"The City Limits" -- John 19:8-22

April 5, 2000 -- Lent
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls

5 Whoever secretly slanders his neighbor, Him I will destroy;
The one who has a haughty look and a proud heart, Him I will not endure.
6 My eyes shall be on the faithful of the land, That they may dwell with me;
He who walks in a perfect way, He shall serve me.
7 He who works deceit shall not dwell within my house;
He who tells lies shall not continue in my presence.
8 Early I will destroy all the wicked of the land,
That I may cut off all the evildoers from the city of the LORD. (Psalm 101:5-8)

I. The Exiled Sinners

It is the consistent teaching of Scripture that sinners cannot exist in the presence of God. We spoke this truth ourselves as we read the Introit tonight, from Psalm 101: Evildoers are cut off from the "city of the LORD," from wherever God is present.

This is true at Mt. Sinai, when the Lord gives Moses the Ten Commandments. Once sanctified, Moses is allowed to climb the mountain and enter into the cloud of glory that declares God's presence there; however, none of the Israelites below are even to step foot on the mountain. It is true at the Old Testament temple: No one, save the priests, are able to enter into the Holy Place; even they have to make a burnt offering first, or they are not saved from certain and immediate death.

We hear and understand this important truth in Isaiah 6, when the prophet has his vision of the Lord in the temple. Confronted by the glory of God, the prophet does not dance with glee or leap for joy; he declares, "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts." (Is. 6:5). The sinner cannot be in the presence of God. To test this is to invite the Lord's wrath and destruction.

We hear of this once again in the Old Testament lesson for this evening from Genesis 3, as Adam and Eve are exiled from the Garden of Eden. The first man and wife are created perfect in every way, and placed in a Garden where the Lord Himself walks in the cool of the day. This garden is Paradise, but it is not enough for them; not content simply to be the creatures of God, they sin because they want to be like God Himself.

Their disobedience brings horrific consequences. For Adam's sin, God curses the ground; Adam's efforts at cultivating the world will bring no easy benefits now. His attempts to provide for his family will be met with thorn and thistle, blight and pestilence. The daily satisfaction of labor will be mixed with frustration and pain. For Eve's sin, God curses labor and delivery; the most joyous event of childbirth will be accompanied by exquisite pain.

But these judgments are hardly the consequence of sin; we might say that they are merely reminders of the greater evil. The pains of daily and natal labor declare a greater pain, a killing separation-no

longer can Adam and Eve dwell in paradise. They are to be exiled from the Garden of Eden. But the loss of the Garden is not the greatest separation. The sinful schism is this: Now unrighteous, Adam and Eve can no longer dwell in the presence of God. Their exile from the Garden of Eden, more than anything, declares that they can no longer be in God's presence.

The Lord expels those sinners from His Garden; but though they can not look upon His face anymore because of their sin, He does not leave them alone, nor does He fail to care for them. He takes the life of an animal so that He can clothe their nakedness and shame, foretelling that their sins will be covered. But such a symbolic action is not enough, so God puts His promise into Words: And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel (Genesis 3:15).

Thus the Lord promises: the time is coming when the Savior will come and crush the head of Satan. By destroying sin, death and the devil, the Savior will end the exile of the sinners. By the Savior's work, they will be able to live in the presence of God once more. Not just for a walk in the cool of the day, but for eternity.

This Savior is your hope as well, dear sons of Adam and daughters of Eve. We are still born with the original sin that entered the world through the sin of our first parents. We are still born separated from God, sinful and iniquitous. Therefore, we cannot hope to live in His gracious and glorious presence forever-except a Savior come and save us.

That Savior has come and redeemed you. You are no longer sinners exiled from God's favor, for the Savior has been exiled for you.

II. The Exiled Savior

In our Gospel lesson tonight, the Savior stands before Pilate. As we have already discussed in our previous services, He stands there for you. He accepts the accusations silently because he accepts the guilt of your transgressions. He wears the crown of thorns because He bears the curse for your iniquity. He wears the purple, bloodstained robe because He burdens Himself with your crimson sins.

