

March 25, 2016  
Luke 23:44-49

Good Friday C  
Golgotha: A Place of Simple Love

*Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, our Crucified King. Amen.*

Have you ever noticed how when people give you directions, they tend to either use landmarks or science? The landmarks are the ones who tell you what you “can’t miss.” “Turn right by the big Walmart (as opposed to the smaller one),” they say. “And then, go down the street until you come to the big white fence. If you turn right, you’ll see an old ranch house with a big oak tree leaning across the front yard.” “You can’t miss it,” they say. Wal-Mart, white fences, and a big oak tree leaning across the front yard. These are directions for the landmarks. On the other hand, you have the scientists. Although they aren’t all this bad, sometimes you need a compass. “Just go north on Highway 75 for 3.6 miles until you reach 200 something street. Then go West for 4.7 miles until you reach 300 and something avenue, and turn south.” Using landmarks or science, either way people seek to give you directions. But what they don’t know is that how they gave directions creates a certain kind of following. For the scientists you need a compass, street signs, a numbering system and perhaps an odometer. For the landmarks, however, you only look to what is obvious and you clearly find your way.

In his Gospel, Luke has been rather scientific in His approach. After all, He is a physician. As he tells us about Christ’s birth, he opens for us the world of kings and kingdoms. It was in the days of *“Caesar Augustus ... while Quirinius was governor of Syria”* that *“all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which called Bethlehem.”* It is Luke who tells us approximately when Jesus began His ministry: it was around the time of John the Baptist, *“in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being the governor of Judea, and Herod being the Tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of Ituraea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.”* Luke, in telling us about the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, has been scientific in his approach. This creates a certain kind of following. We recognize these events as part of history. We read the Gospel, aware of the dynamics of the political situation. We try to discern the division of the kingdoms and the position and relative importance of the cities in the land.

But notice the difference today (tonight). When Luke moves to the crucifixion, he begins to use landmarks. He points to creation and to the temple! What he tells us touches the very foundation of life on this earth and eternal life with God. *“It was not about the sixth hour,” he writes, “and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun’s light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.”* You don’t need a map of the Holy Land to know what is happening at the crucifixion. You don’t need to be able to tell the difference between a governor and tetrarch. No Luke, uses what is obvious so that anybody in the world can see what is happening and all will believe in the graciousness of God.

Some churches can turn religion into science. Turn on the TV and listen. You have your choice of religious systems. There are rules for living and promises for the future. If you just believe strongly enough, then God will bring the healing. They will tell you what to do with your money, how to dress, and how to pray in the Spirit and pray for the Spirit. And then you turn off the TV and are faced with the complexity of life. Here you sit with an ailing parent who struggles to live alone. Here you sit far away from any family and you feel all alone. Here you sit with difficult parenting decisions whether they be for toddlers or teenagers. Here you sit as your loved one battles cancer. Here you sit depressed. Here you sit how your relationship with your fellow

church members got so bad. You sit and wonder, "Now how can I make God work in the middle of this mess?" We find ourselves caught up in all kinds of teachings and trying all kinds of activities until soon we begin to wonder whether there's a God at all. Faith becomes harder than finding Traconitis on a map. And discouragement comes easily to a heart already weighed down with care.

Perhaps you have come today (tonight) tired of trying to get God to work in your life. You've followed all sorts of rules. Your bookshelf has one too many books on how to have a happy marriage and you've stopped saying your prayers anymore before bed. You are simply tired of the struggle...worn out by the complexity...and deep down afraid that maybe God isn't there. Listen to Luke!

Luke speaks today (tonight) for all who have been lost in a religious system. Whether it is the rules and regulations that we impose on our behavior, the Christian bookstore teachings, the politics of churches, or the promises of some evangelist on TV. If you have ever been lost, listen to Luke. He points to something as important and central to religion as the temple. He says, to understand what is happening at this crucifixion, think about worshipping where a huge curtain separates the people from their God. When that temple curtain is ripped, you know something has happened. The way of worship has changed. God is no longer hidden from His people, needing to be reached by the blood of sacrifice. He does not need our religious activities, our efforts to find Him. He comes to us and forgives us by the death of His Son. Here is God's simple love: on the cross, He opens the door to eternal forgiveness. Through the sacrifice of His Son, God opens to you His heart. Jesus suffers the punishment of sin that you might receive the love of God.

