Follow Jesus Sermon Series

"Follow the Thief" -- Hebrews 11:6

Lent Midweek 3 Sermon

Grace, mercy and peace to you in the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dear Baptized,

In the fourth chapter of Genesis two men have presented themselves before the LORD God ... kinsmen, blood brothers, sons of Adam. Each bears an offering to the altar of Yahweh. The result? Well, shortly, one will depart to be with the LORD and live forever in the gracious Presence of the Father and of the … Son and of the Holy Spirit, while the other will soon depart from the Presence of the LORD and die in the cursed land of other idols. God was pleased with the one brother and had no regard for the other.

Why? The answer is the same as the time when two men ... both sons of Adam, worldly brothers, kinsmen according to the ways of sin ... have been presented before the LORD God and His governing authorities. Each will suffer the sentence handed down by the Law. Death. They are criminals. Convicted, for each is guilty. Sentenced, for each is caught. Dying, for each is being crucified. Each will depart this world before this day ends. The end result? Well, shortly one will depart to be with the LORD and live forever in the gracious Presence of the Father and of the … Son and of the Holy Spirit, while the other will soon depart from the Presence of the LORD and die apart from Him. God was pleased with the one sinner and had no regard for the other.

The sermon title this evening is "Follow the Thief," and if asked, which thief?, you might reply with the fact that the answer is an easy one. Follow the man who ended up with the LORD forever. True. But why follow this criminal? Let's face it, the life of that thief is neither the role model for children nor the pattern for the procrastinating elderly who are drawing near the end of their days. However, while there are a legion of reasons why one ought not follow him, there is also most certainly one in which he serves as an example for us and in which "Follow the Thief" is a Godly call.

Two weeks ago we heard the truth that "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Hebrews 9:22). Tonight, from the Holy Spirit, via the pen of the same author we hear once again concerning God ...

... "without faith it is impossible to please God."

Thus far the Word of the LORD our God as recorded in Hebrews 11:6.

Why Abel and not Cain? One is taken to be with the LORD and the other departs from the Presence of the LORD. Why was Abel's offering acceptable and not Cain's? Why was the one thief taken into Paradise while the other thief is left alone? The answer is not that God choose one to be saved eternally in Paradise and choose the other to be damned forever in hell. Indeed, the answer is not in

the desire of God, for the LORD God Almighty truly "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4). God swears this by His very being: "'As I live,' says the Lord GOD, 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?'" (Ezekiel 33:11).

The answer is not in the false teaching of a limited atonement, the wicked doctrine that not all sins find their payment on the cross. The Scriptures teach and the Good News is that Christ died for all sins. The Bible states that the Incarnate Son of God - Jesus, "is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2). God in Christ has paid the price for all sins, even of those who end up in hell, like Saul and like Judas.

The answer is not in the human reason which thinks, "If I do enough sparkling works in the eyes of God, then He will reward me by taking me to heaven," or "if I'm good enough to earn His favor, then I can climb Jacob's ladder into the Presence of the LORD." Wrong. The Bible states that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), and that we are all alike corrupt and "there is none that does good, no, not one" (Psalm 14:3) - not even Abel, not even Moses, not even Mary.

The difference between Cain and Abel, and between the two thieves is not in the will of God but in the heart of man. The Holy Scriptures tell us that the "Good News came to us just as to them: but the message which they heard did not benefit them, because it did not meet with faith in the hearers" (Hebrews 4:2). Or, as our sermon text for this night declares, "without faith it is impossible to please God."

Trust. Believing. Faith. So simple. And even this comes from God and is granted as a Divine gift. "For by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God - not because of works" (Ephesians 2:8-9). This is the gift that the Holy Spirit worked in the soul of the penitent thief on the cross who had heard the Word of God from the Messiah, the Redeemer, the King of the Jews Who hung next to him and Who had prayed and interceded on behalf of sinful man when He petitioned, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:43).

Not only did the two congregated on their crosses in the Presence of the LORD hear the Word from Jesus preached, they also heard the litany from the scoffing false preachers who taunted and the mocking soldiers who jested about Jesus being a savior who could not save himself and about this Christ, the King of the Jews who could not un-pin himself from the tree. While the other thief gave no admission of sin, the faithful thief made a confession of sin and called his fellow man to repentance. He also made a beautiful confession of his sinless Savior on the center cross. When the faithless criminal screamed at Jesus, "saying, 'Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us," the other thief "rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong'" (Luke 23:39-41).

Follow the thief, for this penitent man confessed the life everlasting in the world to come; that is, he understood that death would not be the end of him. He could die in peace - peace with God even though suffering justly because of the decree of death and the nails of the executioner. He perceived that he would, though he die, yet would he live. Thus "he said, 'Jesus, remember me when You come into Your Kingdom'" (Luke 23:42).

God answers the prayer of a righteous man such as this penitential plea for eternal life. It was for such a reason as this that Jesus is enthroned upon the altar of the cross. Thus Jesus said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43).

This man now hangs with Jesus. This man could truly say, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ Who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, Who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

You, dear soul, may state the same truth concerning yourself. Or "do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His Death? We were buried therefore with Him by Baptism into Death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with Him in a Death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a Resurrection like His. We know that our old self was crucified with Him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him. For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over Him. The Death He died He died to sin, once for all, but the Life He lives He lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:3-11).

Dear Baptized, that is, those of you who have been crucified with Christ, Baptism is not simple water only, but it is the water comprehended in God's command and connected with God's Word. It works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this ... to all who believe this ... for "without faith it is impossible to please God."

You ask, "How can water do such great things?" The answer: "It is not the water indeed that does them, but the Word of God which is in and with the water, and faith, ... and faith, which trusts such Word of God in the water" ... for "without faith it is impossible to please God."

Follow the Thief, not because of who he was or what he had done. Follow him because in this man you have an example of God's grace and mercy befitting and benefiting this faithful soul. The rest of this man's life was not easy; rather it was an excruciating, horrid three or four hours. In a few minutes Jesus would depart in victory, and therefore, the penitent man would be able to depart in peace - even though he would remain on the cross, and even though he would behold the hammer coming to break his legs, and even though He went through the valley of the shadow of death. He would be with the Lord in Paradise before 6:00pm on that day. Follow in his train for this faith-gifted man beheld Jesus - for this man followed the King and is with the Lord in eternal Kingdom.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the Pioneer and Perfecter of our faith, Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:1-2). Amen.

Dear Baptized, "since we have a great Priest over the House of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he

who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:21-25). Amen.