

The crucifixion of Jesus is an event filled with meaning. There is the simple, physical account of what happened: Jesus was beaten, nailed to a wooden cross, and left to die. But *what* happened doesn't begin to explain the *why*.

On one level, we can explain Jesus' death in terms of the human struggle for power. Jesus was put to death before He could upset the precarious balance between Rome's authority and the Jewish religious establishment. But there was something deeper and more significant was going on; through Jesus' death, God was reconciling the world to Himself.

There was a cast of characters present at the crucifixion. There were those sympathetic to Jesus' cause: His mother, His Aunt, and one of His disciples (John). There were those who were openly hostile to Jesus: religious leaders and soldiers alike heaped insults upon Him. But for the sake of this morning's sermon, I want to focus in on two specific individuals. The Gospels tell us that Jesus didn't die alone; He was crucified between two others—one on His left and another on His right.

It was here, between two others, that Jesus spoke the second of seven words from the cross. Last week Pastor Mardi taught about the first word—a **word of forgiveness**—and this morning we're going to explore what has come to be known as "**a word of salvation**".

We're going to return to Luke 23:32-43, but as I read let me invite you to listen for Jesus' second word.

***32** Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. **33** When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. **34** Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.' And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.*

***35** The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One.'*

***36** The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar **37** and said, 'If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.' **38** There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the jews.*

***39** One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: 'Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' **40** But the other criminal rebuked him. 'Don't you fear God,' he said, 'since you are under the same sentence? **41** We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.'*

***42** Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' **43** Jesus answered him, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.'"*

The first word, *Father forgive them*, is closely followed by the second: *Today you will be with me in paradise*. And when we look at the text carefully, there can be no doubt that this second word is “a word of salvation”.

- Vs. 35, The rulers sneered at Jesus saying, “He **saved** others; let him **save** himself”.
- Vs. 37, The soldiers mocked Jesus saying, “If you are the king of the Jews, **save** yourself.”
- Vs. 39, One of the criminals insulted Jesus saying, “Aren’t you the Messiah? **Save** yourself and us!”

Everyone assumed that if Jesus could not save Himself, He could not save others. But herein lies one of the great paradoxes of the Christian faith: *only a dying Saviour can rescue us from death*. As Jesus was dying, He was saving the world. Jesus was so confident of this fact that spoke to the person beside Him, saying, *Today you will be with Me in paradise*.

I’m going to conclude by addressing this promise of paradise, but first, I want to draw your attention to one often-overlooked-truth. There was not one cross that day, there were three; Jesus was crucified between two others—one on His left and another on His right.

Luke tells us that these two other men were “criminals,” but this term gets lost in translation. It’s not as though people were crucified in the ancient world for shoplifting at the local Safeway. Crucifixion was reserved for those who were violent, or, for those dangerous few who inspired zealots to rebel against Rome.¹ Crucifixion was a painful death sentence, but it was something more. It sent a clear message: *mess with Rome and we’ll nail you to a cross*.

It is fitting, in one sense, that Jesus died between two outcasts; He spent much of His ministry among such people. Many of His followers were considered bottom dwellers—unsophisticated and unseemly. On a number of occasions, Jesus was declared guilty by association with them; it was assumed that He was a drunkard and a glutton because of the company He kept.² Jesus was labelled a “*friend of sinners*,” and it wasn’t a compliment.

illus: As you know, one of the social issues being raised in Western culture is what has been termed, “white privilege.” It’s the idea that the “right” colour of skin provides unique privilege in terms of perception, opportunities, and respect. When I look in the mirror, it’s not lost on me that I fit the description for *white privilege*: I’m a middle-aged, highly educated, white, male.

¹ Joel B. Green, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel According to Luke*, 819.

² Matthew 11:16-19.

From a historical and sociological perspective, this kind of privilege isn't unique to the Western world, or even to "whiteness". Throughout history, in different geographical regions, the "privileged" colour has varied. Racism is pervasive everywhere: in Canada, in America, in Germany, Cairo, Dubai, and Senegal; I've been to these places and seen it with my own eyes. The fundamental problem with "privilege" is that those who have it think there's not enough of it to go around, and so privilege is guarded—restricted—from those who are deemed to be "unworthy."

"White privilege" is a burning issue in our day, and rightly so, but the issue of "privilege" is as old as time itself. The well-connected, the well-educated, the wealthy, have always found ways to use power to protect their way of life, often at the expense of others.

Jesus calls us to a different way of being, in fact, Jesus modelled the way for us. The apostle Paul writes, "*Though [Jesus] was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine **privileges**; he took the humble position of a slave*".³

³ Philippians 2:6-7, New Living Translation.

⁴ Fleming Rutledge, *The Seven Last Words from the Cross*, 17.

⁵ Isaiah 53:12.

In Hebrews 13:12 we read that "Jesus...suffered *outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.*" Why outside of the city? Because crucifixion was simply too horrifying and shameful to take place within the city. Symbolically, Jesus died the death of an outcast, in between two outcasts, and in so doing, His death opens the door for us all.

Fleming Rutledge writes, "[Jesus] was not numbered among the politically connected. He was not numbered among the good, upstanding pillars of the community... Jesus 'suffered outside the city wall,' away from the good neighbourhoods...cast out from the company of decent people."⁴

The prophet Isaiah foresaw this day when He wrote, "*He was numbered among the transgressors,*"⁵ which is to say, Jesus was counted as one of them...a transgressor, an outcast, deserving of death.

The first criminal cursed Jesus along with the others but the second criminal looked at Jesus with eyes of faith: "*Jesus, **remember** me when you come into your kingdom.*"

Once again, quoting Fleming Rutledge, “In the Old Testament, when God ‘remembers,’ it has a distinct meaning...When God ‘remembers,’ he does not just *think about us*. He *acts for us*, with power to save.”⁶ *Remember me Jesus...act on my behalf, save me, include me in your coming kingdom.*

Let me ask, do you see yourself as the one for whom Jesus died? Jesus was numbered among the transgressors, a friend of sinners. He died outside the city, an outcast between outcasts. But He also died for those who pretend to be righteous but know they are not.

The words Jesus spoke on the cross bring clarity to His nature and to His purpose; a Holy God, in the middle of unholy people. *Father forgive them, and, Today—because of your faith—you will be with Me in Paradise.*

In the time remaining I wanted to turn your attention to the promise of paradise. It was a promise given to a criminal who possessed genuine faith; he believed, while others mocked. It’s never too late to put one’s faith in Jesus.

At times, when we speak about “paradise,” it’s in an escapist kind of way. In the past year I cannot count how many times I’ve said to Naomi, *I just want to jump on a*

plane and fly to Hawaii, to sit on the beach, and leave Covid behind. Perhaps you can relate. All of us long for a momentary escape the cruel realities of life.

The paradise Jesus has planned for us will not be momentary, and while it will include an escape from all that is cruel, it’s less about escaping something bad and more about entering into something real, and good, and beautiful. Not simply freedom from pain, but participating in beauty, enjoying peace, celebrating abundance.

For the Christian, death does not equal extinction; death is a doorway to the life to come. This is the Christian hope. It might appear from the outside that death is the one journey that we must take alone. But it was Jesus Himself who said that He *will never leave us or forsake us*. The journey of faith continues up to, and through, death. Just like the criminal on the cross, we are not alone, not even as we are dying. Jesus is with us, and we follow Him from this life into the life to come.

The word *paradise* carries the connotation of “God’s garden”⁷, the place where the righteous dwell in God’s presence—it hearkens back to the Garden paradise we read about in the Book of Genesis.

⁶ Rutledge, 20.

⁷ Green, 823.

Genesis 2 tells that the Garden God created was both beautiful and functional—pleasing to the eye and able to nourish humanity. It was also a place of harmony. In the Garden, human beings had nothing to hide from one another. There was no shame, jealousy, or anxiety of any kind. That sounds like paradise, doesn't it?

And at the centre of this garden-paradise, stood God, calling out to His image-bearers; the picture is one of perfect communion. This is how things first began, and in the end, God will make it so once more.

The Bible teaches that the moment after a Christian's last breath, they awake in the presence of the Lord. If we die before Jesus returns, I suppose there will still be a measure of waiting. Waiting for Jesus to put an end to evil and injustice. Waiting for Him to renew all of creation. Waiting for the resurrection of our bodies. But if we are with Him, I have no doubt that the waiting will pass quickly, enjoyably.

In Romans 8:18, the apostle Paul writes, "*what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later.*" And so, we put our faith in Jesus *and* in the promise of what's to come.

Pray

⁸ Kyle Idleman, *Not A Fan*, 116.

⁹ Idleman, 116-117.

The Lord's Supper: If I were to ask you to recite John 3:16, many of you could do so easily. Say it with me, "*For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that **whoever** believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life.*"

In his book entitled, "*Not A Fan*," Kyle Idleman points out that while many people can recite John 3:16, far fewer know Luke 9:23. Here, Jesus said, "*If **anyone** would come after me, they must take up their cross daily and follow me.*"

John 3:16 emphasizes **believing**, while Luke 9:23 emphasizes **following**; believing and following are like two sides of the same coin. Idleman writes, "There is no believing without following."⁸

But at the heart of Jesus' invitation to believe, and to follow, there are two words that He does not want anyone to miss: the first is *whoever*, the second is *anyone*. Jesus carefully chose these words to make it clear who has been invited into relationship: *anyone* who wants to follow, *whoever* chooses to believe.

Two different words with one meaning. Idleman writes, "*Anyone* means *everyone*."⁹ You've been invited to believe in Jesus and to follow where He leads.

Illus: Idleman goes on to tell a story that most of us can relate to. He and his wife bought a white couch to match the white carpet in one of their rooms. When the couch arrived, they explained the “white-couch-rules” to their children: no eating in the white room, no playing in the white room, no breathing in the white room...you get the picture.

One day his wife was arranging the white cushions, on the white couch, in the white room, and she noticed something that wasn't supposed to be there...pink nail polish has a way of standing out. They called their girls to launch a full scale investigation but before they began, one of the girls “cracked” and ran upstairs to hide.

As we grow older, we become more sophisticated about our hiding. We hide behind our smiles, our achievements, or our excuses. All the while, most of us are terrified that someone will discover our stains and write us off. And it's not an unfounded fear, is it? It does happen, being “written off” I mean; I've been written off by others, perhaps it's happened to you.

Perhaps you fear that Jesus will write you off, that your “stains” will disqualify you from being included on His list.

When his daughter ran upstairs, Idleman followed after her. He began to call her name, but she wouldn't answer; she

remained in hiding. He began to check each room and eventually he found her in one of the closets, knees up to her chest, crying; she wouldn't even look up.

After a time, she confessed to her mom and dad what had happened. Once the spill happened, she had tried to clean it up but it made matters worse. Eventually, she flipped over the cushion because she was afraid they would find out. After her confession, she turned to her parents and asked, “Do you still love me?”

Idleman's wife knelt down beside her daughter and whispered in her ear, “*You could never make a big enough stain to keep me from loving you.*”

All of us have stains...some that people can see, and others that we've managed to keep hidden. But Jesus sees our stains and still He invites us using words like *whoever* and *anyone*.

We come to the Lord's Table this morning, remembering His promise of forgiveness and the promise of paradise. We come to celebrate the death of Jesus, for in His dying and rising, He has brought salvation to us. Through this Table, Jesus, the Friend of Sinners, extends a hand of friendship to us.

On the night Jesus was betrayed, He took bread, and when He had given thanks for it, He broke it, and gave it to His

disciples saying, “*This is my body, given for you.*” In the same way, after supper, He took the cup saying, “*This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.*”

Will you receive what He offers, forgiveness and friendship?
Will you put your trust in Him and follow where He leads?

At this time, let’s partake together: *The Body of Christ was broken for you; the blood of Christ was shed for you. Praise be to God!*

Worship

Announcement

It is with a mixture of sadness and joy that I share with you upcoming leadership transition. Our church is a part of a denomination known as the Christian and Missionary Alliance; there are approximately 430 Alliance churches across Canada, 82 of which are here in BC—the Canadian Pacific District.

With the current District Superintendent retiring in July of this year, the District’s Nominating Committee began their work last year; in September, they sent me an email asking me to apply. When the email arrived in my inbox, and I saw the subject line—*District Nominating Committee*—I

panicked and slammed my laptop shut. For three days, the email stared at me but I refused to open it.

On the third day, I was praying and Lord turned my mind to the unopened email. “*Mark, why are you refusing to open the email?*” “I’m afraid Lord...afraid that you’re going to ask me to consider this job. I don’t know if I can do it, and besides, I don’t want to do it...I like where I am, what I’m doing, and who I’m doing it with.”

The District Superintendent’s role is multi-faceted:

- they work with pastors and Elders Boards to develop the kind of vision, values, and culture that we have here at NSA...churches that are committed to discipleship and mission, churches that love their congregations and communities well;
- the DS also comes along side churches, and pastors, that are unhealthy and embroiled in conflict;
- they provide support, resources, and direction in times of transition;
- and they work not only within the District, but they also work with our denomination’s president to fulfil a national and international vision.

When I told the Lord that I didn’t want that kind of responsibility, He laid the following question before me: “*Mark, is your life not mine to direct?*” It was in that moment that I knew, that He knew, that He had me. “Yes, Lord, my

life is yours to direct.” *“And can I not give you joy in whatever I call you to?”* Again, my answer was “yes”.

And so, a 6 month interview process ensued that has led me to this moment. As the DS role is an elected position, the Nominating Committee has named me the candidate and Alliance pastors throughout BC will be asked to vote on May 19th. At this point, my name is the only name on the ballot, and so it’s very likely that I will be elected. If that is the case, my time as your Lead Pastor will come to close on June 30th.

I know this is unexpected news...no one has been more surprised than me. When God first spoke to me about this role I was quite resistant, but as I’ve prayed and listened to Him, as I have spoken with mentors and friends, it would seem clear that God has been preparing me.

The Board and Staff have been prayerful, encouraging, and open-handed; they have been a gift to me throughout this process. And while they and I feel a sadness about this news, there is also a joy in knowing that God is speaking and guiding—we can trust Him.

Some of you will have questions...about who will provide leadership during the transition, about a Lead Pastor search, etc. I’ve invited our Board chair, Wendy Wray to come and share a few initial thoughts with you.

Wendy Wray (Board Chair)

When Mark asked me to consider chairing the Board, I never imagined that I would be speaking with you about a Lead Pastor transition. But then, life is filled with unexpected moments. As a Board we have taken comfort in the fact that God knows the past, the present, and future; He has faithfully led our church and will continue to do so.

Mark let the Board know in December that he was in process with the District Nominating Committee; since that time we have been planning as though transition was coming. And while there is still significant work to do, there are a few things that we can let you know right now.

First, assuming that Mark is elected, the ongoing work of the church will continue to be directed by Dave, Mardi, and our pastoral team. Even though Mark may be leaving, our vision and values remain clear; we know who we are and what God has called us to do. We also have a wonderfully capable staff team; we are in good hands during this time of transition.

Second, as a Board we’ve developed a timeline and a process to guide us in the short-term (while Mark is still with us) and beyond. Every transition provides an opportunity to reflect on who we are, where we are, and

where God is leading us—this is what we have been doing as a Board.

Developing a *Lead Pastor Profile* document is a key part of the Board's work. We are grateful for Mark's leadership **and** we have been prayerfully reflecting on the character qualities, gifts, and experiences that a future Lead Pastor might bring to our church.

There are other matters that the Board will attend to in the coming months: assembling a Search Committee, developing a Search Process, posting a job description, and the like. We expect the Search Process to take a number of months to complete and are proceeding on the assumption that Mark will be elected to the DS role in May."

In a time of transition, communication is key, and we want to let you know that we will be regularly communicating with you as the process unfolds. And we'd like to ask you to be praying with us, and for us—for wisdom, for a sensitivity to the Lord's direction. And please be praying for our staff during this time of transition too.

No doubt you have other questions and it's important to us that we hear your questions and respond, and so, we've scheduled a Zoom "Town Hall meeting" for tonight at 7 pm. If you are a part of NSA's email distribution list, you will receive an email after the 11 am service to sign up for

tonight's meeting. The link to sign up will also be posted at noon on our website.

Mark, Dave, and Mardi will be present, so will the Board, and we're looking forward to hearing from you and speaking to you.

Mark: To reiterate, assuming I am elected, I will continue in my role as Lead Pastor at NSA until June 30th; there will be plenty of time to connect in the months ahead. Naomi and I also want to let you know that we will continue to reside here, on the North Shore.

And further, North Shore Alliance will continue to be our home church. My new role will require some travel, visiting churches across BC, and so I won't be able to be present every Sunday, but Naomi is going to continue to be involved in Children's Ministry, and I'm going to attend Sunday services with my family as often as I am able.

If you're available, if you have questions, let me encourage you to attend tonight's meeting at 7 pm; I'll see you soon.

Benediction

In just a moment I will speak a final word of blessing, but first, I want to invite you to join us after the service in our virtual foyer. If you go to our website, nsac.bc.ca, and go to the Events page, you will see a link to the virtual foyer.

And if you would like someone to pray with you this morning, when you join the virtual foyer, let Pastor Dave know and he will send you into a private Zoom room. After the 9 am service, George and Ali Canvin will be praying with you; after the 11 am service, Rachel and Christina will be praying.

And now for the blessing: *May the Lord bless you and keep, the Lord make His face to shine upon and be gracious to you, the Lord turn His face towards you and give you peace.*