

Luke 23:39-43

April 19, 2019

“I Tell You the Truth...

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church

Today You Will Be With Me in Paradise”

Rev. Brent Hartwig

Good Friday

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God, our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen! Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

[Introduction]

The apartment building is about to collapse, but a child is still trapped in his third-story bedroom. The fire chief has ordered everyone out. On the edge of the yard stands the firefighter who is a father of four. He stares at the flames and then slowly turns his head to the mom who is crying uncontrollably as she is held back by the police. Will the firefighter rush in, risking his own life and perhaps orphaning his own children to save this child? ***It's the moment of truth.***

You've dated for three years, surviving your share of challenges along the way and coming out stronger in the end. You saved up two-months' worth of salary, became an expert on the four c's, and bought the ideal-cut sparkling diamond. With sweaty palms and fidgety fingers you reach into your pocket for that tiny box, drop to a knee, and ask the life-changing question. Will she say, “Yes”? ***It's the moment of truth.***

You haven't been feeling well as of late. After a recent visit to the doctor and numerous tests administered, the nurse calls and says the doctor would like to meet with you. After what seems an eternity in the waiting room, you finally get called back to a room. After another lengthy wait, the white-coated specialist finally opens the door and sits down on the rolling stool next to you. What's the report? ***It's the moment of truth.***

[Promise of today]

We've all had them.

Those crucial moments, those critical or decisive times on which much depends.

With bated breath we wait and wait as our lives seem to hang in the balance during a moment of truth.

Yet there is no moment of truth greater than when our very lives hang in the balance.

Such was the case with the criminal whom we see hanging on the cross today.
He is about to die.
As his life flashes before his eyes this Friday afternoon,
 he's not too happy with what he's seen.
The movie of his life would receive an "R" rating for violence and language.
 He knows the nails through his hands were pounded with a hammer of justice.
 He knows the burn in his collapsing lungs was ignited by the fairness of the law.

"We are getting what we deserve," he said.
 But it wasn't the burn in his lungs
 or the blood trickling down his arm
 that brought him to his moment of truth
 as he hung suspended on Golgatha.
It was the "What happens next?
 What happens when I die?"
 And so he asks, he pleads to the One hanging next to him,
 "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

I don't know how much time elapsed between
the desperate request and the divine response.
But no matter whether it was minutes or seconds,
imagine the anguish the criminal felt as he tuned his ears toward the center cross.
Imagine the anguish he felt during this moment of truth.
"Will Jesus remember me?"

Then imagine the relief when he heard these words,
 "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."
Every single word of that sentence lifted the criminal's soul.
 "Today," Jesus said.
 Today you will be with me.
 For someone who sat on death row for who knows how long,
 for someone who had just begun
 one of the slowest forms of execution
 —one that could extend three or four days—
How comforting that element of time must have been for this criminal.
 Before the sun would rise again,
 this man could be assured his suffering would be done.

The promises you and I make to one another come with conditions. *If* this happens, *then* that will happen. *Perhaps* we'll visit there. *Someday* I'm going to do that.

Jesus' promise of relief to this repentant sinner was not in the form of an if/then clause.
Nor was it preceded by a "perhaps" or a "someday."

It wasn't a next month, a next week, or even a tomorrow, but a today.
Through faith, this criminal could be assured his suffering would be over today.

When we're lying on our own deathbeds, Jesus says the same.

For the one who looks to Calvary's center cross,
death is not just the end of breath. It's the end of suffering.
No more hunger. No more pain. No more tears.
No more guilt. No more anger. No more envy.
No more sin . . . today.

[Promise of companionship]

And that's only the tip of the iceberg.

Find comfort in Jesus' other words: "*You will be **with me.***"

Jesus' promise is not just a promise of time. It's a promise of companionship.

Imagine what that meant for this criminal.

More than likely, a life of crime did not land him in the nicest company of people.

Now, in the waning hours of his life, he saw people at their worst.

As the passersby spit on him and shook their heads in disgust,
scorning him with their words and their glares,

imagine how emotionally deserted this criminal must have felt.

That was part of the punishment of crucifixion.

Not only was it physically tormenting,

it was embarrassing and shaming as you were hung naked
along the busiest street

so that others could heap their insults on you.

But as much as this criminal wanted to escape the people around him,

there was something that drew him to the man pinned on his left.

There was something different about this thorn-crowned criminal.

Something that made him different than the soldiers and the scorners.

There was something about him that made him different than the other criminals.

Instead of cursing as the nails were driven through his hands,

Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them."

Instead of the charges that convicted him to death being hung over his head,

a statement of conviction, power, and fulfillment

hung over Jesus' head:

"Jesus of Nazareth, The King of the Jews."

The differences between Jesus and everyone else on that hill were like oil and water, black and white, night and day. It was the difference between sin and perfection.

And the Holy Spirit used Jesus as the living Word of God
to work on this criminal's heart
so that instead of wanting to run away from God in fear of punishment,
he was drawn by his grace.

And Jesus assures the criminal,
Jesus promises, "You will be *with me*." Not behind me. But *with me*.
Jesus' forgiveness is so complete
that it allows us to be in the very presence of perfection.

[Conclusion]

But how do you know this is what's in store for you? When you're on your deathbed, experiencing your "moment of truth," how do you know that very day you'll be with Jesus in paradise?

Don't lose sight of Jesus' words we've been looking at all Lent:
"I tell you the truth." Those are the English words.

Do you know how it is translated into Hebrew?
It's the universal word *amen*.
Jesus' "amen" for you, Jesus' "Yes, this shall be so" is
"Today you will be with me in paradise."

He left no room for doubt about whether or not that thief would be in heaven.
And he makes it clear for you!

Today Jesus makes it clear that when that moment comes,
it doesn't matter what we've done in the past, for Jesus has said "Amen.
Today you will be with me in paradise."
To that, let all God's people say, "Amen."

REJOICE always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. AMEN! (1 Thess. 5:16–18)
