

**+ Luke 23:35-43 + Repent: Turn to Jesus! He Holds the Key to Heaven<sup>1</sup> +  
+ Lenten Midweek #3 + Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY + 22 March 2017 +**

There are times in life when you think, “I wasn’t expecting that!” You see a house that looks absolutely amazing on the outside, but on the inside, it’s a money pit. Then you see a house that’s not impressive at all on the outside, but inside it’s a home. “I wasn’t expecting that!” You’re on vacation and you see a restaurant that looks pretty dumpy. The kids are crying. You’re starving, and you don’t see any other options anywhere nearby. So you go in with low expectations, but you leave having enjoyed a delicious meal that you and your family won’t soon forget. “I wasn’t expecting that!”

Take a look at the life of Jesus and you see it again and again. Wise men from the East come riding into Jerusalem with gifts fit for a king. They expect to find him in a royal palace, but instead they find him in a lowly Bethlehem home. They weren’t expecting that. Then there’s that time when Jesus told his disciples to feed a crowd of over 5,000 people with the meager contents of a boy’s lunch. They figured Jesus would have to send the people home hungry, but then Jesus served up the most famous fish dinner the world has ever seen. They weren’t expecting that.

Nowhere was “I wasn’t expecting that” more true than when Jesus hung on the cross. The sign over his head, written in three languages, mocked him as the **“King of the Jews.”** We expect mockery from those who hate Jesus. You could even expect it from the criminals hanging next to Jesus, but even on the cross Jesus defies expectations because he holds the key to heaven in his hands.

Pilate’s sign said that Jesus was a “king”—a so-called king to be mocked and ridiculed. **“The people stood watching, and even the leaders were scoffing: ‘He saved others; let him save himself if this is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One!’”** Imagine that. The religious leaders of Israel were standing there on Calvary as Jesus was hung out to die. It wasn’t enough for Jesus’ back to feel the whip or his hands to feel the nails or his head to feel the thorns. No, they wanted to pour salt into his wounds. His ears rang with the ridicule dished up by Israel’s elite. Now they didn’t dispute the fact that he had helped others, but all his help simply made them hate him even more! They mocked Jesus for being who he truly is. In doing so, you see the nasty human tendency common to so many of us to turn away from God and hate the truth.

...But it wasn’t just the religious leaders who mocked King Jesus. **“The soldiers also mocked him. They came offering him sour wine and said, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’”** Earlier in the morning, they had put a purple robe on Jesus and then twisted together a crown of thorns, which they beat into his head while they mocked him, **“Hail, King of the Jews!”** (Matthew 27:29) They couldn’t get enough of mocking this man whom they had just nailed to a beam of wood. Yet in doing so, you see the nasty human tendency common to so many of us to turn away from God to attack the weak and the helpless.

...But it wasn’t just the religious leaders and Roman soldiers who mocked King Jesus. The Roman governor Pontius Pilate had provided the written notice above Jesus’ head that sarcastically proclaimed, **“This is the King of the Jews!”** Pilate wasn’t interested in Jesus’ kingdom—a kingdom not of this world. He certainly wasn’t interested in Jesus’ truth. He simply dismissed Jesus and the truth with a cold, **“What is truth?”** (John 18:38) Pilate had a country to run and a rebellious people to keep in line. His little notice hanging above Jesus’ head showed what he really thought about the Jews and this Jesus. The truth is, Pontius Pilate presided over the greatest failure of justice the world has ever seen, even though he tried to wash his hands of Jesus’ blood. Yet in doing so, you see the nasty human tendency common to so many of us to turn away from God so that wrong can be right and right can be wrong.

Along with all those people lined up against Jesus, there were still others who mocked King Jesus—the two criminals crucified on either side of him. **“[O]ne of the criminals hanging there began to yell insults at him: ‘Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’”** Matthew tells us that both criminals were taunting Jesus. Could there be anything more humiliating than a king being heckled by death row inmates? Yet in doing so, you see the nasty human tendency common to so many of us to have no real love for God or faith in God, yet expect him to give you everything, even heaven.