The Savior stands before Pilate, and the hapless ruler declares Jesus to be innocent-then orders Him to be crucified. The sentence is carried out swiftly: the Innocent Man is burdened with His own instrument of death and forced to drag it all the way to Golgotha, the Place of the Skull. We will speak more of this journey next week. But for now, let us content ourselves with this: the Savior is led out of the city.

To be crucified, Jesus must be exiled from the city of Jerusalem. This is not just a matter of taste, that executions shouldn't take place within the city limits. There is a more profound teaching here. Jerusalem is the Holy City-holy because of the temple of God. At the time of the Passion, the temple is where God dwells with His people, where He is present with His grace for them. Remember, only a sanctified priest could enter the temple; a foreign sinner could not even enter the courts of the temple because he was unclean. And if such a sinner is not allowed on the temple grounds, how much more so the One who bears all the sins of all the world?!

The condemned Savior leaves the city of Jerusalem because He is forsaken by God. He is hung on a

cross between two thieves, a declaration of His guilt-our guilt, but carried by Him. So He thirsts on the cross-as does the damned master of Lazarus in hell (Lk. 16:24), because He too is cut off from the living waters of the Father's grace. And in the end, the mournful cry is heard: "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" The Savior is more than symbolically exiled from the holy city of Jerusalem. He is exiled from God's gracious presence, for His Father turns His face away and damns His Son for the sins of the world. Crucified, then, He does not just endure the physical torment; He is also subjected to the torments of hell.

The first Adam wanted to become God, and so he died. The second Adam became man to die for the first. The first Adam was exiled from Paradise because of his sin. The second Adam was exiled to the cross so that the first might regain Paradise once more.

The second Adam is the exiled Savior to die for the sins of the world. Tonight's epistle from Hebrews 13 directs us to this same vivid truth: When an animal was sacrificed so that its shed blood was brought into the Most Holy Place by the high priest, the animal was taken outside of the camp and burned. This was nothing else than a foretelling of our Lord Jesus Christ, whose body was crucified outside the city so that His blood might make atonement for our sins before God Himself: Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate (Heb. 13:12).

Therefore, as the darkness of Good Friday draws ever nearer, behold the stumbling, exiled Savior as He leaves the city gates. This would be a picture of you, O sinner, dragging the weight of your sin through life and stumbling only toward death and judgment. But the Lord Jesus Christ has walked the way of suffering for you. He has been exiled from the presence of God so that you may enter into God's glorious presence.

Of course, the story does not end on Good Friday. We eagerly anticipate Easter Sunday and the shouts of "He is risen indeed!" The Savior is exiled no longer, but sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty. Therefore, He who rose from the dead into God's presence will raise you from the dead as well. In the meantime, as you await that glorious Last Day, the Lord who bore your sins on the cross now bears His grace to you. He remains hidden, of course, for your sinful flesh must be sloughed by death and raised anew before you can tolerate His glory. But make no mistake: The Lord who thirsted with your sin on the cross now pours living water upon you in the font. He who declared "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me" now declares that God has not forsaken you. And He-whose body was so abused, and whose blood was shed-gives you His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, that you may dwell in His presence forever.

In Psalm 24, the psalmist asks, Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who may stand in His holy place (24:3)? The answer: He who has clean hands and a pure heart, Who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, Nor sworn deceitfully (24:4). Is this you or me, that we may come into the presence of God? Certainly not. This is only true of Christ. But Christ, of clean hands and pure heart, who did not lift up His soul to an idol or swear deceitfully-has borne our sins and given us His righteousness. Therefore you can dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

O Lord Jesus Christ, may Your thirst which You endured on the cross quench the thirst of my soul and protect me from the eternal thirst; may Your perfect atoning sacrifice, which You accomplished on the cross, be a comfort to my soul; give me grace that my soul thirst for You, the Fountain of Life; and, grant that I may commend my soul into Your hands at the hour of death. Amen.