# "Paradise Lost, Regained, Forever"
# Luke 23:43

Lent 2 - February 27, 2002

The Third Word

"Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

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I. Paradise Lost

The man and woman stumble out of the garden into a strange, harsh world. Things were perfect this morning, literally so: no blemish, no sickness, no pain. They enjoyed the presence of God-He came to walk with them in that garden, and God even went so far as to entrust the man with His Word to preach to his wife, and any children who would come along: "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." (Gen. 2:16-17)

But Pastor Adam failed to preach this Word of the Lord to his wife when the serpent spoke to them by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; instead, he let her eat. He ate, too. Everything has suddenly changed.

Adam and Eve are naked and ashamed. They have stripped themselves of righteousness and cannot bear the sight of God anymore. They hide from Him; though they are quickly found, and God announces to them some new, harsh realities.

For the woman, sin will manifest itself in pain during childbirth. Eve was given the privilege of bearing physical life into the world. Now that moment of joy will be clouded instead with agony-a reminder that every child will face death because of sin. Adam's labor is cursed: As he seeks to till the ground for food, the ground will produce thorns and thistles instead; these will be constant reminders that sin is in the world. For both, and for their offspring, death is now certain. They will return to the dust from which God made the man.

The consequences continue. To clothe Adam and Eve, the Lord uses animal skins; a sacrifice must be made in order to cover up their unrighteousness. Furthermore, they are evicted from the Garden of Eden, cast out of Paradise. The chance to eat from the Tree of Life is gone, and they make their way out into the fallen world.

Among the many curses is this one: Through the lens of sin, things will not appear as they should. Evil will look attractive, seductive and powerful. At the same time, the things of God will not. Where God's glory was beautiful back in Eden, it will terrify them now. His laws will appear to be useless and a burden, a bunch of hoops and nothing more. Worse, His plan for salvation will seem silly to them, easy to reject as ludicrous. This is not how it's supposed to be, but it is how sin makes it out to be; and so it will appear to all who are slaves to sin.

But-although it will seem silly to the world-there is a plan of salvation, for the Lord is faithful and

will not leave His people without hope. He promises the serpent, "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" (Gen. 3:15). There will be sin and pain and death. But the Savior is coming to restore Paradise. The Tree of Life is locked away for a while, but another tree of life is coming. It won't look all that inviting to eyes jaundiced by sin, but life it will provide.

II. Paradise Regained

On a hill called Golgotha, three men are hanged on crosses one Friday. Two of the men are convicted as robbers, and there is little doubt that these are violent men who are getting what they deserve. The One in the middle, however, is hardly a violent man; He hangs on the cross because He claims to be the Son of God, the King of the Jews.

He certainly doesn't look like a King, much less the Son of God. There is no cloud of glory around Him; and if one believes that gods don't bleed, He certainly fails the test. He is stripped to naked indignity; perhaps the crown of thorns remains. His hands and feet are spiked to rough wood, and he appears helpless to all who behold Him. He hardly looks holy or powerful, but hangs accused of all sorts of things He hasn't done.

The crowd sure doesn't treat Him like the King or Son of God. The rulers and the crowds mock Him, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God." The Roman soldiers join the jeering: "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself." The disciples respond by silence; they've gone. Not much faith there. Even one of the crucified robbers tees off and joins in: "If You are the Christ, save yourselves and us."

No. He doesn't look like the King or the Son of God.

But remember what we said before: Because of sin, everything looks different than it should, and not as it really is.

The crowds are wrong: This is the Christ, the chosen of God, despite what they say; and He's not going to save Himself because He is dying to save them. He is taking their place on that cross, as their substitute, and that explains so much about the scene. Adam's sin stripped him naked of righteousness before God; the Son of God allows Himself to be stripped by unrighteous man as He takes their place and dies for their unrighteousness. Animals died to cover Adam and Eve with their skins; the Son of God dies to cover their sin with His blood. Adam's sin brings thorns and thistles; the Son of God wears that cursed crown of thorns on His head, because He is taking the curse of sin to His grave-to bury it there. Adam blamed others for his sin; Jesus accepts all the blame upon Himself to take the sin away.

Not everything appears as it ought to, but the Word of God is certain. Despite appearances, this Victim is the Son of God. And despite appearances, that hideous cross is your tree of life-for there your death is defeated. It is why, during this season of Lent, that the proper preface before Holy Communion reads, "Who on the tree of the cross didst give salvation unto mankind that, whence death arose [from a tree], thence Life also might rise again; and that he who by a tree once overcame [Satan] might likewise by a tree be overcome, through Christ our Lord…" (TLH, p. 25).

