

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, March 16, 2025

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As we continue in our worship and as we prepare to hear God's word read and proclaimed, I invite you to join me in taking a deep breath in, breathing it out slowly. Take another deep breath in and breathe it out slowly, as we breathe in God's mercies and we breathe out God's mercies to others. We breathe in God's mercies and we breathe out God's mercies to others. Let us join our hearts in prayer.

Gracious Spirit, you are as close to us as our very next breath, so make yourself known in this time. Bring your peace, bring your comfort, bring your challenge to us as we hear your word read and proclaimed this day. May it call us forth to be your faithful people in this time, for we ask in the name of the crucified and risen one, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

So we continue in this season of Lent with the Lenten sermon series entitled The Seven Last Words of Christ. I invite you to go back. You'll be able to follow along each week through our YouTube channel. You can access that either through YouTube or through the website. You can go back and see the first of the last words that we explored last Sunday. This day we find ourselves once again in the Gospel of Luke. We are in the 23rd chapter. This morning we read from verse 39 through verse 43. So let us listen together for God's word to each of us and indeed to the church.

*One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding[ him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? 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 have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."*

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So we entered last week into this intentional time of the Lenten season. Lent—it offers us a few different things. One of the things it offers us is space. It offers us space, and it invites us as well in that space to notice more fully the world around us and even what is going on within us. It invites us to be attuned ever more acutely to the world around us and that which dwells within us. And I wonder if you might share this space with me this morning, and we might take this opportunity to notice simply a few things about our scripture this day from the Gospel according to Luke. First, might we notice the situation that the text locates us in. This is the situation that we'll be in each Sunday in Lent, because all of Jesus's final words are spoken from the cross. So the situation is a situation of suffering. It's the suffering of Our Lord hanging there on the cross.

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In Christian faith the cross represents for us suffering—the particular suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ but also suffering writ large. In this passage from the Gospel of Luke we see a particular kind of suffering. Jesus has been hung on the cross, wrists affixed, palms nailed to the symbol of suffering. It is Jesus and it's not only Jesus. There are others, the text explains to us. The scripture says that one man hangs to Jesus's left, and another hangs to his right, and they are both defined by the crimes that they have committed. They are criminals, the text says. So, like it or not, this isn't simply the particular suffering of Jesus or even of the criminals. This becomes then this communal suffering experience. These three that never imagine themselves on the same hill experiencing the same fate, they are a community unto themselves, and they are not alone in experiencing this suffering. Other texts will tell us that there are others who are seated at the foot of the cross, those who love Jesus. You might even imagine there might be some who love these criminals who are seated at the foot of the cross, and they are watching as those whom they love suffer. And they aren't just watching, they are suffering alongside. The situation of suffering is important because of how suffering functions in our lives and in the world. David Brooks shares that. “When I interview folks, I ask them to tell me about a time that made them who they are as human beings. They more often than not describe a very difficult time of suffering—the death of a loved one, the loss of a friendship, moving away from home, being fired from a job.” The situation of suffering becomes important because suffering reveals very often our truest selves. The theologian Paul Tillich said that “Moments of suffering interrupt your life and reveal to you you're not the person you thought you were. They carve through the floor in the basement of your soul, and they reveal a cavity below, and then they carve through the floor of that cavity and reveal another and another and another.” In moments of suffering you see yourself in your most real and authentic way. We understand more fully who we are. In those moments of suffering, Brooks contends, you can either be broken by that suffering or be broken open. He contends that those who will ultimately experience transformation simply decide that they are not going to be broken but broken open, not just individuals but communities. Communities that are going to experience transformation—they decide that they are not going to be broken but broken open by suffering. So we must notice the situation of suffering.

But I wonder if you would notice further with me the postures, the attitudes of the criminals on Jesus's left and on his right. On the one hand the attitude of the first criminal to speak in this text—“One of the criminals who were hanging there kept deriding Jesus saying ‘are you not the m Messiah. Save yourself and us.’” It's an interesting way to try to endear yourself to one that you believe might be able to save you. The word deriding in Greek, it's actually blaspheming, so the one on one side of Jesus kept blaspheming Jesus, goading him.

“If you are indeed the Messiah why don't you save yourself, and while you're at it save us

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too.” Verse 39 should rightly remind us of the devil tempting Jesus in the wilderness during that time of Lent for Jesus. In the Gospel of Matthew, the 4th chapter, “Then the devil took Jesus to the holy city and had Jesus stand on the highest point of the temple. If you are the Son of God,” the devil said, “throw yourself down, for it is written ‘God will command God’s angels concerning you and they will lift you up in their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone;’ and Jesus answered the devil, ‘It is also written, do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” On the one hand we see in this first criminal a particular type of posture, an attitude of arrogance. The suffering of the criminal in this moment as the basement of his soul is broken open reveals a propensity towards arrogance and self-absorption. The man’s attitude of arrogance invites Jesus into another type of arrogance. He wishes for Jesus to sacrifice his humility to join him in that place of self-absorption.

