

“DON'T YOU FEAR GOD?”

Luke 23:39-43

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

Oh, the irony of it all. Here we have spring starting this Sunday, and what did we see today? **SNOW!** But this is Wisconsin and we have all grown to expect something different than what we would think.

Six midweek services ago, we started this Lenten series with the theme: **IRONIES OF THE PASSION**. Webster defines “irony” as *“a situation that is strange because things happen in a way that seems to be the opposite of what you’d expect.”* We saw a tax-collector in the temple so humbled by his sins that he wouldn’t even look up to the heavens, but simply prayed: **“God, have mercy on me.”** We heard Caiaphas say how it’s better that one man die for the people. The Sanhedrin wanted to capture Jesus, but not during the Passover; except that’s exactly the time when God’s plan made it happen. We heard chief priests shout **“we have no king but Caesar”** when the King of the Jews stood before them.

This evening, we examine words from another man that would’ve shocked anyone who knew him. They are tonight’s 6th **IRONY OF THE PASSION:**

“DON'T YOU FEAR GOD?”**1**

This account of the criminal who said these words is well-known, but we still don’t know his name. You know the story: Pilate finally condemned Jesus to be crucified. But **crucifixions took big-time planning** so there usually was a delay between the time of sentencing and when it was finally carried out. But the Jewish leaders wanted Jesus dead that Friday. There were two other criminals on death row waiting for their execution. Since the Romans were going thru all the trouble to crucify Jesus, they figured they might as well execute all three at once.

The blood hardly began dripping when both criminals joined the soldiers’ verbal jabs at Jesus: **“If you are the Christ, save yourself!”** Then one of them railed on him: **“Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”** **“Sure you are the Christ, the mighty miracle-working Messiah!** (Everyone knows that) Here we are hanging on these crosses together. Since you must be the Christ, it’ll be nothing for you to save yourself and us. So put your power where your mouth is and use that miraculous power of yours to save yourself and us!”

Who were these criminals? The Bible doesn’t spell out their crimes, but these were some real bad-guys who would have their faces on a **“MOST-WANTED”** poster. They had a **“rap sheet”** about ½ ream of paper long: **stealing, rebellion, robbery, theft, rape, swindling, cold-blooded murder, resisting arrest, drugs if they had any** – you name it...they probably did it. AND FINALLY, they were doing the time for their crimes; only not in a cell, but on a cross! Needless to say – they were getting what they deserved.

What’s so ironic is that out of the blue w/o warning one of these bad guys scolds the other: **“DON’T YOU FEAR GOD . . . SINCE YOU ARE UNDER THE SAME SENTENCE? WE ARE PUNISHED JUSTLY, FOR WE ARE GETTING WHAT OUR DEEDS DESERVE. BUT THIS MAN HAS DONE NOTHING WRONG.”** (*literally out of place, or improper*) **DON’T YOU FEAR GOD?** Where in the world did that question come from? They were about to die and here this courageous criminal is telling his former partner that he better have every reason to fear God, because as Hebrews 10:31 says: **IT IS A DREADFUL THING TO FALL INTO THE HANDS OF THE LIVING GOD.** This one criminal spoke from a heart that had been converted, a heart that knew he had only a short time to repent and turn to Jesus. This penitent thief shows evidence that he knew his time of grace, short as it was, was nothing to waste at the 11th hour of his life. **DON’T YOU FEAR GOD?** Do you really want to stand face to face with all your sins before **GOD as a JUDGE?** It’s been said that rebuking the impenitent was the **first good work** he did in his life.

How did this criminal come to know his Savior? Most Jews were raised with some religious instruction. This man probably heard some of Jesus’ teaching. He heard Jesus speak on the way to Calvary and even ask God to forgive the soldiers who nailed him to the cross. **At this point, it doesn’t seem like any of it had sunk in.** But as he was hung from a cross, the Holy Spirit worked through the gospel he heard in the synagogue, in the stories about Jesus, and in Jesus’ words and actions that this criminal had heard and seen as he walked with Jesus to the cross. Through that gospel, the Holy Spirit melted his heart and gave him saving faith right there on his own cross. **The Gospel has power-even in the 11th hour!**

God has done the very same thing for you and me. Now it doesn't seem fair to compare you to a hardened criminal. But when you look at this man dying, don't you see yourself? The greatest lie of our age is that we're good people by nature. Our culture believes that there's a little good in all of us. If there are really bad people out there, they are limited to child molesters and drug dealers.

But you know what? It's all an illusion. Even though we've managed to keep from murdering anyone, we've all hated someone. We've all wanted them to get what we think they have coming. And 1 John says: **Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.** {1 Jn 3:15} Even though we may never have stolen anything, we've been lazy at work. We've been envious of what other people have or do. We've resented the perception that God is more generous to other people than to us? Those sins of the heart are just as evil to God as the sins of these criminals. We are all robbers and murderers at heart. The sin in our hearts contaminates everything we say and do. We are just as guilty as these men were, and we deserve the death and the hell that they deserved.

However, God has been every bit as generous to us as he was to that criminal. Jesus crumbled up all our rap sheets of hatred and murder, greed and robbery, envy and self-righteousness, pride and conceit. His blood deleted them off our records. The same Holy Spirit worked through that same gospel to give us the same faith in our dying Savior as this dying criminal had. We will not stand before the **JUDGE** with our sins because as 1 John says again: **the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.** {1 Jn 1:7} Paul writes: **There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.** {Rom 8:1}

2

Obviously, this man knew he was dying. Do you ever wonder how you will feel and what you'll say if you know exactly when you are going to die? I pray it shows the faith that says, **"DON'T YOU FEAR GOD?"** NO, because **I'm a dying Christian who trusts in God.**

Crucifixion was a horrible way to die. It was unbearably painful. Thirst tortured them. They were exposed to heat and cold. And many times it took days to die. But after hours of hanging on the cross, each breath got harder to take. Slowly, their lungs filled with water, so each breath took less oxygen. They had to work harder to breathe but eventually, they couldn't bring in oxygen fast enough, so they literally suffocated to death.

From the moment it all started, this criminal knew what he was in for. In all his pain, he found strength and comfort in Christ. He didn't ask to be rescued so he could promise to turn over a new leaf. He didn't ask Jesus to spare him the pain. He only asked: **"JESUS, REMEMBER ME WHEN YOU COME INTO YOUR KINGDOM."** *Don't overlook me. Don't pass me by and shut me out.* His prayer **asked for pardon** for his sins and **the opportunity to share** in the joys of heaven. Jesus' responded, **"TRULY I TELL YOU, TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE."** That very day he would go home. He would be with Christ in the greatest joy of eternal life. And as this new Christian hung dying on his cross, the promise of the gospel assured him that he would live in the perfect paradise of glory. How ironic: **who would ever expect a man in this desperate situation to witness to Christ?**

God does wonderful things even in our darkest moments. We all have our crosses. There is **so much pain in this life** – that's why it is called the **"vale of tears"**. God never promised us that we would never experience the trials of this life.

But he did promise to limit our crosses to no more than what we can stand. He did promise to give us the strength we need to endure them. He did promise that on the day our lives end, we will see him as he is. So **DON'T YOU FEAR GOD? DON'T YOU STAND IN AWE OF HIS LOVE & MERCY?** For one day we will hear those words: **TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE.** That's not irony – that's reality!

So when **TODAY** comes, may we be found ready to enter those mansions Jesus has prepared for us. May we **be faithful until death when Jesus will give us the crown of life.** Trust him for your crown.....today and always. **Amen.**