***See below for readings*** April 14, 2017

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Good Friday

**Were You There?**

*Introduction*

 By using this prop, I do not mean to be glib or superficial about this most serious of days, Good Friday. I use this example so that you can understand the meaning of our Good Friday reflections.

 Some children know what this is. Maybe a few adults, too. Someone drew this picture, and in the picture they hid pictures of other things. *e.g. This is a picture of a lake, but in the picture is hidden a wheelbarrow. Can I find it?*

 In a way, on this Good Friday we are looking for hidden pictures in a bigger picture. Instead of looking for pictures in a magazine, we are going to look at five different Good Friday pictures. Then I am going to ask you if you can find yourself in each of those pictures. Maybe the best title I can give to these meditations is “Were you there?”

 We will have six readings. Five of the readings will have short devotions of about three minutes followed by a song. The reading of Jesus’ death will have no devotion or song, but instead will be followed with three minutes of silent meditation. You will be able to follow along in your bulletin.



**I. Were you there with the Acquitted Criminal? Mark 15:5-15**

 *Mark 15:5Jesus made no reply, and Pilate was amazed. 6Now it was the custom at the Feast to release a prisoner whom the people requested. 7A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. 8The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did. 9“Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate, 10knowing it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. 11But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead. 12“What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?” Pilate asked them. 13“Crucify him!” they shouted. 14“Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!” 15Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.*

 As you look, you can feel the tension. The crowd standing outdoors is shouting angry words at a man on a throne. The man on the throne, surrounded by guards, is in charge, but you can also see fear and doubt. He fears losing control. Pilate.

 Next to him stands a man. The man is bloody from head to toe, barely able to stand. You can tell he is the center of the controversy. He is silent. Jesus.

 Pilate knows that Jesus is innocent, but the crowd is going to riot if Jesus is set free. But the crowd has demanded that he release a prisoner named Barabbas. Pilate faces a dilemma. He has been asked to release an enemy of the state, and asked to condemn an innocent man. What will he do?

 These Jews hate the Roman emperors. Pilate knows that. So Pilate takes a gamble. Maybe if Pilate labels this Jesus as “The King Of The Jews”, maybe then they will decide that they want the “King of the Jews” to be freed.

 But no, the crowd insists, “Crucify him!” Pilate is afraid. In order to avoid a riot Pilate releases Barabbas. Barabbas walks free, out the gate, into the crowd, untouched by justice.

 Where are you in this picture?

 I see a picture of you right next to Barabbas as he walks out the gate to freedom. You are the guilty criminal who is pardoned, acquitted. In spite of our many repeated sins, we walk free without punishment.

 We are criminals. We do not run from the state or local police. We are condemned by God’s Law. We deserve what that bloodied man has received. We deserve beatings with fists and whips. We deserve thorns, not pricking our skin, but pounded into our flesh. We deserve our flesh to be burned, to be abandoned by God.

 But we walk free—unpunished, sinners, criminals who are declared not guilty.

 How can this happen? Because Jesus said, *“Not counting men’s sins against them… God made him who had no sin to be sin for us”* (2 Cor 5:19,21) Ah, freedom for you and me! But at a fearful cost to another man.

 We were there on Good Friday, with the acquitted criminal.



**II. Among the Ignorant Sinners Luke 23:32-34**

 *32Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with [Jesus] to be executed. 33When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. 34Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”*

 In the barracks, the centurion barks out names. It’s the duty roster. “You are assigned to crucifixion detail today. Three crucifixions.”

 The soldiers know what that means. They will go to the prison to find some starving, pitiful, beaten up Jews. They will mercilessly prod the men carrying heavy pieces of wood, not letting them rest until they get to the place where they will be executed. They will force the men to lie down on the cross, pound in the nails… and there is worse that I will not repeat… and they will sit there for hours watching men die.

 I don’t know what the soldiers thought. Maybe they felt just a bit of pity witnessing such pain and suffering. On the other hand maybe the soldiers were only too happy to slowly execute these rebellious Jews.

 In any case, these soldiers were doing what they were supposed to do. Whatever you might say about the inhumanity of it all, they were upholding the God-ordained authority of the Roman state.

 But this crucifixion was different. They were not crucifying someone deserving punishment. Here they crucified the sinless Son of God.

 They were ignorant, but they were not innocent. God’s word tells us even when someone *“is unaware of [sin]… he will be guilty.”*(Leviticus 5:4) Sins we do accidentally—when maybe we can really say, “I didn’t know it was a sin”—even for those sins we still are guilty and punishable. So it was here with these soldiers.

 You and I have often been in those soldiers’ shoes. How often do we sin without even meaning too. We wound with our words because we don’t think about what we are saying. We fall into sins of dishonesty before we can even stop ourselves. We feel anger and hatred even when we try to choke it. We give in to temptations of every kind because we aren’t prepared. We really don’t mean to sin, we just do sin – as naturally as we breathe.

 We were there with the soldiers ignorant of whom they were crucifying, unknowingly heaping up our guilt.

 But let us return to the gruesome picture of the cross. However the soldiers felt about crucifixions in general, at this one they were amazed. They had heard angry curses. They had been spit upon. But today they heard something new, ***“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”***

 There we are! In the soldiers’ shoes! Because Jesus still pleads for us. He sees our sins of weakness and asks for our forgiveness. *“Christ Jesus, who died…is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us”* (Rom 8:34). Not my words, but words of comfort for those who mourn over their continual sinfulness and their inability to live the life that they want to live for their Saviour. ***“Father, forgive them.”*** Amen.



