

## The Cross and Paradise

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### Good Friday Ecumenical Service

*Luke 23:39-43 — One of the criminals who was crucified there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your reign as king.” Jesus replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”*

When I read this second word of Jesus, I think of Sister Gloria Perryman, one of several women who raised me at Greater New Hope Missionary Baptist Church in Sherman, TX. Sister Perryman gave me some of the best hugs of my childhood (very well-cushioned hugs, if you will), and whenever she called me “Baby,” which was often, I felt warm, safe, and loved. There’s a home video of me, a VHS back at my parents’ house in Texas, of me at age 5, singing “Jesus Loves Me” as a solo in our church. And after every single line I sing, you can hear Sister Perryman’s voice, off to the side, saying “Yeeessss, Baby, yeeesss!”

Like most of the members at Greater New Hope, Sister Perryman was poor. When I was 11, 12, and 13 years old, my mom and I would pick up groceries and bring them to her apartment every once in a while. As I recall, most of the times we visited her, we could sense that she was living under a weight of sorrow. Even as she spoke words of gratitude to us for bringing the groceries, and even as she tried to exude that personal warmth that everyone at church knew so well, the heaviness and sadness, deep within her voice, were unmistakable. I couldn’t have used this language back then, but looking back now, it seems obvious to me that she was living with depression.

Around that time, when I was a young teenager, Sister Perryman’s son George was trying to appeal his death sentence. My father spoke at the appeal, but it seems that, by then, there was nothing to be done. Capital punishment in that state, as in many states today, is a powerful and well-oiled machine. It runs on vengeance and disdains redemption. My parents had driven Sister Perryman to visit her son in prison numerous times, and on the last day of his life, my dad drove her to the execution. She watched it through a thick glass wall, and she had a microphone through which she could speak into the death chamber. As she watched her son slowly die, Sister Perryman just said, over and over again, “I love you, Baby. God loves you. God loves you, Baby. I love you.”

This second word of Jesus, friends, is the only one of the seven to remind us that Jesus is not the only person being crucified here. In the verses leading up to this holy word, Jesus has been

spoken to by men who are dying the same death that he is. Although we as Christians certainly affirm that Jesus' death holds a unique significance, in a very real sense, it is not a unique death at all. He was not the first person to be crucified, nor was he the last. He was one of literally *thousands* of people who the Roman empire deemed deserving of this most excruciatingly painful, most degradingly shameful, most incomprehensible death. Certainly, from our perspective today, Jesus was unlike any other person who died on a cross, but from the perspective of the masses who were there when it happened, Jesus was just another man on Rome's death row.

According to the Gospel of Luke, however, there is no such thing as "just another man on death row." More so than the other three gospel accounts, Luke insists that those who the world devalues and derides, those who the powerful marginalize and stigmatize, *they* are the primary recipients of the good news. When Jesus inaugurates his ministry, in Luke 4, he does so by reading aloud the Hebrew scripture in Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." From its beginning, Jesus' ministry was *for* people like the condemned man by his side. Just as Luke expects us to see Jesus as more than just another man on death row, so Luke urges us to see the person next to him also as more than just another man on death row.

That's why Luke gives this man such a large role in the crucifixion narrative. This second convict is the last person to have an actual dialogue with Jesus before his death, and in fact the convict's words in vv. 40-42 of Luke 23 are by far the longest reported speech of *anyone* at the scene of crucifixion. If you add up all of the words in Jesus' seven last words, they amount to about as many words as are in the convict's speech. Think about that: this random criminal, who has played no role in Luke's story up to this point, he gets as many words as Jesus! It seems to me, friends, that Luke wants to draw our attention not just to the cross of Jesus, but to the crosses of others as well. Luke insists that we notice and listen to the victims of a murderous state and the outsiders in a callous society. And as we notice, as we listen, Luke invites us to embrace the good news: the good news that no one — *no one* — is beyond redemption, beyond the reach of grace.

In his second word, Jesus emphatically extends God's grace to this condemned man: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." The condemned man has displayed sincerity, humility, insightfulness, and desperation. He has acknowledged his own guilt, perceived Jesus' innocence, and asked Jesus to remember him — which, in the context of the Hebrew tradition, seems to mean to save him. But this man is not demanding instantaneous salvation; he knows, of course, that he is dying, and apparently he no longer entertains the hope of his physical body's rescue. Rather, he humbly asks that Jesus would save him when he comes into his reign as king.

Now, I'm guessing that the condemned man doesn't know the details here. He doesn't know when this king's reign will begin or what it will look like — he doesn't know exactly what he is asking. He simply trusts his sense about this Jesus; he trusts that God is uniquely present in and

at work through him, working to bring about God's perfect reign; he trusts that even as the placard above Jesus' head, "King of the Jews," is meant to mock the crucified prophet, he trusts that there is truth in that title; he trusts that this man Jesus has divine power and divine authority to lead God's people and to save people like him. So, relying on the little knowledge that he has, entrusting the sliver of his life that remains to this Jesus, the condemned man says, "If it's possible, Jesus, please, remember me. Whenever you can, bring me into your kingdom."

Jesus responds with words of comfort and words of salvation: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Like the condemned man, we ourselves can't say that we know much about this Paradise. What we do know is that God is there and when we are there, we are with Jesus, with God. And while the condemned man may have thought that Paradise was a long way off for him, Jesus assures him that *today*, they will be together there.

Of course, when you're nailed to a cross, "today" can't come soon enough. It's important to remember that despite Jesus' comforting proclamation of "today," the two of them are still far away from Paradise. Even after Jesus' second word, they are still suffering, still losing blood, still fighting for every single breath, still feeling the shame of their battered, naked bodies being exposed to loved ones and strangers alike. They are still being crucified. And yet, Jesus speaks with assurance of Paradise.

Friends, in your hour of greatest need, of greatest pain, of greatest shame, how do you proclaim God's promise of peace? When your beloved dies, when the cancer returns, when you really aren't sure if you will be alive at the end of the day, where is Paradise? When you watch the killing of your child through a glass wall, tell me: where is God's peace?

I can count on one hand the number of times I saw Sister Perryman in church after that day. Over the course of the next five or so years, her physical health deteriorated, and it seems that her mental and emotional health did as well. Just a few hours before she died, my family was visiting her in the hospital. She was hardly conscious. Just before I left, I stood next to her bedside, told her that I remembered my first solo in church and how she had helped me feel warm and safe and loved, and — at age 18 — I sang to her again: *Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to Him belong. They are weak, but He is strong.*

I will never comprehend the pain, the grief, the agony that Sister Perryman endured. But Jesus does. Her pain was his pain. Her son George's pain was his pain. And I trust that just as Jesus suffered alongside that condemned man who pleaded, "Remember me," so the spirit of Jesus, the spirit of God incarnate, suffered alongside George. And furthermore, though it surpasses my own understanding, I trust that the spirit of Jesus said to George, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Amen.