

With Me In Paradise

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, February 24, 2010)

Genesis 3:6-13, ⁶The woman saw how beautiful the tree was and how good its fruit would be to eat, and she thought how wonderful it would be to become wise. So she took some of the fruit and ate it. Then she gave some to her husband, and he also ate it. ⁷As soon as they had eaten it, they were given understanding and realized that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and covered themselves.

⁸That evening they heard the LORD God walking in the garden, and they hid from him among the trees. ⁹But the LORD God called out to the man, "Where are you?"

¹⁰He answered, "I heard you in the garden; I was afraid and hid from you, because I was naked."

¹¹"Who told you that you were naked?" God asked. "Did you eat the fruit that I told you not to eat?"

¹²The man answered, "The woman you put here with me gave me the fruit, and I ate it."

¹³The LORD God asked the woman, "Why did you do this?"

She replied, "The snake tricked me into eating it."

Luke 23:32-33, 39-43 (TEV) ³²Two other men, both of them criminals, were also led out to be put to death with Jesus. ³³When they came to the place called "The Skull," they crucified Jesus there, and the two criminals, one on his right and the other on his left. ³⁹One of the criminals hanging there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

⁴⁰The other one, however, rebuked him, saying, "Don't you fear God? You received the same sentence he did. ⁴¹Ours, however, is only right, because we are getting what we deserve for what we did; but he has done no wrong." ⁴²And he said to Jesus, "Remember me, Jesus, when you come as King!"

⁴³Jesus said to him, "I promise you that today you will be in Paradise with me."

This beautiful prayer-hymn expresses a sentiment that I am sure each one of us can wholeheartedly pray in our own hearts. "Jesus, remember me." Even more than the sentiment of the hymn, we yearn to hear Jesus' answer, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." Well, maybe not today, but when our time comes, don't we all want to be with Jesus, in Paradise?

There was a time, in Paradise, when some of our relatives did not want God to be with them, when they were hoping God would not remember them. There was an earlier time when these relatives of ours would enjoy daily walks with God in Paradise. But then, as you heard in our first lesson, Adam and Eve disobeyed God. When God came to them, they hid from God. As those two watched the sun beginning to set on that fateful day of sin, they probably would not have prayed that God would remember them, but they were hoping that God would forget about them, at least for now. Remember what Adam said, "I heard you in the garden; I was afraid and I...hid...from...you." I know, Adam said, "I hid from you BECAUSE I WAS NAKED." But he wasn't referring to his lack of clothing. I don't think he was as worried about body parts being exposed as much as he was worried about his behavior being exposed. He had done exactly what God had told him not to do. He knew he had done something wrong, and he knew that God knew it, too.

That can be frightening. We have each done things we are ashamed of, things we know were wrong, and God knows it, too. That can be so frightening – we don't want God to know, we don't want God to see our bad behavior, we don't want God to be around at that time, or even for a while afterward.

But on the other hand, it is even more frightening to live out our lives without God. We each have crosses that we cannot stand to bear alone. We each have come into circumstances where we have felt God's presence, God's strength and God's guidance. Those thieves on the crosses beside Jesus needed God in their circumstances. They had done things that were wrong; they recognized that they were receiving the punishment that was due to them. And the one had the wisdom to call out to Jesus, the Son of God, "Jesus, remember me."

That simple two-word prayer was answered, because our God is a God who does remember. In Genesis 8:1 we read that God "remembered" Noah and all in the ark with him. In Exodus 32, when the people continued to sin and disobey God, God REMEMBERED his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Psalm 98 proclaims "God remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness.

I would remind you of two different definitions of the word "remember." One definition is to not forget. I don't think that is what we mean here. God is not forgetful – that is a human condition that seems to increase in us with the passing years. The other definition is to honor or celebrate, as in "remembering our anniversary by going out to dinner." This seems the more fitting definition. God has not forgotten us, but God remembers his mercy and his love toward us, and we join with God to celebrate.

That really is the key – we join with God, we celebrate God's goodness and mercy, with God. This is such an important word that we often bring up at Christmas time. We talk about the birth of Christ as being "Immanuel" which translates, "God with us." And God is with us, not just at Christmastime, but during our difficult times, during our times of need, even during Lent, and most important of all, God is with us, even in our death. Yes, even in death, God is with us, to redeem us, that we might not be lost forever, but that we might be remembered, and restored, and once again be given the hope of Paradise.

It happened there, just outside Paradise, as the man and woman received their just punishment, that God remembered them and covered them, as it says in Genesis 3:21, "And the Lord God made clothes out of animal skins for Adam and his wife, and he clothed them." As I said earlier, the man and woman did not need their body parts covered, they surely were not concerned about that as much as they were concerned to have their sins covered. God took care of Adam and Eve then, and on the cross, God has taken care of us. By the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, our sins are covered. And again we are reassured, God remembers. God remembers us. And we will be with him in Paradise, forever. Amen.

Let us again join in prayer, singing #569, once through, "Jesus, Remember Me."