**III. Are You There Among the Willful Sinners Pharisees Mt. 27:39-43**

 *39Those who passed by hurled insults at [Jesus], shaking their heads 40and saying, “You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!” 41In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. 42“He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! He’s the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. 43He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’”*

 As you look at the three crosses under a darkened sky, you watch the soldiers. You can understand them. They are doing what they were ordered to do.

 You also see a few women and one or two men mourning the man on the center cross. You can understand them too.

 But there is another group. Truly they must be sick men. At this execution, they are laughing, they are mocking the one on the center cross. They spit at him, insult him. How can anyone hate that much? These are the religious leaders of Israel, Israel’s spiritual watchmen. They heard Jesus’ words. They could not deny his miracles. Yet they enjoy watching their Saviour die.

 Are you there in their midst? Have you been? Sound ridiculous?

 Do you know God’s law, but still walk out of church with intent to sin. Will you continue to cheat your employer? Will you proudly look down on authority? Do you return to adultery or immorality? Will you continue in your lies? Do you know that you should help, but prefer to keep all for yourself? Are you unwilling to forgive a grudge? You know these things are sin. You know that God, not just a preacher, said so. Yet you somehow think that God’s Law doesn’t apply to you or in this situation.

 If you are led to see that you stand there with the willful sinners, if you can see that you have known God’s will and still plunged into sin, then be afraid. The danger is great.

 If you are willfully sinning today, against your better knowledge, I have no good news for you. Yes, Jesus did die for your sins. “Christ came to save the worst of sinners.” But you have chosen to throw away gift of forgiveness. To you, God’s forgiveness is nothing more than a banana peel you throw out the window of your car. When you sin willfully, you say, “I don’t want forgiveness.” You have chosen God as your enemy.

Jesus once said to some willful sinners, *“You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.”* (Rev. 3:17-18)

 If you have willfully sinned but returned from near disaster, thank God. Thank him right now. And if you are still out there sinning because that is what you want, you are mocking Jesus with those willful sinners. Please, please, repent and return. Amen.



**IV. Are You There with the Repentant Sinner Luke 23:39-43**

 *39One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” 40But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? 41We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” 42Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’” 43Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”*

 Step closer. Look into the faces of the three men dying on crosses. All three know they are dying. Look at the two crucified with Jesus. One, he is a hard case. In spite of losing his life-long rebellion against authority and God, he is still defiant. He mocks Jesus. ***“Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”***

 But the other, at the end of his road, is beginning to understand. Nails holding him to pieces of lumber, he realizes that he wasted his life. He realizes that perhaps the world would have been a better place without him. He knows that this inhuman crucifixion execution was no human rights violation. It was what he deserved. Blessed are you if you can see yourself with that man.

 It is not that somehow you must suffer so that you can be saved. But at some point in your life, if you are truly a Christian, God had to break your will. He had to confront you with your sin. He had to show you that crucifixion is better than what you could have hoped for. God had to make you feel the weight of your sin. Only when you knew your need, could you truly “believe” in Jesus, that one crucified for you.

 Maybe God gifted you so that the Holy Spirit worked repentance and faith in your heart in some soft and quiet way as your listened to a preacher, or to your parents teach you about your Saviour, or through the water of Baptism while you were still an infant. Or maybe you were like this man on the cross: you had to run up hard against God’s Law in prison, rejected by your fellow man, wasted by drugs, depressed or wanting to end your own life.

 Whatever the means God used, though it may have even been great pain or trauma for you, I thank God that he did so. Because when you look at that repentant believer on the cross next to Jesus, and perhaps can even see your own likeness in that man, Jesus could say to a man crucified ***“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in Paradise.”*** Those weren’t empty words. Those words were something that even someone being crucified could find hope in.

 Thank God that we have been brought to repentance, again and again. So we remember Jesus’ words of promise, not only to one man dying on that first Good Friday, but to all believers *“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”* (Rev. 2:7) Amen.



**V. Are You There among the Willing Servants Luke 23:50-56**

 *50Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, 51who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea and he was waiting for the kingdom of God. 52Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus’ body. 53Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid. 54It was Preparation Day, and the Sabbath was about to begin. 55The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. 56Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment.*

 It is getting late in the afternoon and the sun sinks low. On a normal day, you would be thinking about preparing supper, or what last things needed to be done before the day was over.

 But today all such thoughts were gone. You had watched Jesus die.

 As you watched the crowd near the three crosses, you saw the mockers leave. They enjoyed mocking a dying man, but there was no point in mocking a dead one.

 The small detachment of soldiers remain on duty since two criminals still are not dead.

 But there is one more group. You see a small knot of mourners not yet ready to leave Jesus even though he is dead. Are you there?

 I pray that it is among these you find yourself all the time.

 As a forlorn and bereft mother mourns at the cross, as other women and perhaps a couple men remain at vigil, suddenly a well-dressed man almost runs up. This man says that, somehow, he has gotten permission to give Jesus a decent burial, rather than to simply throw his body in a shallow pit as would normally be done. The small group still at the cross nod in agreement with Joseph’s plan. They will bury Jesus. They had walked with Jesus for many weeks, supporting him and his disciples from their own wealth. But they had been prevented from serving his needs in his last day of life. But at least they can honor him in his death, now that his tormentors will leave him alone.

 This man named Joseph had acted quickly and boldly. He had believed in Jesus. He had seen the miracles, heard the teaching and he had thrown the load of his sins on the Lamb of God. He probably did not yet know what to think about Jesus’ death, but this Joseph wanted to serve Jesus even in his death.

 I pray that among this group you find yourselves. That you will always be numbered among the willing servants of Jesus. That you, who every year return for a long look at the cross of Jesus Christ, are inspired to serve him for the rest of yours lives, both in the big and little ways.

 Only great love can move us to do this. Not our love, but God’s. May God’s great love be the food and fuel that powers us to do great things for him at all times. Amen.