

Luke 23:33-43

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "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." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Sermon: The View from Pisgah

The words of Jesus to the thief on the cross have echoed across the centuries: Today you will be with me in Paradise.

There, lifted high above the mount of Golgotha, Jesus surveyed the crowd that had followed in procession as he carried the cross through the streets of Jerusalem: Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

Looking back at how the world had treated him he spoke words of kindness; looking ahead to what awaited him, he had a vision of paradise.

I suppose in years past there have been many sermons preached from his pulpit that sought to evoke a vision of heaven for families grieving the death of a loved one. And I suspect there have been a few preached that sought to evoke a vision of hell in hopes of keeping the living on the straight and narrow.

Some of our Puritan ancestors made quite a name for themselves by stirring up the fear of eternal punishment in their exhortations, and none more so than Jonathan Edwards who in the hot summer

days of 1741 told his congregation in Enfield Connecticut that they were but “sinners in the hands of an angry God.”

I used to think fire and brimstone was the special gift of those New England Puritans, but I was wrong. After being in Dublin for Bloomsday a few years ago, I thought I might tackle reading Ulysses by James Joyce. I was advised that I should first try a more accessible work and began reading “A Portrait of the Artist As A Young Man.”

Even with this book it was hard going in the beginning because Joyce skips from place to place and time to time frequently and without warning. That was for the first hundred pages; but then he takes us to a retreat where he and his Catholic schoolmates are given a series of sermons on the torments of Hell. It must have made quite an impression, because Joyce gone one about it for 20 pages. As the retreat begins, with barely a mention of paradise, the Priest plunges in:

Let us try for a moment to realize, as far as we can, the nature of that abode of the damned which the justice of an offended God has called into existence for the eternal punishment of sinners. Hell is a strait and dark and foul smelling prison, an abode of demons and lost souls, filled with fire and smoke. All the filth of the world shall run there as a vast reeking sewer when the terrible conflagration of the last day has purged the world.

Need I go on? Very graphic and perhaps a reminder that the church, in more than one time and place, has taken a rather harsher tone than her Lord who spoke from the cross: Father, forgive them; Today you will be with me in Paradise.

As Ross Detwiler mentioned a few weeks back, the third minister of this church was a very controversial figure among his colleagues in Connecticut. The Rev. Stanley Griswold had served as a soldier in the Revolutionary War and came to New Milford to help out their aging Pastor, the Rev. Nathanael Taylor. Eventually Griswold was summoned to appear before his fellow ministers to answer charges of heresy, charges he thought were politically motivated since he supported Thomas Jefferson for president and Jefferson’s ideas on the separation of church and state were not popular in the congregational church in Connecticut. But the ministers cloaked their political anger in theological terms and said Griswold was preaching too much grace and not enough judgment – too much heaven and not enough hell.

And among the sermons these ministers used against Griswold were two he preached at the funeral of Rev Nathanael Taylor, who died in December of 1800. The New Milford church loved and cherished these same sermons and had them printed for public distribution. I have a copy here that was signed as a gift by Elijah Boardman – who built the home that now houses the Law offices of Cramer and Anderson, right across the green from the church.

As I read these sermons recently I was impressed at how contemporary they were – how the passage of 210 years did not make them seem archaic or irrelevant. They do make mention of judgment and hell, but they are much more concerned with the prospect of Paradise as the reward of life well lived – and this is what got Griswold into trouble – the thought that it was goodness in this life and not election by God into the church that gave us the hope of heaven.

Griswold looks at the story of Moses in the last moments of his life – God tells Moses to go up Mount Nebo, to the high ridge of Pisgah, so that he might get a glimpse of the promised land across the river before he dies – a land Moses will not enter. This, by the way, is the text that Martin Luther King referenced in the sermon he gave on the last night of his life: I've been to the mountain top - And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land.

So Griswold contemplates Moses going to this mountaintop alone to die. And he says that the loneliness and terror of the moment was overcome by two facts – that it was the most advantageous place from which to look back over the journey he and his people had made through the wilderness, and to look forward to the promised land which on earth was but a faint and imperfect token of the joys and blessings of heaven.

And Griswold says that each person in the hour of their death is afforded this same view, each person can look back at their life on earth and forward to their eternal dwelling place.

Looking back they might see many failings in their life that bring them regret, but even more the good things rise up and appear charming beyond conception: The least act of sincere goodness, Griswold says, does not then lose its reward.

Griswold continues: Few, my hearers, can have such lives to look back upon as Moses. Our spheres of life are more limited and humble. But although humble, yet properly filled, they yield honor and may be reviewed with satisfaction. A faithful attention to those duties which lie in the small circle of a family,

neighborhood, and ordinary society may excite pleasure in a dying hour. If we have nourished up children, provided for them, instructed them, set good examples, been kind neighbors, just benevolent, pitiful to the poor, the sick, the distressed, healed differences, promoted peace, used well the property, good name and confidence of others, we need not look for any great achievements of church, state or arms – but esteem those humble virtues as covering us with glory and forming a truly beautiful life, we can adopt the words of Paul “I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith; henceforth is laid up for me a crown of righteousness which the Lord will give me at that day.”

Neither 200 years nor 2000 years has lessened for us the comfort in hearing the words: Father, forgive them.

Neither 200 years nor 2000 years has lessened for us the joy in hearing the words: Today, you will be with me in Paradise.