

SERMON TITLE: "The Seven Last Words of Christ: #2—Today you will be with me in paradise."
SCRIPTURE TEXT: Luke 23:32-43 (esp. 23:43)
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: March 5, 2017, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

You have all now heard that Ramona Whipple passed away on Thursday. At 96 ½ years of age, Ramona was one of our church's much-beloved shut-ins. She and her husband Wayne were very active in this church and at the Pinecliff United Methodist Camp up by Coalville. On Wednesday, as I sat by Ramona's bedside with her daughter Pam and we watched Ramona closely for any expressions or responses, I was aware how much we human beings value the final words spoken by our loved ones as they pass away from us. I guess that's why Christians have cherished the words that Jesus spoke as he was dying on the cross.

On Ash Wednesday, I started a Lenten sermon series on "The seven last words (or statements) of Christ." We began with "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." Today, we're reading a little farther in Luke chapter 23, and overhearing Jesus' conversation with the two criminals who hung on crosses to his right and left. As we contemplate Jesus' promise to the repentant thief, let's imagine Jesus speaking those words of mercy to us: "Today, you'll be with me in paradise."

1—PARADISE

I suppose the best place to begin with this statement is to define what we mean by *paradise*. I'm sure there are some folks who are willing to bet their mortgage money that paradise will come by gambling with a pair of dice. Others of us want to believe that paradise will be gained by our hard work. Some folks think that paradise can be created or at least approximated by trying to get back to simple living, such as Henry David Thoreau's experiment *On Walden Pond*, or Weird Al Yankovich's music video "Amish Paradise." Others have traveled by foot, boat, covered wagon, or airplane across deserts,

mountain ranges, and oceans to reach far distant and exotic places, in the hope that paradise might be found there.

Unfortunately, those attempts to find or create paradise on earth always come up short. And that's why it's been the human custom in every era, culture, and religion, to imagine a place and time of paradise that's beyond our current life and reality. Whether we call that Nirvana or "somewhere over the rainbow, [where] skies are blue," as Dorothy sang in the Wizard of Oz, it seems to be human nature to long for such a place where dreams of paradise come true.

In the Christian faith, we tend to equate paradise with heaven. But even that idea is full of variations. I can remember back to times in my youth when Sunday School lessons or youth group meetings included conversations about what we thought heaven would be like. My friend Kelly, who was an animal lover, was sure that there would be horses in heaven. The pastor's son suggested that heaven would be a place where he could consume all the ice cream he wanted. Other ideas were that heaven would be a place of no homework or a place where you could stay up as late as you wanted at night. When our adult leaders made their contributions to the conversation, they were more interested in heaven as a place where they could get a long, peaceful rest; a place where they would suffer no more pain; or a place where they could be reunited with loved ones who had passed away ahead of them.

Christian ideas about heaven developed out of the Jewish experience. For most of the Old Testament period, the Jews didn't have any concept of heaven like we think of it. In the oldest of Old Testament times, when someone died, they believed that person simply went to be with their ancestors in Sheol, the place of the dead. The only kind of *afterlife* was what would happen through your children and succeeding generations who lived on after you. But, when the Jews were taken as captives into Babylon, they were exposed to a new kind of thinking. They started to learn about the Persian idea of

heaven as a place of afterlife for those who were morally righteous. Some of the Jews adopted this concept, and that was the belief that came forward in the teachings of Jesus and the disciples.

Jews and early Christians who adopted the Persian belief about heaven sometimes compared paradise to the Garden of Eden prior to Adam and Eve's sin. That lush heavenly garden would be full of fruitful trees and fragrant flowers. It would have plenty of gently-flowing water. It would be a place where humans and God could take a walk and rest in the cool shade.

But other ideas developed over the centuries too: Humans sitting down at God's heavenly banquet. The lion lying down with the lamb. A house with enough rooms for everyone. Heaven coming down to earth as a holy city made of jewels. Streets of gold with pearly gates. Angels with wings and harps. Saints in white robes singing praises to God. Healing and rest and safety. Reunion with beloved family members who have died before us. Purity from sin, where there is no more temptation or guilt. A chance to ask God all the questions that have confounded us. A place where our spirits are at peace. The idea, of course, is that heaven will be a good place, a place where we want to go. Paradise will be a place where whatever troubles we have in this life will be no more.

