

33 When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. **34** [Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. **35** And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" **36** The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, **37** and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" **38** There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

39 One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" **40** But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? **41** And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." **42** Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." **43** He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

“A Moment to Remember”

A Sermon on Luke 23:33-43, Rev. Paul R. Heins, FPC Logan - Nov 21, 2010

I feel like a challenge today. What do you think?

I think we can do it. I think we can make a lasting mark that people will remember.

What am I talking about? Well, just a few weeks ago, the Rev Ken McReynolds set the record for the *longest* sermon. At his parish in Northern Ireland somewhere, the good rector preached for 5 hours and 50 minutes. The news story I read said eight “of the most faithful members of his flock - including his wife - stayed for the duration. But other parishioners popped in for sections to support him.” He was shooting for 6 hours, but fell short. “I had run out of material,” he said, “and didn’t want to ruin it by going on.”¹

So are you ready? Do I have an Amen? You don’t know it, but you’ve been in training. I know some of my sermons might seem to last for 5 hours, you’re almost there! No?

Well, ok, perhaps we don’t need to be here for 5 hours and 51 minutes to accomplish what a sermon is supposed to accomplish, i.e. for us to share in a moment of good news.

That’s my hope for all my sermons: that we share in a moment of good news. To get to that moment, sometimes we need to provide some context, or do some unpacking—of the text, or of ourselves—but the goal is to reach a moment of good news. Whether it is in a word of comfort, or in inspiration from God’s wisdom, in a challenge to live faithfully, or simply in a reminder of God’s love and grace for us, we are after a moment.

Sometimes (*hopefully*) the moment may be in something God’s has given me to say, or sometimes it may be, upon reflection, in the opposite of what I say. Sometimes it may be in the wandering of your mind, or sometimes your moment of good news might be that little cat nap I give you—right in the middle of the service (I mean that only partly in jest, sometimes the best thing that we can get is a nap). Whatever form it comes to you, the Spirit wants to bless you with a moment of good news.

That’s what Luke wants to give us this morning in the story of Jesus on the cross: a moment, a profound moment of good news.

It is true that we can’t really understand the significance of the moment without looking at the whole of Jesus life and teachings. And we need, I believe, to encounter the God of grace in the OT, whose Word brings about a diverse and harmonious creation, gathers a people together, and when they’ve gone astray, calls and delivers them out of bondage into freedom. This reflection adds to the depth of the moment. It gives us insight into it.

It is also true that the moment doesn't leave us where we are. It raises questions. Sometimes it issues challenges (God's little nudges they are, toward faithfulness and wholeness of the whole creation).

But it all boils down to a moment.

Even in the verses we read, we are prepared for the moment in Luke's telling. Luke narrates Jesus' tumble down the status ladder. He is mocked and derided by characters that are more and more lowly. First the leaders scoff at him, then the soldiers, and then Jesus really hits bottom when the criminal who deserves death spits his insults, "Why don't you save yourself and us while you're at it." This is all part of the story, but it is Luke's lead up to it's heart. The story focuses on a moment—a moment between a person in desperate need and a savior.

"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." asked the criminal on the cross. "Truly I tell you," Jesus replies, "today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:42)

Did you catch the moment?

Today is the Reign of Christ Sunday, the last Sunday in the liturgical year. Next Sunday we start all over again with Advent, preparing for Christmas. This Sunday has traditionally been known as Christ the King. It has, at times, been a celebration of triumphalism when we celebrate the kingship of not only Christ over all creation, but also the supremacy of our own tradition, our own culture, our own ways of thinking and believing. This triumphalism has been sinful because we have a tendency to interpret Christ's lordship in terms of power and domination and glory, too often more for ourselves than for Jesus.

But Jesus makes his Lordship about something else: a moment, a moment on a cross when he is giving everything he's got, when he's *given up* all his power and glory for a criminal who asks him, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Jesus' reign is about a moment when he blesses the one who comes to him, "Today you will be with me in paradise."

This moment, this moment of good news in the gospel story, this moment of good news for the criminal, is also a gift for us, it is a moment for us.

I know that I spend a lot of time in my sermons talking about faithful response—about working for justice and peace. This morning's moment is not about that. This morning's moment goes to the foundation of faithful response. It digs down to that which empowers us to work for justice and peace. This moment is a reminder for those who are open to hearing it, a reminder that God loves us, and has given, and will give everything for us. When it seems as if life puts us on a cross, when it seems as if

energy and patience and solutions are exhausted, when the world or our lives seem headed for disaster, when we are beaten up and bloodied, at the moment when we are at our worst, we are invited to enter into a moment to ask, "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom." We are invited, this morning, to enter into the moment when Jesus blesses us with his response, "Today, you will be with me in paradise."

The language of 'paradise' connects us to the vision of the garden of Eden not only at the beginning, but at the end of time when all tears will be wiped away, and injustice and violence will be nothing but a memory, and death will be no more.

The language of 'today' points to the good news of the moment: that it is not only the moment when we die, not only a moment sometime in the future, but *this* moment. This is the moment when God works in us, and sets us on a path toward that future. This is the moment when we can experience gospel good news.

From this moment springs hope, grace, peace, joy, faith, endurance, strength, comfort, and love. We don't need to claw for, or hoard these things. We don't need to earn them. In fact, it is when we fall short, when we are at our worst, when we realize that we can't accomplish everything ourselves, that Jesus shares our burdens, and shares his blessing with us.

This is not about triumphalism. It is not about doctrine. It is not about denying the spiritual experience of others or other traditions. This story is simply about a moment, a moment to receive God's gift.

Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.

Well, we've fallen short by 5 hours and 40 minutes! Perhaps all is not lost if you discover your moment, your moment of good news, your moment when Jesus leaves a lasting mark that you will remember.

Amen.

¹ "Rector resets record for longest sermon" *The Newsletter*, 01 November 2010: <http://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/Rector-resets-record-for-longest.6607452.jp>