

20 November 2022  
Last Sunday of the Church Year

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“The Man in the Middle”

Text: Luke 23:27-43; Malachi 3:13-18; Colossians 1:13-20

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

***But turning to them Jesus said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.”***

Jesus doesn’t want their tears. Not tears of pity anyway. He wants to go to the cross. The agony of the Garden is behind Him. For this He came. He lays down His life for the life of the world.

Don’t weep for Him, He says. No, ***weep for yourselves***. Because this is just the beginning. It’s going to get worse. How much worse? ***For behold, the days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’***

*Blessed are the barren?!* Barrenness, childlessness, was considered a curse in the Old Testament. Such women were shamed. But now, or soon . . . *blessed?* That’s quite a change! Driven by the sin and evil in the world. Sin and evil that not only rejects, but actively works against, the good. Like here, with Jesus. He can’t just be rejected, He must be eliminated.

And if they’re doing this, Jesus says, what you see here, crucifying Him, the green tree, the innocent one, the very Son of God, who heals and restores and lifts up and gives hope . . . what’s going to happen in the days to come, when the wood is dry? It will be so bad that they want to die - it will be *preferable* for the mountains to fall on them and the hills to cover them.

Are we there yet? Maybe. There’s a lot of sin and evil in our world. Working against the good, the godly. Just when you think it can’t get any worse, it does. Barrenness, childlessness, is now considered not only a blessing and a virtue but an imperative by some. And as we’ve seen, don’t try to take that “blessing” away, or you will incur wrath! For them, conceiving children is a curse.

The Old Testament prophets had spoken words like this, when the people rebelled against God and went after the gods of the nations, all kinds of false gods, and worshipped them

*under every green tree.* Jesus is the green tree here we ought to worship, the one we look to for what we need and every good thing, but that is the tree they weren't interested in. So there was going to be judgment, the prophets said, and it was going to be bad.

But here, with Jesus, is the ultimate rebellion, the pinnacle of rebellion. Rejecting and crucifying the very Son of God. The hands that formed Adam from the dust of the ground now pierced through with nails. The feet that once walked in the Garden in the cool of the day, now spiked, immovable, to a cross. The mouth that in the beginning spoke everything into being now filled with sour wine. Kings usually get the best of wines, but Jesus gets sour wine, cheap wine. The "two buck chuck" that turned rancid.

For you see what going on here? **They want to control God.**

That's the bottom line. Make God do our bidding. Keep God in the box we want Him in. That's the basis of all false religions, including the Baals of the Old Testament - you do for God so God will do for you. Control. This is what I want, God, and we expect Him to do it. After all, what good is having a God if you don't get what you want? If He gets in the way of what you want? That's why many jettison Jesus today. That's not what I want for my life, so I'll get it some other way. And they turn to false gods. Money will get me what I want. Power will get me where I want to go. Success will elevate me. Popularity will make me immortal.

And with these we, too, are tempted. And it's hard to resist, isn't it? Because it seems to be working for others! Or to use the words of the prophet Malachi that we heard today, ***What is the profit of our keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the Lord of hosts? And now we call the arrogant blessed. Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape.***

So why not me? Why not get what I can? Get my piece of the pie?

But a world that does this to the green tree, to Jesus, will do it also to the dry wood - dry, sinful you. Because what you have someone else wants. Where you are someone else wants to be. What you say someone else doesn't like. So they might crucify you, too. Maybe not literally, but the world is crucifying people that stand in their way, if you don't go along with their agenda, if you speak the wrong words. They hated Jesus for it, and they'll hate you for it, too. People have lost all they worked for their whole lives. They have been dragged through the mud. And no apologies. The world just moves on to consume the next tree.

The criminal on the cross next to Jesus went for his. We're not told what he did, the charge against him, what the inscription above his cross was. Some criminals the world likes - like Barabbas. Some it crucifies. The world is undependable. It wants to control God but wants no one to control it. Very satanic, evil, in that way.

But while that criminal was on the cross, he found hope. He began by railing against Jesus just like all the others. But at some point, he realized something wasn't right here. Something was "off." That the man in the middle wasn't guilty. That the man in the middle had done nothing wrong. That the man in the middle was innocent. The man in the middle didn't hate, but forgave. The man in the middle didn't curse, but prayed. The man in the middle knew something, had something - a something, he needed. The man in the middle wasn't like the rest, wasn't like the world. No spite, no evil, from the man in the middle. Even here, even on the cross, only compassion and forgiveness. So . . . for him, too? Maybe? So he asks Jesus: ***remember me when you come into your kingdom.*** And Jesus, I like to think with a smile on his face, or at least as much of a smile as he could muster while on a cross, says to that criminal: yes. Certainly. Today, in fact. "When" is today. ***Today, you will be with me in Paradise.***

And with that sentence, maybe so softly spoken that few others heard it, but heard by untold numbers of others since because of Luke, we hear that **a world that tries to control God can't**. Their words couldn't do it. Their deeds couldn't do it. Even their nails couldn't do it. For even hanging in the midst of evil, Jesus speaks words of love and forgiveness. He would not become like them. He dies - and then rises from the dead! - to make us like Him. To give us dry, dead trees life again.

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

The cross - and staying on it - was Jesus remembering. Remembering our need for life. Remembering our need for forgiveness. Remembering His promise to save. And acting. Doing it. Fulfilling every word, every promise. So that when Jesus says, ***Today, you will be with me in Paradise***, those are no empty words, like so many we hear today. But truth.

And the truth spoken to you where Jesus and His cross are for you today. In the waters of baptism, Jesus is saying: *If you are to die today, today, you will be with me in Paradise.* When you hear the words of Absolution, or the Gospel, it is Jesus saying: *If you are to die today, today, you will be with me in Paradise.* When you come and eat and drink the Body and Blood of Jesus here at His Supper, it is Jesus saying to you: *If you are to die today, today, you will be with me in Paradise.* And with those words and that promise, dry, dead, sinful trees are given life and begin to green and grow again. That your sin no longer control you. That the sin and evil in the world no longer overcome or overwhelm you. That you know that God is not so easily controlled. He will accomplish His good and gracious will, even using the sin and rebellion and evil in this world to do so.

For in truth, the arrogant are not blessed, evildoers do not prosper, and those who put God to the test do not escape. Children are a blessing, the words of God are truth, and the ways of God are good.

If it doesn't seem that way to you, if you are despairing, if all you can see is your sin, if you have days where you wish the mountains would fall on you and the hills cover you because of all that is happening in the world and in your life, if it seems like you are being crucified . . . take a lesson from the criminal on the cross. Stop obsessing over yourself, stop railing against the world, and **turn your head to the man in the middle**. And see there not just everything's that wrong, with the sin and evil of the world crucifying God, with my sin heaped upon Him . . . but see there everything's that right, with your God coming to do that for you, wanting to do that for you, dying there with you, to give you life. *To be the man in the middle* - not just between two criminals on Golgotha, but the man in the middle between life and death, between God and man, between heaven and hell, between you and the devil, to say to you, *if you are to die today, **Today, you will be with me in Paradise.***

That's a good way to end the Church Year, don't you think? A good way to end your life, and a good way to end each day. With the Word of God, the promise of God, the forgiveness of God. The God we cannot control, and that's a good thing. A good thing because He is always working good for us. When we try to control Him, we are only hurting ourselves. When I put myself in the middle, try to have control and have everything revolve around me, I die. When Jesus is the man in the middle, I live. When Jesus is the man in the middle, I have hope.

So when the day comes when death comes upon you, whether it is today, tomorrow, or some other day, and you awaken in Paradise, against all odds, against what you deserve, it will be because **the man in the middle said you could**, and *would*. Because the man in the middle shed His blood for you. Because the man in the middle is your Saviour.

And on that day, He'll be in the middle then, too. In the middle of all the angels and criminals made saints, praising Him for all that He has done for us. There will be no more weeping and tears, for He will wipe away every tear. And no sour wine! Only, as Isaiah tells us, the richest of foods and the best of wines (25:6-8).

Because of the man in the middle. If it seems like He's getting in your way, it's because you're trying to put yourself in the middle. So turn and repent. You don't want to be in the middle! That's His place. He wants to be there. For you. *So that you can be with Him in Paradise.*

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.