2—WITH JESUS

There's another aspect of paradise that's really important for us to understand, as well. We go there with Jesus. You'll notice that Jesus didn't just say that the thief was going to paradise. Jesus said, "Today, you will be *with me* in paradise."

At Christmas, we celebrate the coming of God into the world, "God with us" as a human baby who grew up and lived among us. At the time of our passing from this life into the next, we celebrate again that we're not alone. We have someone who walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death. As Psalm 23 reminds us, we don't have to fear any evil, for God's rod and staff are with us. In fact, God's very own Son is with us. As Jesus said to his disciples in John 14, "I go to prepare a place for you, and . . . I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." The

Letter to the Hebrews tells us that we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens ahead of us as our pioneer. And Revelation 21 tells us that, at the end of time, “the home of God” will be “among mortals. God will dwell with [us, and we] will be God’s peoples, and God himself will be with” us. So don’t let your heart be troubled by fear of the unknown or concern about traveling alone on the journey. Our sense of paradise is shaped by this assurance that we will be there with Jesus.

3—TODAY

Jesus communicated a lot of future hope when he told the thief that he would be *with him* in *paradise*. But there’s something else Jesus conveyed in his statement from the cross. You’ll notice that Jesus said, “*Today*, you’ll be with me in paradise.” In using that word, Jesus expressed assurance that was powerful and immediate. This wasn’t about something that might happen some day. This wasn’t the kind of vague promise people make sometimes in the secret hope that they’ll never have to deliver.

Do you remember the movie *Pursuit of Happyness* [sic]? In that movie, the father, played by Will Smith, is trying to motivate his son by telling him that, if he cooperates, they might go to a football game later in the day. As the chores of the day wear on, the little boy gets tired of cooperating, and the football game looks less and less like a possibility. So his dad has to explain that the word *might* can also mean *might not*. Anyone who has been a parent understands the occasional use of such *might* and *maybe* promises. *If* and *perhaps* are essential words in our parental communications toolbox. But young children rarely understand those subtleties and often feel cheated by promises they perceive to be broken.

Jesus didn’t leave himself open for that kind of misunderstanding. Jesus didn’t say, “*Maybe*.” He didn’t say, “*Some day*.” He didn’t add any qualifiers or equivocations. He just said it straight out, clear and plain. “*Today*, you’ll be with me in paradise.”

That reminds me of the story of Jesus going to dinner at the house of Zacchaeus. You may recall Zacchaeus was a tax collector who had cheated lots of people out of their money. But that day, when

Jesus went to his house, Zacchaeus' life was turned around. When he repented of his sins and said he'd pay back quadruple the money he stole, Jesus declared, "Today, salvation has come to this house."^(Lk 19:9) Whatever was true for the thief on the cross and Zacchaeus the tax collector is also true for us. God is ever ready to hear our confessions and our repentance. God is ever ready to offer us salvation. The joys and assurance of paradise don't have to wait. Paradise can begin today.

CONCLUSION

On February 14, 1912, Arizona became the 48th state to join the Union. During his first speech as a U.S. senator from that state, Henry Fountain Ashurst declared to his Washington colleagues that his "state could become a paradise. We need only two things," he said, "water and lots of good people." Just then, "Boies Penrose . . . , a senior senator from Pennsylvania, begged to interrupt: 'If the Senator [from Arizona] will pardon me for saying so, that's all they need in Hell.'"^{*}

Well, if all it took was good people and water, the small town of Paradise, Utah, would have it made. Unfortunately, over the past month, the folks who live in that northern Utah community have had flooding in their fields and basements and across their county roads.

As long as we're living on this earth, there may always be some kind of trouble in paradise. But the good news is that there is a paradise awaiting us where our troubles will be no more, where we will be with Jesus. And our confidence in that promise gives us assurance even now. No matter what adversities you face or crosses you have to bear, you can take courage immediately, said Jesus. "Today, you will be with me in paradise."

^{*}Eric W. Johnson, ed., *A Treasury of Humor* (Ivy Books: New York, 1989), p. 153.