

April 10, 2020

Good Friday

Luke 23: 43

Save Yourself

Last month, my best friend's mother died. She was 91 and had been in a nursing home for four years. It had been hard on my friend, who lived out of state, and hard on her siblings here in town.

With the coronavirus raging, the family opted for a graveside service with limited attendees.

But this woman was so much more than a bedridden nursing home resident with a fading memory and failing heart. She was an outsized personality who laughed and sang and danced and bowled and played bridge and made candy and thoroughly enjoyed life.

For decades she'd worked a grueling split shift as a telephone operator so she could pick up her children from school and cook them dinner before returning to work at night.

And for decades she welcomed me into their home like I was family.

When I met with the daughters to plan her eulogy, I told them, “The challenge is to reach past these final years and weeks and days of your exhaustion, and remember who she really was.”

That’s what we try to do at a memorial service.

I find this same impulse at work in Luke’s Passion narrative. Like the other gospel writers, Luke tells about the betrayal and terror and abandonment that surrounded Jesus’s last days.

But he also includes a little snippet that takes us back to all that came before, all the teaching and healing and ideas that told who he truly was.

That snippet is about the criminal being crucified beside him who turned to Jesus and expressed belief. And Jesus -- even as his earthly life was being snuffed out – acknowledged that belief. **“Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”** (Luke 23: 43)

As Jesus hung there on the cross, people challenged him to *save himself*. Whether in ridicule or irony or mockery, three different people or groups of people challenged him to save himself. When a writer includes something three times in such a short space, we are supposed to sit up and notice.

The first time, the *religious leaders* scoffed: **“He saved others; let him save himself”**

The second time, the *soldiers* mocked him. **“If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”**

Lastly, one of the *criminals* crucified beside him, said, **“Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”**

Save yourself! Something is going on here. Luke doesn't construct this story by chance. He is carefully laying out a theology that he has been hammering throughout Jesus's life story, a theology that Jesus hasn't come to save himself.

Hasn't come to set himself up as a military ruler.

Hasn't come to overthrow Rome and restore Israel to its glory days, as his disciples and so many expected.

If you recall, this story began with three similar temptations for Jesus to save himself in the wilderness. The devil tempted Jesus with food, with glory, with a chance to prove his power.

Like bookends, these three temptations at the beginning and at the end of the story show what kind of Savior he would be, what kind of Savior he wouldn't be.

So even as he hung on the cross, he turned to save one of the most marginalized citizens of his day. **“Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”**

What an encapsulation of Luke's gospel in this one little scene!

The point of this passage is the point of so many of Luke's passages – to show that none of us is beyond God's reach. None of the people we have met in this gospel – not shepherds, not women, not tax collectors, not

prostitutes, not criminals hung by the Roman Empire – is beyond God's reach.

This is why I call Luke ... the gospel writer for Triune.

Very often, by the time people arrive at Triune, there are terrible things in their pasts. Assault and battery. Criminal domestic violence. Sex offenses. Stealing. Drug dealing. Prostitution. Murder. Can God forgive those things? Yes, when one honestly repents.

This is the day we conduct Jesus's memorial service.

And like a good pastor, Luke shows him doing exactly what he's done on every page of his gospel: Forgiving us. Offering us a way to be with him.

Amen.