Christ is the King you simply do not expect. You don’t expect kings to be dismissed by local leaders. You don’t expect kings to be brutalized by low-ranking soldiers or mocked by men on death row. You expect kings to be

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on thrones, not crosses. You expect kings to wear crowns, not thorns. You expect a king to march down Main Street to the music of choirs and the blast of brass, not the catcalls of a crowd. Jesus is King—a King who was mocked and ridiculed.

Now does that upset you? I mean, it's easy for us to think, "If I were there, I would've given it right back to those religious leaders! "If I were there, I would've told those soldiers and those criminals to keep their mouths shut!" "If I were there, I would've ripped that sign off the cross and told people who was really hanging there! I would've helped Jesus!" "If I were there, I would've humbly thanked Jesus for his suffering and sacrifice!" Or would I?

Rather than come up with all kinds of fanciful ideas of how "I would've done" this or that "if I were there," maybe we need to ask a different question. Why was Jesus there in the first place? Jesus was there because I would've found a place in the crowd. How could I give it back to those religious leaders, when so often I have refused to speak the truth in love? How could I tell those soldiers to be nice, when so often I have enjoyed wounding others with my own words? How could I rebuke those criminals when deep down I know that the only difference between their crimes and mine is that I haven't been caught or crucified for them? How could I tear down Pilate's sign when my life has been a walking billboard for sin? The truth is, if I were there, I would like turn my back on Jesus just like everyone else. I would display that nasty human tendency to turn away from God to go along with the sinful crowd.

...But that's when something happened that no one was expecting. Right in the middle of all that rejection and ridicule, you hear a voice of faith-filled repentance. ***"[The other criminal] answered, rebuking him: 'Don't you even fear God, since you are undergoing the same punishment? We are punished justly, because we're getting back what we deserve for the things we did, but this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'"***

If there is such a thing as a living hell, this criminal was living it. This man's life had been heading the wrong direction for a long time. The Romans finally caught up with him. Surely his stay in a Roman jail was unpleasant. At his trial, his ears heard the death sentence pronounced. Now the insults of the crowds filled his ears. With nails driven through his hands and feet, he became a dying, bloody example for everyone else. The Romans wouldn't let his death come any quicker than they wanted. Of course, there was also that nagging feeling in the pit of his stomach—the soul-chilling knowledge that there was a reality far worse waiting for him on the other side of his final breath.

Yet in the midst of that living hell, the criminal caught a glimpse of heaven. Having heard Jesus' word of forgiveness for the executioners, he, in faith, spoke a humble request: ***"Jesus, remember me."***

...And remember him Jesus did. ***"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."*** Christ, the King mocked and ridiculed, is Christ, the King who opens paradise. The thief's humble prayer was answered immediately and unexpectedly! ***"Today you will be with me in paradise."*** And in Jesus, you see no longer see nasty tendencies. No, you see God's unexpected tendency to be gracious to the most undeserving. Jesus is the key to heaven, even for criminals on crosses. With one sentence, Jesus turned the key and opened the gates of heaven for that thief on the cross!

Why does Jesus do that? Christ Jesus came to save sinners by not saving himself! Did you catch the common temptation that wound its way through all that ridicule? ***"Let him save himself if this is God's Messiah...If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself...Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"*** Save yourself! Save yourself! Save yourself! Jesus could've easily saved himself, washed his hands of Pilate, and sent the world packing off to hell in a handbasket, but he chose not to do so. Instead of saving himself, he sacrificed himself! His forsakenness is your forgiveness. His judgment is your justification. His humiliation is your glory. His pain is your peace. His wounds are your healing. His death is your life!

"Jesus, remember me too!" Remember me in depression, when life is only clouds and loneliness and overwhelming everything. Remember me in heartbreak, when everything seems to hurt. Remember me in turmoil, when those I love most are terrible to me. Remember me in sickness, when I can't remember what it's like to feel well. Remember me at the funeral home, when tears of good-bye sting my eyes. Remember me each and every day, as life proves to me again and again and again that I'm not in heaven yet! Jesus, remember me!

...And Jesus answers that prayer too. Jesus remembers you. He even remembers the number of hairs on your head. His memory is perfect and remembers how to forget the sins of your past, the sins of your youth, and the sins of your weakness forever. Jesus remembers you and me, which is precisely why someday we will be with him in paradise! My dear friends, turn to Jesus who hold the key and opens the gates of heaven for you! Amen.