

Midweek Lent – St. Matthew 27:38-44
March 22, 2023 | King of Grace Lutheran Church, Waukon
March 29, 2023 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

Sermons Preached by Jesus' Enemies:
Chief Priests: "He saved others; He cannot save Himself."

In Nomine Iesu

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St. Matthew 27:38-44

Then two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and one on the left. And those who passed by derided Him, wagging their heads and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross." So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked Him, saying, "He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in Him. He trusts in God; let God deliver Him now, if He desires Him. For He said, 'I am the Son of God.'" And the robbers who were crucified with Him also reviled Him in the same way. ^(ESV)

Merciful God, heavenly Father, we give You most hearty thanks that You have removed from us the grievous burden of our sins and placed it upon Your dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ; and we humbly ask You, govern us by Your Holy Spirit, that we may comfort ourselves with His suffering and death in the face of all temptations, diligently guard against sin and an evil conscience, and finally obtain eternal salvation; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (*The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 101)

In Christ Jesus, the sinless One, who for our sake was made to be sin by His Father, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God (2Co. 5:21), dear fellow redeemed:

"If You are the Son of God." Jesus had heard those words before. The devil said them when Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights in the wilderness. Jesus had just begun His public work which would lead Him to His death outside Jerusalem. *"If You are the Son of God,"* the devil said, "why do You feel so hungry right now? Why not throw Yourself off the temple and let the angels catch You? Or maybe You aren't the Son of God after all!" (Mat. 4:1-11).

Now as He hung on the cross, the same abusive words came at Jesus from all sides. *"If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross."* *"Save Yourself!"* "Let God deliver You from this suffering, if He really thinks You are worth saving." They mocked Him, speaking blasphemous words about Him. They jeered at Him, made fun of Him, laughed at Him.

Is that how you would treat someone who was fighting for your life? Would you verbally abuse the person trying to save you from a burning building, or the person who jumped in to defend you from an attacker? Would you laugh at him? Mock him? That's what was happening at the cross. Jesus was hanging there out of love for the very people who spouted these hateful words at Him. He was there to save their souls, and they despised Him.

This didn't surprise Jesus. The surprising thing is that the Jewish chief priests, scribes, and elders were so ignorant of the Scriptures they claimed to know. The very words they hurled at Jesus had been prophesied more than a thousand years before then. Listen for yourself to these words recorded by King David in Psalm 22 which clearly describe Jesus' suffering on the cross: *"But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads; 'He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him!'"* (vv. 6-8).

What the religious leaders said about Jesus at the cross is word-for-word what God said they would say. But they did not recognize it. They thought they were with God by being against Jesus. But they were with the devil. They were parroting the words of the "father of lies." Through their mouths, the devil was tempting Jesus to give up His suffering, to abandon His mission.

"[L]et Him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in Him," they said. And why shouldn't Jesus do this? Think of the powerful impact it would have. If all of a sudden the nails popped out, and Jesus floated down to the earth, how could the crowds deny who He was? But not even this would have convinced them. How many miracles had these people seen Him perform? Just a few weeks before this, they witnessed Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead. In their mocking words, they even admitted He had done these things: *"He saved others,"* they said, but *"He cannot save Himself."*

They thought His suffering on the cross was proof that He was not the Son of God. But in fact the opposite was true. Jesus stayed on the cross not because He had no power to save Himself. He stayed on the cross because it was the only way to save sinners. Jesus could agree with what they said, *"He saved others; He cannot save Himself."* If He was going to save others, He could not save Himself. In order to save others, He had to die in their place.

Jesus' cross is planted right in the middle of human history. On one side of Him stand all the people of Old Testament times, from Adam to John the Baptizer. On the other side of Him stand all the people of the New Testament, from the apostles to you and me and everyone who will come after us. We all look upon Jesus—one Man before billions, one Man against the world, the Holy One surrounded by sinners.

We should come to His defense. We should own our sins. We should admit our wrongs. But instead we join the chief priests, scribes, and elders. We spit insults at Jesus. We mock Him. We laugh at Him. That is what we have done by our life of sin. We put Jesus on the cross. We caused His suffering.

And He willingly accepted it. He obeyed His Father's will to become the scapegoat for all us straying sheep, to become the "fall guy" for us fallen sinners. God the Father knew what He was sending His Son to do. He knew how terrible the anguish and affliction would be, how ruthlessly He would be treated by those He came to save. But He would not let the people of the world go to hell without contending for their souls. He would send His Son on a rescue mission to redeem them.

This was the Father's will, and His Son submitted Himself to it. Isaiah writes that *"it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief"* (53:10). God the Father forsook His Son instead of forsaking you. Jesus suffered the torments of hell, crying out, *"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"* so you never would. He endured taunting, mockery, and laughter at the cross, so your ears would be spared these demonic words which echo constantly and eternally through hell. You deserved this suffering, but Jesus endured it for you.

Jesus is the true focus of our Lenten series—not His enemies. They were ignorant tools, manipulated by the devil, who was in turn manipulated by God to carry out His holy plan. It does us no good to vent our anger toward the Jews or the Romans for their treatment of Jesus. Jesus had to suffer and He had to die if you were going to be saved. He could not come down from that cross. He could not save Himself. He stayed there and suffered for your forgiveness, to win eternal life for you.

As the hymnwriter says:

What Thou, my Lord, hast suffered
Was all for sinners' gain:
Mine, mine was the transgression,
But Thine the deadly pain:
Lo, here I fall, my Savior!
'Tis I deserve Thy place;
Look on me with Thy favor,
Vouchsafe to me Thy grace.

What language shall I borrow
To thank Thee, dearest Friend,
For this, Thy dying sorrow,
Thy pity without end?
O make me Thine forever!
And should I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never,
Outlive my love for Thee. *Amen.*
(*Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* #335, vv. 4, 6)

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