

First Presbyterian Church
Marianna, Florida
Sunday, March 4, 2012
Sermon by Huw Christopher, Pastor

Scripture Readings: Psalm 23
Luke 23:39-43

Sermon Title: "The Glory of God in the Words of Jesus from the Cross:
Today, You will be with Me in Paradise"

Sermon Text: Luke 23:42-43: Then the criminal said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

"This hotel has shown me paradise, and I will forever be grateful for the memories." This was a review of what was listed as the top choice of the most romantic hotels in the world on TripAdvisor recently. Maybe I had looked at this list because I thought that after we retire Rachel and I may have time to take a belated 40th wedding anniversary trip. Some of you may already have been to this place which the reviewer from London suggested had shown her paradise. The hotel was the Four Seasons Resort in Bora Bora in French Polynesia. If you have been there maybe you can tell Rachel and I myself and probably most of us what you thought of paradise because at a low average of \$880 a night to stay there I am not sure that Rachel and I want to blow all of our retirement savings in just one trip!

Certainly if it is going to cost at least \$880 a night to see paradise many of us may already have given up on the idea that we will ever see paradise. The two people who were crucified with Jesus are called in various gospels, bandits, criminals or thieves. We may not be aware of the exact crime for which they were being made to suffer. Possibly they too had heard about this way of seeing paradise and they had come to realize that the only possible way for them to see paradise would be by robbing from the rich. What the one man at least finds right at the end of his life, though, is that even he is offered paradise at a far lesser price.

We do not know what he may have heard about this man who hung on the cross between him and his fellow criminal. Nor do we really know what he was asking when he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Whatever it was for which he was hoping Jesus no doubt exceeded his expectations as he says, “today, you will be with me in paradise.” How often have you wished that Jesus would have used a few more of his dying breaths and had gone on to say, “and this what paradise will be like.”

I do not know what may come to your mind when you hear that word paradise. As critical as some people can be I would not be surprised that there have even been people who have paid out more than \$880 a night to stay in the Four Seasons Resort in Bora Bora who said I do not know what that reviewer meant but this is no paradise to me. We probably all have our own pictures of what Jesus was offering to this dying criminal. Certainly if you have come here this morning hoping for a definitive description of paradise then I am afraid that you will go away disappointed and needing to consult TripAdvisor or some other travel website.

As I reflected on the words of Jesus what struck me in his response is the way in which he says, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” In this response Jesus affirms that being remembered in his kingdom meant sharing paradise with

him. Jesus was not offering him some tropical island where he and maybe even his fellow criminal could be alone and could exclaim, “This place has shown me paradise.” Jesus is assuring him that paradise was something that they would share together. To be remembered in the kingdom is to share life with the king.

This morning as we have heard our Scripture readings I wonder which words were the most familiar to us. “Today, you will be with me in paradise,” or “and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever?” I think probably for most of us we would have to say that we have read and even sung the latter words far more than the former. We may hear the words of Psalm 23 at funeral services because of the way in which they remind us of that valley of the shadow of death, but as we face the reality of death those final words also speak of our hope as we affirm “surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” We may not be able to describe the house of the Lord any better than we can describe paradise, but we know how the psalm begins, “The Lord is my shepherd.” The one in whose house we look forward to dwelling is the one whose concern and compassion for us is affirmed throughout the psalm.

Jesus says, “Today you will be with me in paradise,” to a man who like himself was hanging on a cross to die. If he looked down from his cross this criminal may well have seen the soldiers taking his clothes and any other few possessions he may have had. It is very doubtful that at that moment he possessed the over \$880.00 to spend one night in the place someone suggested had given her a picture of paradise. But to this man whom that hotel with its picture of paradise would have turned away, the door of paradise is opened and not just for one night but forever. As Cecil Frances Alexander put it in her children’s hymn on the death of Jesus,

He died that we might be forgiven, He died to make us good,
That we might go at last to heaven saved by his precious blood.

There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin;
He only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in.

The promise of Jesus “Today, you will be with me in paradise,” is our assurance that the price has been paid not because of what we have done but because of what Jesus has done for us. As we come as guests invited to his table, so he invites us to remember all that he has done for us and to come and to share in this meal which is a foretaste of paradise, that heavenly banquet with him. As we prepare to come to this table and as we think about what it means to us to have that privilege of sharing paradise with him, Isaac Watts in his paraphrase of Psalm 23 speaks so profoundly of the welcome God wants to extend to us as we come to experience paradise in the house of the Lord. He says that dwelling in the house of the Lord can mean that there we can “find a settled rest, while others go and come, no more a stranger, or a guest, but like a child at home.” This is the welcome that God wants to give us through Jesus Christ as he remembers us as part of God’s kingdom and promises to us that he will be with us in paradise. Let us claim and celebrate that welcome as we join in Isaac Watts’ hymn of assurance, “My shepherd will supply my need” found at No. 172.

PSALM 23

My Shepherd Will Supply My Need 172

RESIGNATION CMD

Para. Isaac Watts, 1719; alt. 1972 Walker's *Southern Harmony*, 1835
Harm. Dale Grotenhuis, 1986

C C G C G Am AmG C Am Em F C G C

1. My Shep-herd will sup-ply my need; Je-ho-vah is His name;
2. When I walk through the shades of death Your pres-ence is my stay;
3. The sure pro-vi-sions of my God At-tend me all my days;

F C G C Em Am F G C F C F C G C

In pas-tures fresh He makes me feed, Be-side the liv-ing stream.
One word of Your sup-port-ing breath Drives all my fears a-way.
O may Your House be my a-bode, And all my work be praise.

G C F C Dm G C Am Em F Dm Am

He brings my wan-dering spir-it back, When I for-sake His ways;
Your hand, in sight of all my foes, Does still my ta-ble spread;
There would I find a set-tled rest, While oth-ers go and come;

F C G C Em Am F G C F C F C G C

And leads me, for His mer-cy's sake, In paths of truth and grace.
My cup with bless-ings o-ver-flows, Your oil a-noints my head.
No more a strang-er, or a guest, But like a child at home.

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