

Sermon – Luke 23:1-49
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
Palm/Passion Sunday – Year C
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“Into His Father’s Hands”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. It seems, at first glance, that things have gone horribly wrong. How could the cries of “Hosanna! Save us!” turn so quickly to “Crucify! Kill!”? The joyful confusion of Palm Sunday quickly gives way to the calculated confusion of Good Friday. Today, we are brought to a standstill, seeing our Savior nailed to Calvary’s cross. How, we wonder, could things have come to this? If we listen, though, we will hear what God, this crucified, incarnate Word has to say to us today. Three times Jesus speaks to us from the cross in Luke’s gospel. Three times Jesus speaks grace, revealing that while horrible, his dying is of a piece with his living. While we, as much as the crowds in Jerusalem, the Roman occupiers and the religious leaders, are accountable and responsible for the death of the Son of God, this death is also the reason for which Jesus was born into this world. In his death, he joins us in our dying. Amid his suffering, he speaks: *Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise. Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.* Into his Father’s hands. That is where Jesus has been all along, and it is into his Father’s hands that Jesus is moving us.
2. We often say that Jesus died to forgive us for our sins. We are right to do so, for it is by his suffering and death, in his blood, that we are forgiven. But Jesus also died *because* he forgave us for our sins. Forgiveness doesn’t begin after Easter. It is because of his audacious claim to the divine right to forgive

sins that Jesus is put to death. Who does he think he is to let people off the hook for their sins? Frankly, we're not that interested in forgiveness. In theory, perhaps, but not in practice. Even in today's gospel, we see the contrast. Jesus prays for forgiveness for those who are quite literally responsible for his death not long after Pilate punishes him in spite of his innocence. Not only does humanity not practice forgiveness, we punish the innocent. Is this not what we see in Ukraine? What sort of world do we live in where refugees are killed in a missile strike, innocents put to death for no reason other than trying to live? Vladimir Putin is just the latest monster to prowl this earth, reminding us that we are bound to the ways of death. But here, today, as he dies, innocent, Jesus speaks forgiveness. Here in his crucifixion, we are finally set free. We are returned to his Father's hands.

3. We, like the criminals, find ourselves guilty, convicted of the sins of which Jesus was innocent. We have no claim to the gift of grace or the joys of Paradise. We find ourselves near Jesus in his death, presented with the opportunity to mock him or to turn to him with humble hope. While it is foolish, by human standards, to see hope and the promise of life in the midst of death, we are invited to follow the lead of criminal and see in Jesus's death the door to eternal life, forever opened to us now through the gift of Christ crucified. In Jesus' death, we are returned to his Father's hands.
4. At the moment of his dying, it appears that Jesus is as far from God as possible. How could God be present in this suffering, this humiliation, this death? But it is precisely here, joined to our humanity and mortality, taking our sin upon himself and suffering with us in solidarity, that God's glory is most manifest. Here are the hands of God at work. Here, in his dying, is Christ at work to save us. Here, in human weakness, is Jesus most powerfully present. Jesus' Father is with him as he dies, and in the coming promise of the third day we see that Jesus' Father is with us to move us from death to life. Today, we stand in the shadow of Jesus' cross and see how God moves us

from sin to forgiveness, from doom to Paradise, from death to life. We are, with Christ, moved forever into the Father's hands. May we, this Holy Week, marvel with wonder and praise as God replants the Tree of Life, the cross of Christ, drawing all of creation into the Creator's hands. Out of this horrible wrong, we see God making all things right. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.