Do you still need directions? Luke points to something as universal as creation. He says that to understand what is happening at this crucifixion, you simply need to have lived in a world where the sun rises in the morning and makes its way from one side of the sky to the other. When it is the middle of the day, between the sixth and ninth hours (12-3 PM), when the sun is in the middle of the sky and that sun is in the middle of the sky and the sun stops shining, you know, something has happened. The way of the world has changed. The power of darkness has come close to Jesus and, for a moment, creation bows its head and closes its eyes. There is night like no other: when Jesus dies for a fallen creation. But then there will be a morning like no other: when Jesus rises and brings about a new creation and a never-ending age. Jesus comes to you today (this night), takes the wrath of God for you, that you might awaken in a new creation. There, you will never faint or grow weary, for your God is alive. When Luke tells of the crucifixion of Jesus, he uses landmarks as important as worship and as universal as creation so that no one can miss the significance of this event.

But for those who need words, Luke offers one more landmark along the way. As Luke tells the story, there are many reactions to our Lord's death. The crowds beat their breasts. The women stand afar off. And Joseph, a member of the council, asks Pilate for the body. Yet, in the midst of all of these, you have one strange reaction. The Roman centurion. Listen to what he says when he sees our Lord's death. Luke writes, "The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man." This is the only spoken word that Luke records between the crucifixion and the resurrection. When the lips of Jesus are silent in death, Luke records one voice. One voice in the face of deadly silence. You can't miss it. And what does Luke call it? He calls it a word of praise. That's what Luke writes. The centurion praised God.

Praise is what happened whenever Jesus performed wonders. When the miraculous occurred, people opened their mouths and praised God. The shepherds in the field saw heavenly wonders, ran to see Jesus, and opened their mouths in praise. The people of Nain attended a funeral. When Jesus raised a widow's child from the dead, their mouths were opened in praise. A leper was healed and ran back to Jesus, a blind man finally saw and took a good look at his Lord. Their mouths were opened in praise. The miracles of Jesus led people to praise. And, now, when you would think that the time for miracles has passed; now, when you think that all wonders are over; no, when Jesus is dead on a cross, Luke records of praise. Why? Because, Luke wants you to see a wonder beyond all wonders. God has made a marvelous exchange. In exchange for your sin, He has given you His righteousness and, in the place of all sinners, He has punished a righteous man, an innocent man, the Son of God. Regardless of the complexity of your life, regardless of your decisions and indecisions, regardless of how many books for the spiritual life you have upon your shelf, one thing remains certain: the righteousness of Jesus saves you from sin. The cross has become for us a place of praise. God looks at our lives, sees our sin, and yet chooses to call us righteous for the sake of His Son. That is His Work, not ours! His obedience, not ours! His love, not ours! His grace, not ours! Only voice is speaking, and it shares one simple truth: This was a righteous man and by His righteousness we are saved.

We live in a world filled with complexity: the aging of your parents, the loneliness of being far from family, the difficult parenting decision, the depression, the cancer, the hurt relationships. In that complexity, it is easy for us to lose our focus. We try to balance our love for our children, our care for our parents, our love for our spouse, and our obligations at work, along with making sure the self is taken care of. And in this midst, we don't find easy answers. It is never as simple as turning on the TV or picking up a book about Christian Living. We struggle, we pray, we love truly, and we live sincerely. At times, we falter and lose our way. You don't need to know us long to see our sin and our failures. You don't need to be a genius to recognize our weakness. But, even in our weakness we fall into sin, God remains a Savior bringing us salvation. As long as we live and as long as we struggle, there is one thing that does not change. You can point to my sin, but I can point to my Savior: Jesus. This one who died on the cross, He was righteous man. And lest any should doubt, Luke has given all of the directions anyone would need. The heavens, the temple, and the people proclaim that here, today (tonight), on the cross is the glory of God. God has made this place, a Golgotha, a place of praise. Today (tonight), God opens the kingdom of heaven. In Christ, He forgives you your sin. Take comfort in that certainty. Though our lives are complex. God has given us life in the death of His Son. For this simple saving love...we sing praise. We sing the Praise of Him who died, of Him who died on the cross.

In Jesus Name. Amen.

*Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior, our Crucified King. Amen.*