

Trinity Lutheran Church, Gillette, WY
November 25, 2007

Happily Ever After

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, amen. The text for the sermon this morning comes from the Gospel, which was read earlier.

“Once upon a time...and they lived happily ever after. The End.” These are words which we all grew up on, words which we enjoyed to hear because of the happiness which it would bring to us. You always knew that if a story started as “Once upon a time,” it would always end with “and they lived happily ever after. The End.”

There was another story that we enjoy to hear because of the happiness which it brings to us. However, it doesn't begin with “Once upon a time.” It begins with *“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”* This particular chapter, entitled “Jesus” begins with the following: *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”*

This is a familiar story to all of us. We know the happy ending of this story: God's promises are fulfilled on that day of final resurrection. One day, Jesus will come back. On the Last Day, everything will come to an end. Those who had died will have their physical bodies rise up and live again. On this Judgment Day, those who have believed in Jesus Christ enter into the final glorious heavenly life forever, with body and soul reunited.

When we read this story, we see it is not a fairy-tell story. The story is very real. It has real people with real lives and real consequences. It involves criminals, bad guys.

It involves a story which we don't like to hear, one that involves a man who was crucified for the message which He preached. People did all they could to get Him to stay quiet: finding His errors in the Law, showing how He violated it. In the end, the only way to quiet His message was to kill Him. Right now, it doesn't seem that this will end happily ever after.

It wasn't easy quieting the message of Jesus Christ. They tried and tried and could not quiet Him. The only way was through His death. During Christ's crucifixion, others were crucified along with Him, two criminals. They were placed on either side of Jesus. Though these men are criminals, though Jesus is surrounded by those who would persecute Him, He still preaches until His dying breath: *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”* Regardless that His life is coming to an end, He still prays a prayer for them. Why does He pray for them? They didn't ask Him to pray. If you ask some of them, they would tell you that they don't **need** His prayers. The answer to why He prays for them: because they are sinners and are in need of forgiveness.

That same prayer which Jesus prayed on the cross for the people of His time, He continues to pray that same prayer for us today. He continues to pray to God, our Father, for forgiveness. We continue to sin. We revel in sin. We **adore** sin! However, we were not meant to sin at all. We were not meant to revel in sin. We were not meant to adore sin. Due to the Fall, we became sinful human beings. We need forgiveness, whether we want to admit it or not. Jesus recognized the fact that those standing before Him at His crucifixion needed forgiveness. He recognized the fact that all people need forgiveness. That is why Jesus prayed from the cross, *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what*

they do.” Because of the sin they commit, they do not know what they are doing. They are ignorant in their actions, crucifying the Son of God. Even Jesus' own followers were ignorant, not truly understanding the identity of their Lord until after His resurrection. In ignorance of what true paradise was in the Garden of Eden, they sin. In ignorance of who Jesus Christ is, they crucify Him. Through all of this, Jesus prays for forgiveness.

Forgiveness was not the only thing which occurred on the cross. Mockery occurred also.

Jesus was mocked. The soldiers mock Jesus, having fun at His expense. They ridicule Him as the King of the Jews who can't even save Himself. The Jewish leaders also mock Jesus. They see Him as weak and pathetic, a fraud who claimed to be the Christ. Even one of the criminals mocked Jesus. If that weren't enough, even the sign above Christ's head mocks Him. They deride Him for being the King who couldn't save Himself.

We too are mocked. We are mocked for our beliefs and our faith. We are mocked for going to church rather than sleeping in. We are mocked for attending a Bible study, studying and meditating upon God's Word rather than go out for a night on the town. Death continues to make a mockery of us and our faith. The body stops breathing, the hearts stops beating. Death mocks us. Death tells us that that's all there is. However, we know that death is not all that there is.

When the criminals mocked Jesus, one of the criminals told the other, *“And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.”* The one criminal recognized that Jesus was innocent of any accusations

brought against Him. If anyone was to be tried for their crimes, it would be the criminals hanging on either side of Jesus. The criminal makes one request of Jesus: *“And he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’”* The criminal is broken and beaten. He sees himself as he truly is, lost and condemned. Honest admission of his guilt leaves him with only one hope. He turns to Jesus and sees more than a dying man, more than the blood and agony. Others see a failed and fallen false messiah, but he sees the true Messiah! His eyes look at Jesus in moments of complete humiliation and utter torment. In an act of faith, he places himself into the outstretched arms of the Christ. He sees Jesus as innocent, as the One who can save him. He confesses Jesus as the King, someone who has a kingdom he wants to live in. In that moment, he receives more than he could ever imagine – paradise.

Jesus answers the criminal's request, giving him paradise by turning the mockery of the sign above his head in a sign of truth for all believers. The criminal's request is granted. *“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”* His happy ending is assured. On the cross, the criminal sees the sign above Christ's head and believes. The One who doesn't save Himself saves others by His death. It's not that Christ couldn't save Himself as the mockers claimed, but that He wouldn't. He needed to take our punishment on the cross, so that on the Last Day we would be judged innocent, free to enter into His presence with body and soul rejoined together forever. The sign is not a sign of ridicule but a sign of truth: Jesus is the King who saves us because He did not save Himself. Jesus gives paradise from the cross by saving others instead of Himself and because of that, we look forward to that day of fulfillment when He restores all of creation with the

resurrection from the dead.

Jesus granted that same request of the criminal to each of us through the waters of Holy Baptism, just as He did for Caleb (early) / Adam (late) this morning. When we received water with the Word of God, “I baptise you...”, that is a promise. That is a promise that we have died. We have died to sin and are reborn in Christ. We live these days as both sinner and saint until the day we die. When we die, we receive the ultimate promise: paradise from God the Father, through His Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

For our life story, it begins with “Once upon a time.” There are good parts and there are bad parts, but we know the end of the story. The story ends with “and they lived happily ever after” because of the words which Jesus gave to each and every one of us: *“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”* In the name of Jesus, amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, amen.