

Last Sunday 11/20/22  
Luke 23:27-43 29C

“TRULY, I SAY TO YOU, TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE.”

“Once upon a time...and they lived happily ever after. The End.”

These are words of the fairy tales many of us grew up on. We loved hearing and reading these words because of the joyful, pleasant ending we knew they would bring us. We just knew that when the story started with the words, “Once upon a time,” that the story would most certainly end with, “and they lived happily ever after. The End.”

Today we conclude another Church Year. This Sunday reminds us that we are awaiting our Lord’s Christ return in glory. This is a story we ought to enjoy hearing; one we should never grow tired of hearing over and over, either. That’s because of the happiness—the sheer joy – which it brings to us.

This divine story doesn’t begin with “Once upon a time.” It begins with “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth “ (Ge 1:1). Martin Luther likened creation to God building a home for you. The Creator poured the foundation, put up the walls and the roof, painted and laid the flooring, connected the internet, stocked the refrigerator and pantry with food, folded your clothes and put them away, and even made your bed for you. It was perfect! All you had to do was move and enjoy the handwork of the Lord your God forever and ever, without end.

But, you know the rest of the story. It wasn’t enough for us to simply have fun in God’s good creation, we wanted to be God. So, we rebelled. And that rebellion brought sin and its wages of death upon us and our lives.

You know all too well that it’s like to live in this curse of sin everyday. Those beautiful snowflakes are supposed to come on Christmas Eve, to

add beauty and serenity to our celebration. But no, the snow came much too soon and way too much; and ... your snow blower wouldn't start. You have surgery for cancer; now, you wait wondering if chemotherapy will follow that surgery. Your husband once vowed to love you "for better or worse," but now he spends his time ogling women on webpages. The holidays are coming and what is supposed to be a time of joy is nothing but a reminder to you that death has taken your spouse from you and the children and grandchildren are hundreds and hundreds of miles away, and you are ... alone.

The hymn writer said it so well, "Earth is a desert drear" (*LSB* 748:1). But, you know the strange and perverse thing about it? We kind of like it here. In fact, we love it here; often, more than we love heaven itself. We long for earthly things more than we long to be with Jesus.

This Sunday, we hear, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise," and we say ... "Ok. Sure." In the very next breath it's, "How about them Vikings? SKOL, brother! Was that the game of the year or what? This could be the year!" **Pretend to be asleep. You know who you are.**

Do you see how easy it is for us in the weakness of our mortal nature to have our priorities all mixed up, to the extent that we begin to think that this earth, in all of its perversity, is our home.

This Sunday holds before us the fact that we are strangers here; heaven is our home and there we will live happily ever after.

As we hear the words of our Gospel, it doesn't seem that this will end happily ever after. Evangelist tells us of the two criminals crucified with Christ.

Though these men are criminals, though Jesus is surrounded by those who would persecute Him, He still preaches and ministers to others until His dying breath: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (v. 34). Yes, His own life is coming to an end, but He still prays for them.

Why? Why does He pray for them? They didn’t ask Him to pray. In fact, if you ask some of them, they would tell you that they don’t **need** His prayers. The answer to why He prays for them is this: He prays because they are sinners and are in need of God’s forgiveness, just as you need God’s forgiveness, Dear Child of God. Your sin not only offends and grieves your Father in heaven, it brings its wages of death upon you (cf. Ro 6:23).

That’s why the eternal Son of God, very God of very God, humbled Himself to be born of a Virgin. St. Paul says it this way in our Epistle,

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for by Him all things were created...all things were created through Him and for Him...For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace by the blood of His cross (Co 1).

Jesus reconciled us to God by taking all of our sin upon Himself and being crucified upon Calvary’s cross. Because His blood was poured out all over that cross, you are forgiven. And that means that you are reconciled to God, holy and blameless before your Father in heaven.

That is important for you to remember and cherish, Dear Child of God, because this earth is a desert drear. In our lesson, it doesn’t seem even Jesus will live happily ever after. The Evangelist tells us that in His anguish, He is scoffed, mocked, by the Jewish rulers, the soldiers, the crowd, and one of the criminals dying with Him.

You know all-too-well what it's like to be mocked. We are mocked for our beliefs and our faith. You've heard it: "You're that special church that doesn't take part in the community Thanksgiving service. I went to your church and couldn't even go to Communion." When all the world around you revels in sexual perversity, you believe that God has created us male and female for the blessed estate of marriage, and you are mocked for it. When all the world bullies and belittles those who may not wear the right brand-name clothing; you befriend them, and the world mocks you for it. When all your co-workers say mean, cruel things about your supervisor, you refuse to join us, and soon you, too, are being mocked. You are mocked, because you believe the Bible.

But the greatest mockery you endure is death that scoffs at you with every breath of earthly life. We have confident certainty in earthly gold and silver, our money, our stuff. Paul reminds us that we have the treasure of living happily ever after with Jesus in jars – fragile, easily broken – jars of clay. These jars of clay, our earthly bodies, fail us. And with every ache, and pain, and wheezing of breath, we are reminding us that death is mocking us. Every funeral, every time you drive past a cemetery and see a headstone marking a grave, death is mocking you.

When death mocks the dying thief on the cross, He turns to Jesus, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom". Jesus answers the criminal's request by giving him Paradise. His happy ending is assured, as is yours.

Just as Jesus granted that criminal's request on the cross, He provides that same gift of Paradise to you in the waters of Holy Baptism. When you received water with the Word of God, that is Jesus' promise that He is remembering you in His kingdom. As He pronounces the absolution

over you and feeds you His life-giving Body and Blood, you are granted Paradise. And when you die, you will be in the Paradise of heaven.

This Last Sunday of the Church Year assures you of God's promise that you will "live happily ever after" because of those words which Jesus speaks to you: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (v. 43).