

Pastor Kris Litman-Koon
Date: 14 April 2019 - Palm Sunday
Lesson: Luke 23:32-43

As you reach the pinnacle of the hill, the sweat from your forehead is running into your eyes. It stings, but its pain is outmatched by the stinging of the sweat running into the numerous cuts on your body. The weight of the cross on your back is nearly unbearable, as you look up to see that you have about ten paces until you reach the spot prepared for you and your cross. “Keep moving, thief!” one of the processional guards yells in your ear. Ten paces... The realization hits you that these will be the final steps you will ever take in your life.

You don't recall your first steps, but you are certain your mother was there to cheer you on. One of your earliest memories, however, is of your mother taking you to the crowded street market. Standing at the edge of it, you were afraid to go in... afraid of the people... the noises... but mostly afraid of losing her forever and being left alone. Doesn't everyone fear that? Seeing the fear in you, she knelt to look you in the eye, grabbed you by the hand, and said with her trademark tone of reassurance, “Today you will be with me.” Those words filled you with hope, and you took those next steps with her into the market.

You are snapped out of that memory when the soldiers lift the cross from off your back and toss it to the ground. You pause for a moment, taking in the thought that this is the last time your feet will touch this earth. The soldiers quickly rip the remaining clothes off your body. They then wrestle you down on top of the cross. As they tie your arms to the cross bar, you see the two other crosses being carried to this pinnacle on the hill. One is carried by another thief like you, but the other is carried

by a man fully clothed. He's been forced to carry the cross for the man behind him, staggering and already reduced to wearing rags; that man has been ruthlessly beaten and whipped -- he's already half dead -- a crown of bloody thorns adorns his head. Only a handful of days ago, everyone was clamoring to see this man enter the city. He was someone special. He was supposed to usher in the kingdom of God, you had overheard. He had given people hope, but now... God only knows if there is a place for hope on a cross. The soldiers approach you with nails and a hammer. You're tied down, so the wrestling to get away is pointless, but you impulsively try anyway. As the first strikes of the hammer take place, you shut your eyes and enter a state of shock.

When you come to, the soldiers are hoisting your cross, with you on it, into in the hole they dug. The two other men have also been stripped, nailed into place, and raised up for all to see. Slowly the ringing in your head from the shock subsides enough to make out the taunts and jeers of all the people gathered there. Romans and Judeans... putting their differences aside to join together in torments and mocking. They don't know you. They don't know your story. Your heart is welling with contempt for each one of them when they make eye contact with you. In the midst of their hurled insults, the thrown rocks, and the spittle, you suddenly hear the man hanging next to you plea, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they do."

Your memories go back to your mother and that first trip to the market long ago. You had seen a basket of dates at your eye level. You were hungry. You took some, and before you knew it the vendor began berating you. Your mother shoved herself between the man and you, grabbed the dates from your hand and put them back in the basket. She faced the vendor and said, "Forgive the boy. He does not know what he does." After a moment of looking at her, the vendor gave a huff, and he waved you and your mother along. She knelt down... and looked you in the eye.

With a wry tone of reassurance your mother said, “Forgive him. He doesn’t know what he is doing either.”

You snap out of it to see that the soldiers are gambling to get the clothing of this man many people thought would be the Messiah; that prophesied Jewish liberator. The religious leaders approach the crosses, look up at the one in the middle, when one of them scoffs, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!” The others cheer at this line, masterfully delivered. The soldiers join in the match of who can deliver the best mockery. “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” You turn your head to look up at the man, this Jesus, to see that he is staring right back at you. And you recall his words, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” “*Forgive them?*” you question. It is so hard to forgive bullies.

You recall your first encounter with bullies. You were so young then; no maturity at all. Your mother? Deceased. You were alone, older but still a boy, trying to do what you could to get by in the market. The only hope you had left was selling little trinkets to anyone generous enough to purchase them. A small crowd of boys who were bigger than you approached one day. You sensed that they were up to no good. You forget exactly how it all played out, but by the end of it you were left on the dusty ground beaten and bruised. Most of them ran away with everything that you possessed in life, but one of them -- the lead bully -- put his hand to your chest and pinned you to the ground. “A word of advice, kid.” He said. “You’re all alone out here. No one is going to save you. Learn to save yourself.”

You hear the crowd continue their mocking. “Save yourself! Save yourself! Save yourself!” Jesus is still looking at you. He knows what you are going through. Your life

had lost hope long ago. To save yourself you resorted to the life of a thief, and yet this man next to you -- the one who undoubtedly does not deserve this fate -- looks you in the eye like no one in your life has done since... her. All those years ago, when you were a young boy. Your mother could look you in the eye, speak in tones of reassurance, and you knew all would be well. Jesus continues to give you that look, and for the first time since you were a young boy you experience a moment of divine peace -- shalom -- in the middle of your crucifixion, of all places.

A weak but distinctive voice breaks the moment, crying out from the third cross, joining the taunts of the crowd. "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" It sickens you. Even in death, some people can still be bullies. Most of your life has been spent in their shadow. Something within drives you to finally stand up to a bully.

"Do you not fear God? You are under the same sentence of condemnation. You and I have been condemned... justly. We are getting what we deserve. This man... this man has done nothing wrong." You realize that your life has been spent taking for yourself what you did not earn or deserve. Perhaps now, at the end of your life, Jesus might freely give something to you that you did not earn or deserve.

"Jesus, remember me... when you come into your kingdom."

With a tone of reassurance, he says, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." That is more than enough. You have suffered with Jesus today. You will die with him today. Even in this harsh brutality, you've finally been given something to hope for.