

Midweek Lent – St. Luke 23:39-43

March 11, 2026 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

March 18, 2026 | King of Grace Lutheran Church, Waukon

Witnesses of Christ's Passion: The Thief

In Nomine Iesu

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St. Luke 23:39-43

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at [Jesus], 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." ^(ESV)

Greatly to be praised are You, Lord Jesus, for everything! Greatly to be praised because You took the thief, the *thief* with You from *the cross to paradise*! Sentenced to death, You took the one sentenced to death out of death and led him in triumph to heaven. Grant us also by Your grace true repentance and living faith, and take us to Yourself in paradise, when our time comes. Help us now, today to seek and find You in the true words of grace. Amen. (*Book of Family Prayer*, p. 255)

In Christ Jesus, who "*was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors*" (*Isa. 53:12*), dear fellow redeemed:

At the time of the Passover in Jerusalem, it had become the custom that the Roman governor would release one prisoner of the people's choosing. In an attempt to get Jesus released, Pontius Pilate chose to put opposite Him a notorious prisoner named Barabbas (Mat. 27:16). Barabbas had taken part in some sort of insurrection in the city and had murdered someone (Mar. 15:7). The choice should have been obvious: Jesus who had healed people of sicknesses, fed the multitudes, and raised people from the dead, or the rebel Barabbas, a murderer.

But the chief priests and elders stirred up the crowd and persuaded the people to ask for Barabbas to be freed and Jesus to be condemned (Mat. 27:20, Mar. 15:11). So that's what happened. Jesus was sentenced to die on the cross, and Barabbas went free. There were other rebels in prison who weren't as fortunate as Barabbas. Two of these, whom the Gospels call "robbers" and "criminals," were led away with Jesus to be crucified. We don't know exactly what their crimes were, but they could have taken part in the insurrection along with Barabbas.

In today's reading, one of the criminals hanging next to Jesus did not dispute the sentence he had received. When the other criminal hurled vile insults and blasphemies at Jesus, the first one rebuked his associate, 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.*" That is a surprising statement. It is not often that someone admits his wrong.

We know how crucial it is that people tell the truth. And yet our natural inclination is to avoid punishment by lying to get out of trouble or by passing the blame on to someone else. We have

done this since we first started to form words and maybe even before. "Did you do what you weren't supposed to? Did you take that? Did you break that?" We shook our head "no," even though the truth was "yes." We also learned that the punishment for lying is worse than for telling the truth.

The more we practice deceit or pointing our fingers at others, the more hardened our conscience becomes. We begin to see everything we do as justifiable and right, and everything others do as wrong. This is the height of pride and self-centeredness. The second criminal is a picture of this. He railed at Jesus, "*Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!*" There was no remorse, no self-reflection. Jesus had come to save him, too; He was hanging on the cross for that man's sins, but he would not see it. Since he would not own up to his sins, he could not see his Savior.

The first criminal saw things differently. The rapid approach of his death had clarified his thinking. Perhaps he thought about how he had forsaken the Scriptural instruction of his youth, how he had pursued a course of wrongdoing, how he had grieved his parents, family members, and friends, how he had thrown it all away because of his selfishness.

He also saw Jesus, how "*He was despised and rejected by men,*" how "*like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth*" (Isa. 53:3,7). He saw how "*[w]hen he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly*" (1Pe. 2:23). He saw how Jesus did not struggle against those who nailed Him to the cross, but said, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*" (Luk. 23:34).

How could this be? How could a Man suffer like this? The mockers and revilers in the crowd derisively called Him the Christ. "*He saved others; he cannot save himself,*" they said. "*Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe*" (Mar. 15:31-32). These were temptations straight from the devil. At the beginning of Jesus' public work, the devil tempted Him to forego suffering: "*If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.... If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down*" (Mat. 4:3,6). But Jesus stayed the course.

Because He was the Christ, He would not come down from the cross. He had to be there. He had to bear the sins of the whole world and pay the eternal penalty for them, or no one could be saved. And by the grace of God, the first criminal believed. He believed that as He looked at the bruised and swollen face of Jesus, with thorns driven into His head, blood dripping from His wounds, breath coming with great difficulty and pain – that He was looking at the face of God incarnate.

Could he dare to hope that the Lord would be merciful, that even in these last moments, He would look upon this poor sinner and forgive his sins? With anguished, heartfelt cries, he said and kept saying, "*Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.*" Now I want you to picture this man as one of the most wicked people in history. Could that person's sins be forgiven? Or imagine that it is someone who has wronged you, that frankly you cannot stand, whom you might even think of as your enemy. Could God forgive him or her?

Or imagine that the criminal hanging next to Jesus is you. Would you admit that you had sinned, that you were hanging there justly, receiving the due reward of your deeds? Would you dare to think that Jesus would have mercy on you, since it was your sins that put Him on the cross, a Man who had done nothing wrong? The statement of the thief is a great test case. Would Jesus

just ignore him? Would He throw the man's words back in his face with the condemnation he deserved?

Jesus said to him, *"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise."* *"Truly—Amen—I say to you—this is certain; the gates of hell shall not prevail against it (Mat. 16:18)—, today—even this day of torment and suffering, this day of darkness and dread, even this day—you will be with Me in paradise.* You will see Me, not with a crown of thorns but with a crown of glory. You will be with Me where death is no more, where there is neither mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore" (Rev. 21:4).

That is His answer for your troubled conscience, for your doubt about whether He loves you and forgives the wrongs that you have done. Will He remember you and bring you into His kingdom? "Amen, Amen" He says, "Yes, yes, it shall be so." Jesus died for you too. Jesus paid for your sins, including your pride and self-centeredness, the times you were deceitful and put the blame on others.

There is no need for self-righteousness because He is your righteousness. He lived the perfect life that counts before God. Your righteousness is in Him, by faith in Him. Covered in that righteousness and cleansed by His blood, none of your wrongdoing or crimes stick to you. You are forgiven. And that is why, when your earthly end is near and your breath becomes shallow, Jesus' beautiful words will apply to you as well, *"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise."*

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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