**A Pilgrimage of Hope: A Promise for Today**

**Luke 23:32-43**

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Two thousand years ago, an angry mob persuaded Pilate to release Barabbas and to deliver Jesus to be crucified. Jesus and two others were led just outside the city of Jerusalem to a place called Golgotha – the Skulls Rock. There, on three crosses, these three were put to death. We usually fix our attention upon one cross – the one on which Jesus hung. On that day people who passed by saw three crosses – three men being crucified.

I was reading a commentary on our passage, which made the point that in some respects, the three crosses are alike. All three men suffered agonizing pain, raging thirst, and shame. On one cross we see a man dying in his sin, another dying to his sin, and Jesus dying for our sin.

First, however, we must make note that today is Palm Sunday (if you haven’t noticed by now). This is a fun day in the life of the church. It is sort of like party day. Let’s have a parade. Let’s shout and holler because there is one among us who we believe to be the messiah. This Jesus has been teaching and healing and performing miracles. He’s doing things we haven’t seen before. Surely this is the one whom God anoints to free us from our bondage. And today we are marching into the den of our oppressors and we are excited because Jesus is going to show them what’s what.

You remember John Crossan and Marcus Borg’s take on this. It was a day of contrasting parades. While Jesus and his followers were coming into Jerusalem from the east, from Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, and perhaps coming into Jerusalem through the Eastern Gate (which you saw a picture of last week taken from the Garden of Gethsemane), there were columns of Roman soldiers coming in from the west. The Romans made sure there were a few extra cohorts in Jerusalem during high holy days such as Passover just to “keep the peace.” Crossan and Borg comment that Jesus rides in on a donkey, which is a symbol of humility and true peace, while the Romans rode in on great steeds decked in armor representing false peace by power, authority and control.

But for a moment, the Jesus crowd was having their day.

We have been on a Pilgrimage of Hope this Lenten season. Those who were following Jesus into Jerusalem that day probably had not experienced as much hope in their lives as they had at that moment. If Jesus is the Messiah, today is going to be a game-changer. Unfortunately, the common understanding of Messiah wasn’t too different than what was happening on the west side of the city. The common thought is that the Messiah would vanquish the oppressors with sword and spear and take back the power and authority. The Messiah would come, mighty in battle and again rule from the throne of David.

From this side of the death and resurrection of Jesus, we understand that the battle isn’t with arms of war, nor is it for power and authority. It is for the hearts of humanity, where God’s kingdom is not a temporal rule, but a community of spirit. Paul states in Galatians that it is governed by love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. That is a realm in which Christians can live in spite of who their earthly king is.

So we have been walking this Pilgrimage of Hope this Lent by stepping through some of the Stations of the Cross. There are fourteen stations in the modern version, and we only have had time to highlight four of them. It is hard to find hope in the Stations of the Cross in and of themselves, because by definition they highlight the cruelty and injustice of the day. It’s only from our vantage point – post resurrection – which we can begin to understand how the way of the cross has become a means of hope and salvation. For there in the injustice and the suffering do we truly see the way God wishes to move in and through our lives with love, and joy, and peace, and forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. God is in battle for our hearts where the one that is most honored is the lowliest among us, and who lives to serve through the forbearance of God’s love and grace.

This takes us to Station 11 and our Scripture lesson for today. It is interesting that when you see renditions of Jesus’ crucifixion, very often it is Jesus alone hanging on a cross. It is also true as you drive around you often come across three crosses in a field, or in front of a church as a testament to the fact that all four Gospels tell us that there were three men crucified that day.

Crucifixion was a gruesome and public display. The Romans made sure that crucifixion took place on a main thoroughfare going in and out of the city. The whole point wasn’t just to punish a bad person. It was meant to be a deterrent to anyone who might want to oppose Roman rule. “This is what will happen to you, if you dare threaten Rome.”

I remember my father-in-law, Keith Pohl, many years ago when he was the editor of the Michigan Christian Advocate, wrote an editorial about how we do capital punishment wrong. If it is to be effective and a deterrent to committing violent crimes, then we have to take it out of the backrooms of prisons and get it out into the public. Being a good alum of U of M, he even suggested that we do it right in the middle of the Big House, right down in the middle of the field. Sell tickets to the event. Televise it for all to see.

He received several nasty letters for even suggesting such a thing. They didn’t catch that it was written tongue-in-cheek. They didn’t catch the sarcasm that, of course, a civilized society wouldn’t do such a thing. If that is true, why are we doing it at all? But that is what Rome did. Pax Roma was peace by threats, bullying, and intimidation. Contrast that with Christ’s peace: love, joy, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

So Jesus is crucified with two others according to all four Gospels. Matthew and Mark call them robbers and from the perch on their crosses, they join the crowd that gathers in making fun of Jesus, the savior who can’t even save himself.

The Gospel of John just says that he was crucified with two others. No more elaboration than that.

Luke calls them criminals, but they are very different. One joins in with the crowd that derides Jesus, and perhaps is looking for a way out. “Are you not the Christ?” he calls out. “Save yourself and us too!” Even while he is hanging on the cross he doesn’t grasp his depravity, or try to make amends for his crimes. He is a man dying in his sin.

The other takes a more contrite approach. His eyes are opened and he is aware of how he failed himself and those around him. His crucifixion is a calculated outcome of the choices that he has made in life. He succumbs to the reality of his situation. In his understanding, this is what he deserves.

In his grief, in his frustration, perhaps in his newfound self-understanding he calls back to the other criminal to shut up. “We deserve what we are getting. This man has done nothing wrong and yet he suffers the same consequences we do. That is the tragedy that is happening here.”

Where the first criminal is man dying in his sin, this criminal is a man dying to his sin. And if you will allow me to editorialize, he looks up to Jesus and says, “I am not sure who and what you are, but I have seen you and I have seen me. I wish to more like you. Remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

And Jesus responds with perhaps the most intriguing thing in Scripture. “Today you will be with me in Paradise.”

I wonder if Luke doesn’t purposefully set up this dialogue with Jesus and the criminals to help us know that we have a choice in life. To continue to live with hard hearts always seeking to take and abuse, like the first criminal, or to acknowledge the depravity in which we live and seek the spirit of Jesus. The latter doesn’t necessarily make life easy and comfortable. But it does make it satisfying and joyful. It gives us purpose beyond what this world can offer.

I don’t know if any of you caught Fresh Air this last Tuesday on NPR. It was actually a repeat. I had heard it before. Terri Gross had on Rhiannon Giddens who is a singer/songwriter. On her latest solo album, *Freedom Highway*, she has a song *“At The Purchaser’s Option.”* An eerie song of what it must have been like to be a black, woman slave who could be bought and sold. The refrain in the song says:

*You can take my body; you can take my bones; you can take my blood, but not my soul.*

Jesus was in battle for our souls. What was won on the cross that day isn’t that our circumstances will change. Rather, in Christ, our circumstances do not need to define us. The hard truth that Christians often need to confront is that salvation does not mean life becomes comfortable or easy. It doesn’t mean we won’t experience tragedy or life-threatening illness. It doesn’t mean we won’t experience hurt and grief. It doesn’t mean that we will magically stumble on the resources we need to live the life-style we desire. What it means is that today we can begin living in Paradise, because our spirits are freed in Christ to reside in the graceful walls of God’s love and acceptance. The world can take everything else from us, but not our souls.

There were three men crucified on that day. One died in his sin. One died to his sin. One died for our sin. The choice is still ours. Today, will we choose to live in Paradise?