

Jesus, Remember Me **Luke 23:26-27, 32-43**

Passion Sunday

Today is Palm Sunday as well as Passion Sunday. While I normally choose a Palm Sunday reading this year, I have chosen a Passion Sunday reading for my sermon because I realize not all of us will be able to come for Maundy Thursday and Good Friday worship services. The passion of Jesus Christ on the cross is central to our Christian faith and somehow, many of us have missed it. After the celebration of Jesus' triumphal entry to Jerusalem, we may want to skip the passion and go right to the big celebration of Easter. Nobody likes hearing about suffering, however, without facing the cross of Holy Friday and going through God's deep silence on Holy Saturday, we don't really feel the true joy of Easter. So I invite you to join our passion week journey. First, let us listen and remember the story of Jesus' passion.

Correcting or Carrying a cross?

I bet everyone has at least one cross in their home. Some of you wear a cross around your neck. As you may know, I collect crosses. These are two of my favorite crosses. [ppt] This one is the cross of reconciliation. The shape of the cross is like two people hugging one another. Another is the cross of peace. It looks very plain and simple, but this cross of peace is made of wood that comes from Baekdo mountain in North Korea and Hanlla mountain in South Korea. The Korean Peace Committee made this cross in hope of peaceful reunification of the two Koreas. You may also have a favorite cross. What does that cross mean to you? When you see the cross, what do you feel? Comfort, love, empowerment, forgiveness? The cross has been the ultimate symbol of God's forgiveness and salvation. It shows God's unconditional love for us through Jesus Christ. That's why we love the cross.

However, a few years ago, I was struck by a sudden thought while lying on my couch surrounded by crosses. "So you like to collect crosses. What about carrying your cross? Do you like carrying your cross as much as you like collecting crosses?" Collecting crosses is delightful and easy, but carrying a cross is a completely different story. I have romanticized the cross only as the symbol of God's love and somehow closed my eyes to the brutal reality of the suffering Jesus endured on the cross as I have gotten used to the passion story. "Jesus died for my sin. Thank you! Period!" Somehow, I have lost the wonder of the cross and the pain and suffering Jesus bore.

Have you watched the movie "the Passion of the Christ?" When I first saw that movie, I was horrified by the realistic depiction of the whipping scene and its brutality. Most Christian movies about the life of Jesus tend to make the scenes of Jesus' suffering somewhat bearable so that we don't really feel disrupted or uncomfortable. However, the movie, "the Passion of the Christ" shows the pain and horror of the cross Jesus had to bear.

The Cross of Jesus Christ

There is nothing to romanticize about the reality of the cross. Crucifixion was a way of imperial execution intended to terrify people and demonstrate the power of the Roman empire over the conquered people. Crucifixion was common, so people often saw people hung on crosses when they went on their pilgrimage to Jerusalem. "The sight of the crucified, the sounds of their dying, the smell of their decaying bodies pervaded the hills, and generations of Jewish children grew up beneath these shadows and smells." Jesus might have grown up under the

shadow of the cross. Imagine what life was like for the people who lived in the shadow of those crosses. Debie Thomas said, “The crosses were the Roman Empire’s illustrated sermons, and the message of those sermons was crystal clear: “You can have your religion. You can worship whatever you want. But don’t forget, even for a minute, who really holds sway over your life. Go to your temple if it suits you, call on your God if it makes you feel good, but never, ever mess with the power structures that actually control your world. Don’t even think about resisting. If you do, we’ll hang you up, too.”¹

The cross is one of the most brutal ways of killing a human being. According to Professor Michael Cook of Hebrew Union College, “There could be no “moment” of death. Mostly, it was a sliding towards death for three and half days. The victim died of multiple causes but the final cause of death was dehydration, and after three days without water, the victim descended into madness.”² There is no glory in this kind of death. If there is a place like a living hell, the cross is that place. And Jesus was on the cross. with two others alongside him.

The Cross, the place of forgiveness and salvation

While the reality of the cross does not look like salvation, we, Christians, celebrate and revere the cross as the symbol of God’s salvation. In fact, the cross was the place of great forgiveness and salvation. Even while he was in great agony on the cross, experiencing humiliation, rejection, and betrayal, Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them; they don’t know what they’re doing.” He was innocent, but had to bear the iniquity of the world. The brutal violence of the Roman empire negates and destroys the image of God in all people. Religious leaders’ hypocrisy, common people’s ignorance, politicians’ dishonesty, disciples’ unfaithfulness. All those personal and collective sins hung Jesus on the cross. However, on the cross, Jesus proclaimed the forgiveness of sin and in that way, Jesus Christ made the cross a place of forgiveness.

Jesus also made the cross a place of salvation. One of the criminals hanging alongside him cursed Jesus saying: “Some Messiah you are! Save yourself! Save us!” But the other one made him shut up: “Have you no fear of God? You’re getting the same as him. We deserve this, but not him—he did nothing to deserve this.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you enter your kingdom.” Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

What strikes me is that he didn’t ask for rescue. “Get me down, get us down!” He didn’t ask for this. Instead, this criminal asked to be remembered. “Remember me!” That’s all. “Remember me!”

In her book, *Witness at the Cross*, Amy Levine shared her experience of teaching students in a maximum-security prison. Her students didn’t want to be called whatever crime for which they’ve been convicted, because they didn’t want to be identified only by the worst thing they’d ever done. And God forbid, any of us be identified by the worst thing we have ever done. “A call to remember is to make sure we don’t treat our fellow human beings like numbers on a uniform or at a roll call, but that we treat them as individuals.”³ Everybody is a child of God no matter what. This man in the passion narrative asked Jesus to remember him as a person, not the crime he had committed. “Remember me as a person who is more than the sum of my sins.” That’s what he asked.

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay>

² <http://www.shlomohsherman.com/literary/essays/passion/mikecook.html>

³ *Witness at the cross*, 45.

What did Jesus say? “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” At that moment, he received the comfort that he needed and rescue. But it’s a different type of rescue. It’s not rescue from death. We all die one day. But it’s rescue from despair. It’s rescue from hopelessness. It’s rescue to eternal life. Jesus turned the place of death and despair into a place of hope and salvation. The cross of Jesus Christ is truly a symbol of forgiveness and redemption for all.

Jesus said, “TODAY you will be with me in paradise.” How can a person on a cross be in paradise at that moment? The answer might be in the words “with me!” Eternal life is not about a place we go after we die. It’s about a relationship, so when Jesus said, “today you will be with me in paradise” to this dying man on a cross, Jesus meant “right now.” Paradise begins when we enter into a relationship with Jesus. With Jesus even a place like the cross can become a place of paradise.

Jesus Remember Me

My friends, Jesus Christ our Lord, remembers each one of us, not as the sum of our sins but as children of God. To embrace us into loving relationship with God, he gladly took the cross for our sake. So, ask Jesus to remember you as his children. Let us silently pray to be remembered as we listen to the hymn. “Jesus remember me.”