Kingdom or Paradise?

A Meditation on Luke 23: 33 – 43

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church November 24, 2019

Close your eyes for a moment and rest with this word: “paradise.” What do you see? What do you feel? What do you hear? What can you taste and touch and smell in paradise? Paradise may be a warm beach when you need a vacation, or an overflowing table when you are hungry. Paradise may be that place where you are surrounded by love.

Paradise. “*Today*,” Jesus says to a criminal who is dying beside him, “you will be with me in paradise.” I wonder what that man imagined when he heard those words. As he was being tortured and executed, beside two others, what could he imagine awaited him?

Today is the last day of our church year. It is a calendar unlike any other for it is oriented around anticipation. Next Sunday a new year begins, and we start the journey towards a stable, in search of the Christ child. But just in case we might forget what awaits that vulnerable infant, we return to the cross today. We haven’t been here since Good Friday, and let’s be honest: we’d rather not stop here at all. Ever. It’s a brutal place. A place of torture and execution. A public shaming. Not unlike the lynchings our culture has witnessed.

We go to this place, the place of the skull, with Jesus today. We go because we must be reminded what kind of king we serve, and what type of reign he claims, for he is unlike any king the world has known and his realm is like no other. Here is how we know: even in the midst of excruciating physical pain and emotional, psychological and religious abuse, his focus never wavered. Even in the face of death, even as he was birthed from this world to the next, he continued to labor for the world’s reconciliation and salvation.

How Jesus could think about anything other than surviving from one breath to the next is a mystery, but even as those around him sought to dehumanize him, he sought to redeem them. “Father,” Jesus says, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.”

* When they crucified me…they did not know what they were doing.
* When they gambled over my clothes, my worn out, secondhand clothes, they did not know what they were doing.
* When they stood around watching as if this were a public holiday, they did not know what they were doing.
* When the leaders scoffed and taunted me, saying, “Save yourself, Messiah!” They did not know what they were doing.
* When the soldiers mocked and hung a sign over the cross, “King of the Jews,” they did not know what they were doing.
* When one criminal derided me, even as we were both dying, he did not know what he was doing.

How generous of you, Jesus. How amazingly generous of you to say that none of them knew what they were doing. How like you to go to God on their behalf and ask for God’s forgiveness. To ask God to forgive your tormentors and torturers. We can’t even begin to comprehend a love like that.

So time for a “*Come to Jesus*” meeting with Jesus. Here we go…Jesus, who do you think you’re kidding? They *did* know what they were doing. You know it and God knows it and all of us who have read your story know it.

* Those who condemned you to death knew they were part of a corrupt system, no matter how many ways they attempted to justify their decisions. They tossed the responsibility around like a game of “hot potato,” but they knew they were involved in something that was dirty and shameful.
* The ones who nailed you to that cross, who witnessed your pain, they had to know, deep in their souls, that torture is wrong regardless of what the political powers say. They certainly knew that forcing one human being to torture another is wrong. And so they were abused as well.
* The ones who played a game with your robe and sandals, they knew that humiliating someone is wrong. They knew that laughing at someone as they face death is a horrific thing to do. They knew.
* The ones who threw your words back in your face, people who were respected in society and in the synagogue, what more did they have to gain? They knew their words were cruel.
* Even the condemned man who hung beside you and mocked you, he knew what he was doing. Were they words spoken from shame and fear and horrific suffering? Yes, absolutely, and maybe he regretted them. He knew he was wrong.

They – knew - what – they – were - doing. They might not have understood, or couldn’t believe who they were doing these things to, but they knew that what they were doing was wrong.

*The reason we know this is that we have done these same things and know how wrong they are.* We have found ways to justify our actions. We have participated in unjust systems. We have tried to assign blame when the responsibility fell on our shoulders. We have made fun of others, probably not to their faces, but behind their backs. We have said cruel words which we wish we could retract. And we have questioned you. And doubted you, neglected to speak up for you if we felt it would cost us something.

One small voice stands out among all the others: a thief who believes in you. A thief, who looks at you, and the condescending sign they have hung over your head. A thief, who has heard the laughter and seen how your abuse continues even after they have nailed you to a tree. He sees that you are as pitiful as he is, even more pitiful, and yet he recognizes who you are. No one else, except your mother, and a few terrified disciples know this truth. This man asks for one thing: that you remember him when you come into your kingdom. He doesn’t ask for forgiveness. He doesn’t ask for mercy. He simply asks to be remembered.

And you, Jesus, you offer him so much more than that. You say, “I’ll meet you by the tree of life in paradise.” Instead of a hierarchical power structure in which he could only imagine himself to be a servant (at best), you offer him a home in God’s garden. You offer him a home where God walks with humans, and there is no crying or pain. You offer him a home where all creation dwells in justice and peace.

Jesus, we, your people, tend towards vengeance and retributive justice. It seems to be our nature. But you, you choose restorative justice every single time. You choose not to blame, but to forgive. To forgive them and to forgive us. You don’t forgive us because we don’t know what we are doing when we go off the rails and forget how to live as your people. You forgive us because we are so very human and our hearts and minds can only *begin* to comprehend the vastness of your love.

And so this is your story: you begin your life surrounded by shepherds, dirty, lower class individuals, and you end your life suspended between two thieves. You enter this world with nothing, not even a cradle of your own, and you leave this world with nothing, not even a tomb of your own. In between that miraculous birth and that heart breaking death, you sought only to heal and restore. By your life, you demonstrated that everything the world tells us is important: wealth and power and luxury and beauty and winning – always winning – you show to be ridiculous.

Thank you, Jesus, for pretending that we don’t know what we are doing when we hurt you, but help us to name those ways we wound you by wounding one another. It is very easy for us to judge the crowds and the soldiers, the political leaders and the thief on the cross. Instead of judging them, may we allow them to help us uncover our own foolishness, our own brokenness, our own misplaced pride, our own fear.

We would much rather stand around the manger and watch you sleep, than gather at the cross and witness your suffering, but we need to do both. We need to remember how the world can mangle love, and how you can recreate – yes, transform! - even the worst destruction. Oh, giver of life, how can we ever thank you?

What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul,  
what wondrous love is this, O my soul!   
What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss   
to bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul,   
to bear the dreadful curse for my soul!

And when from death I'm free, I'll sing on, I'll sing on,   
and when from death I'm free, I'll sing on;   
and when from death I'm free, I'll sing and joyful be,   
and through eternity I'll sing on, I'll sing on,   
and through eternity I'll sing on!

Sources consulted: Feasting on the Word, Year C (vol. 4); Feasting on the Gospels: Luke (vol. 2); Connections, Year A (vol. 3)