On the one hand we witness arrogance, on the other humility. Verse 40– “But the other rebuked the first criminal saying, ‘Do you not fear God since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And indeed we have been condemned justly, for we are getting exactly what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.’” On the one hand there is arrogance, and on the other hand there is humility. Even in this one’s suffering he humbles himself, accurately locates himself in the story. He has done wrong. He deserves condemnation, and, yet, the text shows that he is also hopeful. He recognizes his need, and he seeks help from the one hanging beside him. Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

We must notice the situation of suffering. We must notice the posture, the attitudes of the criminals both arrogance and humility, and finally we must know this, the response of Our Savior, Jesus Christ. Jesus replied to the one who pleaded with him. “Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise,” and in his response the entire story turns. Jesus promises a reward to the one who has committed crimes, that hangs beside him, condemned justly for what he has done. Jesus promises a reward, not for those crimes but for the humility and the faithfulness that he shows in the face of his suffering. Jesus says he will remember him when he comes into his kingdom, but he says it in a different way. But be assured that this man by being remembered by Jesus was indeed re-membered, drawn back into himself, his true identity. Simone Weil says that “attention is the purest form of generosity,” and Jesus promises to be attentive to this one even in the midst of his suffering.

Surely our God rewards the humble, we ask. The problem, of course, is that nothing about this circumstance, nothing about the suffering on that hill would make one believe that a reward is coming. Nothing about the criminals hanging there, nothing about their pain, nothing about their

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suffering would lead one to believe there was anything but death on the way. That's kind of part of the point. The perpetrators of violence. It's to take away belief and hope. The perpetrators of the cross, the source of the suffering of in this situation—they wish to strip these criminals of their humanity. They wish, indeed, to strip Jesus of his character and his identity as well. They wish for their suffering, for his suffering to make him sacrifice his identity in God, to forfeit his faithfulness to his father. Just as the devil did in the wilderness, the perpetrators of violence, the purveyors of suffering—they wish for it to happen again here. This is always the hope of the perpetrator, always the hope of the source of suffering that those who suffer and that through suffering those who suffer might abandon their identity as the faithful. In this moment those who are perpetrating the violence wish for Jesus to abandon his ministry of grace, concede his mission of mercy, sacrifice his posture of humility, and, yet, Jesus is quietly defiant. He is defiant. The perpetrators of violence wish to steal his soul, yet when suffering carves through the floor of Jesus's soul, it finds a defiant love; and when it digs deeper, it finds an impermeable Grace; and when it digs even deeper than that, it finds a faithfulness to God that cannot be defeated. Jesus refuses to sacrifice his divine compass.

And now I wonder, as we notice the response of Jesus, how that response is to inform us in this season of Lent. I wonder what Christlike defiance, refusal to concede our faithfulness, refusal to concede our humility, refusal to give in to the purveyors of suffering, what might that look like now? What might it look like to refuse to abandon our identity in the face of suffering?

How will we come before our God? Will we come with arrogance, self-absorption, or will we come with humility?

Jesus says “Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise,” and there's something interesting going on there. This week's study has been on salvation, and often when we speak of salvation, we imagine a distant heaven to which we are going. But if we look at the Greek for this word paradise, what it actually describes is this Jewish understanding of this place that the righteous of God will take where they will be gathered together waiting for the resurrection of God, waiting for the redemptive power of God to take root in the world. It is not that they are being transported to a place wholly different. They are being set aside in a place where all the righteous of God gather, and they wait with expectation, defiant of the darkness of the world. Their presence in that place is a testament to their belief that God is still at work. So when Jesus says, “Today you will be with me in Paradise,” what he really means for this criminal is that ‘today you will be counted among the righteous of God, who wait for the redemption of our God, for the power of our God. Your righteousness will bring you into a company not of the proud but of the humble who refuse to give up that hope.’

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And so again I wonder what Christlike defiance looks like in the face of suffering and the sources of suffering? I wonder if we might cling to the hope and power of our God in this season of Lent, that we might allow the qualities and the character of Christ to define us rather than the suffering and arrogance and violence that surrounds. I wonder if tasting salvation in this time, being found in Paradise in this time, might simply mean that we refuse, we refuse, we refuse to give up our identity as those who are claimed by a loving God, called to be about the work of justice and mercy, those who do not approach God with arrogance but humility, and that in so doing we might be found amongst the righteous of our God. As Christ was defiant, may we be so as well to the ills and the suffering of our world. May we hold hope for the power of God.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.