This is the Son of God, and this is the tree of life.

But eyes that are blinded by sin can't see this; they just see a jeered man dying on a cross. No one sees the truth.

Except one. One of the robbers sees, because one of the robbers believes.

The Roman soldiers have preached the law to this robber in a most effective way. He has sinned, and he knows far too well that the wages of sin is death. He has heard Jesus speak the Word of the Lord twice now; the first time He has prayed forgiveness for His enemies, the second He has cared for His mother. He has examined himself, and by faith he makes a good confession. To the other robber he demands, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward for our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." Then he says to the Savior, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."

It's an astonishing confession. He agrees with the Law that he has sinned, and that he is only getting what he deserves-death. He goes on to declare that Jesus is completely innocent and sinless, for He has done nothing wrong. He also acknowledges that Jesus is Lord, and that He will live after this death and come into His kingdom. And by speaking to Jesus, he trusts that the Lord is present there, and present to forgive.

This is certainly a confession made by faith. This is not the decision of the mob below which he has adopted, nor the assertions of the leaders. It is not the opinion of the other robber, whose sinful nature has so hardened his heart. This penitent thief has not received this confession of faith from man, but from God.

An astonishing confession, and an unlikely source. But the Lord will not leave the world without a preacher. If the religious leaders, civic officials, disciples and worshipers fail to proclaim the Gospel, the Lord will call a criminal at his death to announce the truth.

It is then that Jesus speaks a third time: "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Paradise is back, regained for the thief on the cross. It is certainly not his because of his life of good works and service to his fellow man. It is most assuredly, certainly his because of the work and service of the Savior. On that cross, Jesus is suffering God's wrath for that thief. And for Adam. And for all the world. If Jesus suffers all of God's wrath for sin on that cross, then God has no wrath left for us. Therefore, the thief is welcomed into Paradise, for the sake of Jesus. Paradise regained-life eternal with the Lord. There the thief can stand in the glorious presence of God with rejoicing, not terror. There, once again, everything appears as it ought.

III. Paradise Forever

This is a difficult thing to comprehend for us sinners, especially since we lack one advantage of Adam and Eve: We have never been to Paradise. We've never seen things the way they ought to be. It is therefore important to be well-warned, to learn from the sermon by the thief on the cross and to rejoice all the more in the Lord's gracious reply.

Be well-warned: Because of sin, things do not appear in this world as they ought to.

The Savior and His cross are not highly exalted; instead, all too often, they are denied-spurned as myth or history. The rejection can still take place as an angry mob, or can appear as a reasoned and respected scholar who politely, humorously teaches blasphemy.

The Lord appears absent, because the world demands that He be present on its terms-miraculous works, power, glory, approval of sin. The Lord, however, is most present; and He is present in His means of grace.

The means of grace, too, are scorned by most. Holy Absolution is met with a sneer: "Talk is cheap, and someone telling me that I'm forgiven isn't going to do anything. It's up to me." Holy Baptism is likewise shouldered aside: "What's a little water going to do?" Holy Communion is also scorned: "It's just a symbol, nothing more."

Such dismissals shouldn't surprised us. The world would not acknowledge Jesus when it could see Him in the flesh; it can see no better now that His presence is hidden in Word and Sacrament.

And this is where we learn from the thief. We don't listen to the majority mob, nor do we listen to anyone just because he or she has a few letters at the end of their name. We listen to the Word of God, for the Word of God is sure. It is therefore absolutely certain that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has died in your place on that cross-to take away your sin, to suffer your death, to give you His life. It is equally most certain that Jesus gives you this forgiveness and life in His Word and Sacraments.

With forgiveness, He also gives faith needed to trust in Him, and to be assured of these words: "Assuredly I say to you: You will be with Me in Paradise." The gates of that Paradise called Eden were shut behind Adam and Eve because of their sin; but Christ has flung wide open the gates of that Paradise called "Heaven" for you.

What joy and privilege we have. The thief had the privilege of declaring the truth to the world on Golgotha that day, and the Lord entrusts that privilege to His Church here at the corner of Orchard and Cassia. We therefore boldly proclaim this message of forgiveness; and the Good News that, though we missed out on the first Paradise and Tree of Life, Christ Jesus has restored these things to us by His death. Thus we wait in joyful expectation; and as we wait, we gladly hear His Word. For as St. John writes in tonight's epistle, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God."

Assuredly, this Paradise is yours; for you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen