

“In Our Worst Moments, Jesus Is There”

“And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left” Luke 23:33.

We don't like to publicize our worst moments. Those times of raw pain and anger. Those times of unfiltered criticism. Those times of embarrassing mistakes. Those times and much more are situations we seek to hide. We want to distance ourselves from them as soon as we can. Like magicians, we try to misdirect those around by dangling better moments for people's attention while we try make those worse moments disappear.

Social media has become masterful at this! Anyone can tell the best parts of their story omitting the difficulties and suddenly people become convinced that their lives are ideal. School and work settings are also full of individuals disguising their worst moments so not to betray what really goes on after school or work is over. Even churches can be guilty of this as members, both leaders and parishioners, discuss those surface level topics without admitting what's really troubling them at that moment. Hiding our worst moments comes naturally to us as sinful people. From Adam and Eve's actions in the Garden of Eden to now we've only come up with more and more creative ways to hide our worst moments.

Now, I realize this might be a heavy start to our reflection time this weekend, but it's important to make this point clear from the start. Our desire to hide our worst moments comes into the cross hairs of this weekend's theme. This weekend is the last weekend of the church year. As we've been wrapping this church year, our focus has turned to the End Times, the Last Day, that Day of Reckoning. Judgment Day brings all sorts of emotions and feelings for us and perhaps one of the most burdensome is the distress that can overwhelm us as to how much of our lives will be exposed on that day. On top of all the other worries and concerns that consume us in our present moments and keep us on edge this ultimate worry can often be the piece that puts over the edge.

With the Last Day squarely in front of us and no wiggle room to avoid or ignore this reality, our Gospel reading this weekend about Jesus' crucifixion is a gracious gift from the Lord even if it might feel somewhat out of place. We're used to reading about Jesus' death on the cross on Good Friday after the entire buildup of Holy Week. This weekend, we find ourselves closer to Christmas than Easter and encountering this account. Yet, for as important and applicable as this moment is leading into Easter, it remains just as important as we close this church year in anticipation of Jesus' return.

Hearing Jesus' conversation with the two criminals crucified with Him, highlights a crucial point for us even today that in our worst moments, Jesus is there. For those two criminals, as their wicked deeds are justly exposed in their horrific punishment, Jesus is literally there with them. And it's not just their worst moment either, the rulers and soldiers truly didn't have their best moments as well. Ultimately, as we hear elsewhere in Scripture, this was the world's worst moment as Jesus hung there praying, **“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”** (Luke 23:34)

As Jesus hangs in the middle of this worst moment, His presence evokes two powerful and different reactions. The first is the reaction of defiance. As the rulers scoff and the soldiers mock and the unrepentant criminal rails, it becomes very clear that Jesus' presence in their worst moment puts them on the defensive. Instead of humility and sorrow, these parties in their sinful and selfish pride demand Jesus to prove Himself. In the voices of these individuals, the devil returns to tempt and taunt his nemesis. If You're really who You say You are, escape this moment by Your might and power! You want to be king, hop down from the cross and show us what a real king looks like!

Through all of this, humanity's sinful nature tries to hide its worst moments even from God by boldly blaming Him!

While our worst moments likely don't involve crucifixion, they certainly have involved defiance of our Savior who is present with us in those dark moments. Like those hostile parties demanded Jesus to prove Himself by escaping that moment, we also experience that same expectation. In varying ways, we give voice to this demand attempting to hide our worst moments from others and our Savior. Sometimes it can sound like this, if God is so good why is there such evil in this world? Other times, it comes out, if God really cared about us, we wouldn't be in this mess, right? Still other times, it's that bold and painful claim there is no God! Each of these cries demanding God to prove Himself are really attempts to hide what we don't want exposed to the world.

Blinded by defiance, those rulers, soldiers and criminal missed what we still easily miss too. Jesus' presence in our worst moments is truly for forgiveness. Jesus' presence in our worst moments is for us to learn that He took on our worst moments because while we think we can hide these moments from others we truly can't hide them from Him. Jesus' presence in our worst moments is to remind us that He didn't hide His worst moment from us so that we might see His true kingly authority. For in Jesus' worst moment, He delivers to us our best moment.

That's what the repentant criminal was led to see. Even in those final moments of his life, the Lord graciously pulled from this man's lips a humble confession that he hung there upon a cross justly for his own actions unable to hide them any longer. From his worst moment, that criminal demanded nothing of Jesus who was with him, but meekly asked Jesus to remember him when He came into His kingdom. And without hesitation for that criminal's worst moment, Jesus claimed that criminal as His treasured possession, as righteous, as one who served God, saying **“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise”** (*Luke 23:43*). And with that beautiful promise, Jesus wrote that criminal into His book of remembrance.

Dear partners in crime, dear partners in sin, as Judgement Day approaches Jesus is our sure and only defense. His worst moment covers our worst moments. He remains present with us to lead us to repentance, to forgive and to assure us of what that final day truly means for us in Him. Like with that repentant criminal, our worst moments will be lost on everyone else as they focus on Jesus' worst moment. By His mercy and grace, our worst moments don't define our eternity instead Jesus in His worst moment defines our eternity as Paradise with Him. He has written us into the Book of Life!

While we can no longer physically turn to Jesus on the cross and ask Him to remember us. We do run to His Word and Sacraments where He physically remembers us proclaiming over and over again that we will be with Him in Paradise. We point others to the truth that Jesus is there in our worst moments not to excuse or permit but to forgive and restore. And so, we regularly return to this place in repentance and faith receiving what He has won for us so that we need not fear His Second Coming. Thanks be to God, that even now in our worst moments, Jesus is there. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan