

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

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

Who was that second criminal who asked Jesus to remember him? We are without some important details—his name, his crime. Luke uses a word that means “a common thief.” An ordinary, run-of-the-mill type of thief.

Well, suppose he **was** a thief. Perhaps he simply had been hungry, as so many in Palestine were. Perhaps he yanked a piece of bread from a market stand, and then ran to beat the band, cramming the food into his mouth to fill an empty stomach. Then maybe the Roman guards caught up with him, his fist clenching the last crusty bite of bread, crumbs still on his face.

Or perhaps it was more serious than that. Perhaps the man was a seasoned professional—a thief who plotted and planned and connived. Perhaps he threatened at knifepoint a priest in the temple, scooped up into a bag the coins from the coffers, and before he left, decided to lift a small bronze vessel, hiding it in his robes. A mistake, since it clattered onto the ground as he hurried away. Soon those Roman guards surrounded him.

But does it really matter **what** he did? The point was he was in **THE WRONG PLACE AT THE WRONG TIME**. And look where his wrongdoing brought him. To the limits in his life. To his end. To his execution. To the cross. To the creative and torturous punishment Rome had developed to humiliate and deter criminal elements in the Empire.

Being in **THE WRONG PLACE AT THE WRONG TIME** . . . Actually, the criminal on the cross is not alone in that distinction. We can find ourselves there, too, you know. When have you and I been the proverbial little boy, caught by Mom with his hand plunging into the dark recesses of the cookie jar?

Terri thought it was a cinch. She had access to the company’s receipts. She would just palm a bit of the cash, and get some easy money out of the business without anyone realizing it. It seemed almost ridiculously simple. Besides, Terri needed that money. She convinced herself she deserved that money. The business made a healthy profit last year—they wouldn’t even miss it. Soon palming the cash wasn’t enough. Terri began to forge a few checks, and alter some of the books to cover her tracks. Of course, the perfect plan crumbled when the yearly audit took place. The documentation was questioned, the signs pointed back to her. There Terri was, in **THE WRONG PLACE AT THE WRONG TIME**.

George had a habit of opening his mouth when he shouldn’t. Looking back, he wasn’t at all certain how it began, but what started as a simple conversation suddenly erupted into angry words and heated discussion, and he was leading the charge! George almost didn’t know how to stop

himself, and the biting, vindictive words came pouring out of him. When he finally paused to take a breath, collect his thoughts, consider his next barrage, he had a chance to look at the carnage left in his path. All those wounded people, people he cared about. George surveyed the damage, realized what he had done, and began to wonder, “Well now, what do I do when I think I’ve gone too far?” There George was, in THE WRONG PLACE AT THE WRONG TIME.

Look where their wrongdoing brought them. Let’s use a theological term here—look where their **sin** brought them. To the end of something—their reputation, an important relationship, their freedom. Each reached a limit in their life. Kind of like the thief on the cross.

Although the second thief is surely in THE WRONG PLACE AT THE WRONG TIME, hanging on that cross, the more I study this passage in Luke’s Gospel, the more I realize something else is happening here. Because Jesus Christ is on that cross beside him, the thief has now been put in the position of being in THE WRONG PLACE AT THE **RIGHT** TIME. Let’s think about this now. See, at the moment where the thief has reached his limit, his end, his Waterloo, he suddenly finds himself in the presence of the Christ, the Messiah, the King.

The first thief is also in Christ’s presence, but he does not recognize that. It’s all a matter of perspective, you know. It’s like that black and white optical illusion where one person sees the vase and the other person sees the two faces looking at each other. This first thief is absolutely blind to the identity of the One who hangs beside him: “*Are you not the Messiah?*” he shouts with sarcasm. “*Save yourself and us!*” Oh, yes, it’s a matter of perspective in many things. For that thief refuses to acknowledge his own guilt, see his culpability for his wrongful deeds. So by his perspective—through his taunts of our Lord, and his lack of repentance—he remains forever trapped in THE WRONG PLACE AT THE WRONG TIME.

As I said earlier, the second criminal has a different perspective now. He certainly is no different in the degree of guilt, nor are we told that the heinousness of his crime is somehow less than the other’s. In fact, maybe what he did was even worse than the crime of the one who rebuked Jesus. But the second criminal indeed has a different perspective because he happens to stand in awe and respect of God. He realizes justice is being rightly served in his punishment, though he may not like it. And above all, he admits his own guilt, recognizing that, in comparison, this Jesus who hangs on the cross next to him is guiltless, completely innocent. So, he tells the first criminal: “*Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.*”

It’s all a matter of perspective. The presence of the innocent Christ beside him compels the thief to make a final request, humbly, yet trusting it will be heard and considered: “*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*” He says those words in faith because he realizes that, though he is definitely in THE WRONG PLACE, sins and all, he is somehow there AT THE RIGHT TIME.

Today is known as Christ the King Sunday, but the picture we have here in our Gospel lesson seems far removed from the pomp and circumstance of a coronation at Buckingham Palace. Where’s the crown, bejeweled and shining? Where’s the royal robe? Where’s the throne from

which the king rules with authority? At first we don't see them, do we? For Luke tells of a man, stripped and beaten, a crown of thorns pressed onto his brow, hanging on a cross for the crowds to see. And what do the Roman centurions, ordered to execution duty, see? They see Jesus of Nazareth, just one of many common criminals crucified on any given day. Of course, this particular execution does relieve their boredom a bit—today they have someone to mock and deride: *“If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”* they shout with glee. For another diversion, they gamble to see which one of them would keep Jesus' pitiful robes—they might clean up well and be sold for a few coins. A sign above Jesus' head silently jeers, *“This is the King of the Jews.”*

But you and I know the sign speaks truth. It's all a matter of perspective, like an optical illusion. They see the vase; you and I see the faces. Everything happening here points to Christ the King. The robes the guards cast lots for are the ones Luke speaks of chapters earlier—the very robes that a sick woman who had hemorrhaged for years longed to reach, believing that if she could only touch them when Jesus walked near, she would be healed. A royal robe, indeed, from her perspective.

The crowned figure, in his dying woes, **is** enthroned, but it's on a cross. From **that** throne, Christ the King acts out what it is to be the Christ, shows what it is to be savior and king as he issues his first royal edict, a pardon: *“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”*

And to the thief who recognizes both his own guilt, and the innocence of the One beside him, Christ the King brings restoration: *“. . . today you will be with me in Paradise.”* Why, the king responds extravagantly. More abundant is the favor shown than the request made. The thief is acquitted of his sins and restored to God, not in some far away future, but **today**. He finds himself in **THE WRONG PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME**.

Who was that criminal on the cross? The one beside Jesus? He is you and I. For each of us, if we haven't already a thousand times over, will routinely find ourselves in **THE WRONG PLACE AT THE WRONG TIME**. You and I say and do things that are most certainly wrong, things which move us to limits in our lives, which bring us to an end in one sense or another. But on this Christ the King Sunday, we give thanks that God remembers us. He has chosen to intervene, and so involve himself in our world that the wrong time becomes **THE RIGHT TIME** for us, when we have opportunity for repentance and change of heart, when our forgiveness and restoration and newness of life become reality. Today Jesus Christ accepts our guilt on his guiltless body. The cross is indeed his throne—the enduring symbol of the merciful Kingdom of God for those who believe, who trust, who see Jesus from a certain perspective. **AMEN.**

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