

Luke 23:27-43 And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. But turning to them Jesus said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us,’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And they cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!” The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “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.” And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise

The Word of the Lord from Luke 23: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.” This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

I. Eden and Golgotha

What does the Garden of Eden have to do with the Place of the Skull? Could there be any two places more unlike each other?

On the one hand, the Garden of Eden. God created the heavens and the earth, and the pinnacle of that creation was man, Adam and Eve. He created them in His own image, and He placed them in the Garden of Eden for their home. He called the entire creation “good,” and “good” to God means “perfect” and “holy.” You’ve seen the pictures and paintings, I’m sure: man and woman in the beautiful garden, surrounded by lush vegetation and all sorts of animals. All of that is well and good, but that’s only the start. The best part of the Garden of Eden is that God is with man. They’re dwelling in peace. There’s no sin, there’s nothing to separate man from God. There’s no restlessness, no fear, no trouble in the Garden, because God and man are at peace. It’s Paradise. In fact, it is Paradise, literally. “Paradise” originally meant “garden,” specifically the Garden of Eden. No trouble, no pain, no sickness, no DNA malfunctions, no cancer, no heart disease, no threat of death; because man is at peace with God, and God dwells with man.

It's a far cry from Golgotha. That's the name of the hill outside Jerusalem, used by the Romans for crucifixion. Far from a garden of life, it's a hill of death: Golgotha means "The Skull." That's the location of the Gospel lesson today, and it's a long way from the Garden of Eden. About the only thing the two places have in common is that God and man are there together. But they're far from dwelling in peace. The Son of God—God Himself—has become man in order to save His people, and man has elected to put God to death on a cross. Fear, restlessness, pain, evil, anger...it's all evident on Golgotha as man kills God at the place of The Skull.

What do the places have in common? Man is there, but man at Golgotha is corrupted by sin, so much so that he wants the Lord dead and gone. Creation is fallen too: there's none of that peace of Eden. There is sickness, leprosy, blindness, fear, pain, suffering and all the rest. There is only One who hasn't changed: the one thing in common with both places is that God is there; and although He is there dying on a cross, He is still there to serve mankind, to give life to all who will receive it.

Nothing looks more hopeful than the Garden of Eden. Nothing might appear to be more hopeless than the place of The Skull, but there you would be wrong. Wherever the Lord is, there is hope, because the Lord is there to give grace and life and hope.

You see it and rejoice when you hear the thief on the cross. The rulers scoff at Jesus, the soldiers mock Him and even the other dying robber uses precious breath to rail at Jesus. But in the midst of the malice and the darkness, the other thief rebukes his fellow criminal, and listen to the words: "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 for our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." These aren't the words of a despairing man. They're the first part of a godly confession of faith: "We are condemned, and it is a just sentence because of our sin." Furthermore, he has a right understanding of Jesus: "This man has done nothing wrong"—he declares Jesus to be righteous, holy. But then comes the really good stuff, the confession of faith: "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." Make no mistake: that's faith, trusting in what he does not see. Jesus doesn't look like a king on His way to a kingdom: He looks like a bloodied criminal on His way to the Potter's Field. But even so, the thief makes this faithful confession: "You are the King. You're on Your way to Your kingdom, and I trust that—if it is Your will— You will remember me."

And what does Jesus say to the thief? "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise." There is so much good packed into that one little sentence! "You will be with Me" where? In Paradise. And what does "Paradise" mean? "Garden," as in "Garden of Eden," perfect creation. Jesus tells the thief on the cross, "This place of the The Skull is not your end, and neither is hell. Neither is the pain, the anguish, the hatred and the death. Neither is the mess of a person that you made yourself in this world. I became flesh, and I am on this cross, to conquer the sin that corrupted Eden. I am here to reverse the curse of sin. I'm bearing your sins on My shoulders here, and I am suffering God's judgment for them. Because I die for the sins of this world today, I will raise you up to life. You will be with Me in Paradise, because you will be with me where there is no sin and death. It will not be long from now. I will raise you up today." And what does the thief have to do to get to Paradise? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Jesus simply says,

"You will be with me—I forgive your sins." By speaking, Jesus gives the man eternal life and the faith to believe in the promise.

That's what the Garden of Eden and the place of The Skull have in common. The Lord is there, giving and sustaining life. Golgotha is a tipping point between heaven and hell. Unrepentant sinners demand that God be gone—they demand so much to be forsaken that they'll put Him to death to do it. But the Lord says, "I am faithful. I will not forsake My promises!" That's why He prays on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." That's why, even in His terrible anguish, He still absolves the thief, because He has come and is on the cross so that He might forgive.

It's what makes this such a great Gospel lesson for the final Sunday of the church year, where the theme is that the end of the world is coming and Christ is coming back in glory: no matter how much the world might forsake Christ, He remains faithful to His promises—and He will to the Last.

Today back in my home congregation –St. John Ev. Lutheran in Palmer, it's a busy day or at least a busy service. In addition to the service of the Word and service of the Supper, they are experiencing the joy of seeing Emma Meier being joined to Christ – Emma is being baptized—my daughter is her sponsor. About right now, Emma, who is about 5 days old is being washed by God, cleansed and then His promise is given to her. He says "You are my child, I join you to my Son, I wash you clean and I claim you as mine." This is what the Church is to be about until the Last Day, because this is what the Church has in common with both the Garden of Eden and the place of The Skull: the Lord Jesus Christ is present here, and He is present to forgive sins—to welcome people into the kingdom of God.

We know the Lord is here because the Lord promises to be here, and He tells us exactly where He is: He is present in His means of grace. So perhaps it is best that we let the means of grace do most of the preaching today.

The Lord is present in Holy Baptism: He says so in Romans 6, where it says that in Baptism He joins us to His own death and resurrection; and in Titus 3, where He says that it is the Holy Spirit who does the washing and regenerating there. By water and the Word today, He is saying to Emma—as he said to each one of you at your baptism: "I've died for you so that you don't have to die for your sin. I'm adopting you into My family, and I'm writing your name in My book of life. I will be faithful to you all the days of your life; and no matter what happens to you in this crazy world, I will remember you. And unless you forsake Me and would rather I be gone, I promise you that you will be with Me in Paradise." Same Jesus as Garden and Golgotha. Same grace for sinners in need of salvation. That's what is happening right now to Emma.

Don't forget: that's why the service began with the Invocation—"In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." We sometimes pay little attention to those words, but they are very important. Those words say that all the power and might of almighty God stands behind what is said and done here. He has charged His Ambassador with proclaiming His Truth and Administering His Gifts you. And His Power and might stands behind them. Remember, You were baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost; and what began there continues here. The Lord declares, "In baptism, I gave you new life; and by My Word this day, I continue to sustain that

new life." And so what happens next in the service is what happened with the thief on the cross. We confess our sins—with that robber, we confess to God that we justly deserve His temporal and eternal judgment for our sins. But we also ask for forgiveness: with the thief, we pray, "Remember us when You come into Your kingdom." Then the pastor speaks Jesus' words to you. They're not his own: they're what Jesus tells pastors to say to you. "I forgive you all of your sins." In other words, "Because Christ has died for you, you will be with Him in Paradise."

Soon, we move from sermon to Supper. There, says Jesus, He gives you His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. It's His body and blood that was put on the cross at the place of The Skull. It's His body and blood that rose again and ascended into heaven. In the Supper, for those prepared and penitent, He gives you His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. And if you are forgiven, then Paradise is yours.

That's what the Church is to be about until the Last Day does come. All the world is Golgotha in the sense that the world wants Jesus gone. But for the sake of all who will believe, Jesus is faithful. He remains present in His Word and Sacraments to forgive sins, to give life everlasting. That's why the message of the Church is not to change until the Lord returns again, for the message is, "Here is grace! Here is life! Here is restoration and the curse of sin reversed! You are not forsaken, but for Jesus' sake you will be with Him in Paradise—because you are forgiven for all of your sins."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen