. This is what you need to be saved, admit your sin, believe in Jesus as Savior, and call on him as Lord.

Now what about those of us who are saved already? What do Christians do? True Christians, those who have repented toward God and placed their faith in Jesus Christ, continue to do so. They are like the thief, who saw his hopelessness without Jesus, and his hope with Jesus. They are continuing to seek God's grace, having found its source. And true Christians grow in grace, which means that they also grow in repentance.

What that means is that they continue to see their sin, but in a greater way. Now they don't simply see sin as what they've done wrong, and what the earthly consequences are. But what their sin does to God. They see it more deeply, as an offense and attack on the holiness of God. The more light you have, the more dust you see. So, they see God in a greater way, and they see their sin in a greater way. And they see grace in a greater way, and their desire to walk in that grace grows stronger.

The thief had conviction and confession. But true repentance is more than conviction and confession. True repentance means conversion. It isn't just a faith that you are forgiven. It is a faith that has turned to Christ and follows him away from that sin, and closer to God. It may be a bumpy road; it sure was for that thief. But that thief was looking forward to the kingdom. Not

someday, but every day, even if this was his last day. He was headed that way, and he knew only Jesus could get him there, and he wasn't about to let go. That was where he wanted to be, and he wasn't worried about dying any more. He had found eternal life. Is this you? Are you following in repentance, or are you just feeling remorse?

The first thief said "I am not getting what I need" but the other one said "Jesus you know what I really need and I trust you to give it to me when I need it". The first one thought Christ was hopeless, but because of Christ the other one became hopeful. The first one just gave up on Jesus and said my situation is hopeless and I am helpless and I might as well curse God and die. The other one was also dying but he still knew Jesus, a dying Jesus, had something for him. And the risen Jesus has something for you. The forgiveness of your sins, and eternal salvation. Do you want it?

Of course some are like these at the cross, saying, "I don't want to hear it!" Offering the good news of the gospel to someone that doesn't believe in a hell of torment is like offering a cup of water to a man who is convinced that he is drowning. Forgiveness can have no meaning without the weight of sin. As you look at the perfect sinless Jesus, the Son of God, do you see your sin? Do you realize *your* sin put him on that cross? This is what it is like when you truly encounter Christ. Jesus' life exposes you and convicts you. A true encounter with Jesus is not "harmless." When you are confronted with his suffering you see your sin or you feel your scorn.

Jesus can save you no matter what your situation looks like. Jesus can save you no matter what his situation looks like. Do you hear his word of forgiveness today, or will your shouts of scorn continue to drown out the call of divine love? If you hear his voice today, do not harden your heart.

There are only two types of people in the world. All of us are sinners. But some sinners know they need Jesus, and they receive Jesus. And some sinners don't think they need Jesus, and they refuse Jesus. We are all like one of the two thieves on the cross, but which of those will you be?