What if this is the last sermon you will ever hear? What do you want to hear? You probably did not come to church this morning to ponder your mortality, did you? Because in all honesty, death may be a far way off for some of you, for others it could be closer than you want to admit. In either case, you just do not want to think about it too much. But the sobering reality is that it will come. Death will come for each and every one of us here this morning. God has told us in his Word: So then, just as sin entered the world through one man and death through sin, so also death spread to all people because all sinned. All means me. All means you.

One of my neighbors across the street died unexpectedly last Sunday morning. Monday afternoon I was talking to a couple of other neighbors about it. One of them said that he looks at the obituaries every morning in the newspaper. He takes note of the ages of the deceased. Many of them are my age or younger! he said. I realized that my name could show up there any time!

That is another sobering truth about death. Death does not discriminate. It does not care how old or young you are, the color of your skin, what you have accomplished in life or what responsibilities you currently have. Death does not care how or where you breathe your last breath. So, what if this is the last sermon you will ever hear? What do you want to hear as you prepare for death?

Let’s travel to Jerusalem this morning and listen to the conversation that took place between men who were facing death. Here we are standing on Golgotha, the grotesque hill outside of the city, shaped like a human skull. How appropriate that the Roman government chose this spot to execute the worst of criminals, those deserving the death penalty, a place where all who traveled into the city would see and be warned.

A crucifixion is taking place. Golgotha is crowned with its three crosses and three suffering, bleeding, slowly dying forms. Luke points to one in particular: One of the criminals hanging there was blaspheming him, saying, Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us! Matthew and Mark record that at first both of these criminals railed against this man who had the place of prominence between them, the one who was receiving all of the attention. Aren’t you the Christ? they taunted. Where did they get this info about this man, that he was the supposed Messiah? They had been listening to the Pharisees and chief priests, the religious leaders of the Jews, who continued to mock him: He saved others. Let’s see him save himself, if he is the Christ. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, had placed a sign above Jesus’ head, so that all who passed by would know the crime for which each criminal was suffering: Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews. That is what happens to people who claim to be a king, because there was only one kin, Caesar. They had listened to the Roman soldiers who also were mocking him. Perhaps these criminals also saw Jesus on display in Pilate’s palace courtyard earlier, dressed in purple, adorned with a crown of thorns, and wooden staff in his hand.

They joined in the mockery: You don’t look like a king. Where is your crown of gold? You have a crown of thorns. Where is your purple robe other than the purple bruises and blood that cover your body? Where is your scepter other than the nails pierced through your hands? Where is your sapphire throne other than your cross? Where are your servants other than your executioners?
How would the King answer? How would he respond to the cursing, the mockery? Because you do not tell a king what to do. He tells you what to do. Why, he is the king! If you try to tell the king what to do, he could very well order your execution! And these people appear to be getting away with their blasphemy - because he says nothing. He is silent.

And this is what catches the attention of one of the criminals. He stops and he ponders the situation. And then he speaks, this time, not in blasphemy, but a rebuke directed toward his partner in crime: Don’t you fear God, since you are under the same condemnation? Don’t you get it? Are you paying attention to the clues that things are not going well in your life right now? We are punished justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for what we have done. We deserve this, you and me, because we committed crimes worthy of the worst punishment the government can inflict.

This criminal did not excuse his crime. He did not blame his lack of father figure when he was a child. He did not blame society. He did not complain about his punishment. He did not wish that circumstances might be changed. He took responsibility for his actions. He is where he needs to be. He admits his guilt.

Isn’t that what you need to hear as you prepare for death - these same words coming from your mouth, ringing in your ears, piercing your own heart: I am a sinner. I have committed crimes against my King worthy of death. The criminal would soon explain why we need to hear these words as we prepare for death. He quickly continued his discourse: We are receiving what we deserve for what we have done, but this man has done nothing wrong. Literally, This man has done nothing out of place. Everything he has done he has done perfectly.

How did this man come to know this about Jesus, that he is innocent of any guilt, that he is being punished for crimes he has not committed? He had seen the placard above this man’s head: The King of the Jews. He had heard the jeers and taunts from the soldiers, religious leaders and the people: If you are the Christ, come down and prove it! They were mocking this man because he claimed to be the Messiah, the Savior. As the three of them were paraded through the streets of the city, bearing their instruments of execution, he heard Jesus speak to the daughters of Jerusalem: Stop weeping for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. He heard Jesus speak forgiveness to the soldiers who drove the nails through his hands and feet. He saw in this man silent endurance and patience. He heard no word of complaint. He heard no word of retaliation or revenge.

How could all of the other people here have missed these obvious clues? This man has done nothing wrong. He is innocent. This man is what they are doubting – he is the King. He is the Messiah, the Savior. He looked past the crown of thorns and saw the crown of victory. He looked past the nails and saw the scepter of gold in his hands. He looked past the weak and weary body, bloodied and bruised and saw his beautiful Savior, clothed in white robes, glorious and powerful.

As this man recognized his guilt more and more, and that this Jesus of Nazareth was without fault, he’d heard forgiveness uttered freely for these ruthless men who had crucified him, he, too, wanted to hear that same promise as he labored to breathe. His lungs were now beginning to collapse under the weight of his body that sagged on the cross. He knew that death would come to him - today, tomorrow, two days from now – who knows? He longed to hear that his sins had been pardoned.

So he speaks: Jesus - with confidence he addresses the King by name, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. With complete confidence, he put his full trust in this man dying on a cross, knowing that whatever the King will do, it will be a blessing. He does not know how or when Jesus will enter his kingdom, but he wants to go where his
King is going. He wants to be with his Savior.

He tells the King what to do. But his request is different. He does not ask Jesus to do what the others asked, and perhaps what he himself may have wished for, that is, **Come down from that cross and save me!** No. His request is different because it comes from a heart of faith. Faith that was born in him, in a very short time - which is amazing when you think about this. The Holy Spirit used these few words from the lips of Jesus to convert this man from blatant unbelief and convinced him that this is the Savior of the world, the one who holds forgiveness for his sins. Not too long ago blasphemy spewed from his lips, but now, we hear a confession of faith.

And what will the King say? All day long people had been telling the King what to do. The King said the one thing that he needs to hear as he prepares for death. **Amen I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.**

He could have said: **I will remember you.** But he says much more than that. He gives him a promise that is sure and certain, a promise that chases away any doubts, a promise that gladdens that man’s heart, a promise that comforts him as he dies, a promise that his sins are pardoned, a promise that Jesus’ innocence covers over that man’s transgressions, a promise that his King has accepted him as his child: **Today, you will be with me in paradise.**

How refreshing this must have been to Jesus! All the world had abandoned him, his people rejected him as king, his religious leaders hated him and did not want him to be their king, even his disciples abandoned him, but here on the cross, as he is being punished for the very sins these people are committing and knowing that most of them would not benefit from his death, Jesus is able to offer pardon to this man. He has the opportunity to offer the innocence of his perfect life. He is able to offer that man a respite from his suffering. Today you will die and that is a good thing! This very day you will die and so will I. Today, there will be an end to suffering. Today there will be a place of rest for you. **Today, you will be with me.**

So here you are, just like the criminal, preparing for your death. What do you want to hear? You have already this morning heard what you need to hear, and from your own lips: **I confess that I am a sinner by nature. I have disobeyed my King. I have done evil. I have disobeyed with my thoughts, my words, my actions. I have committed crimes worthy of death.** Those are words that you and I need to hear because they remind us that we stand before the King empty-handed. We come with nothing to offer. We look in faith to our King and humbly say: **Jesus, remember me when I die.** Because in that request, you are throwing all of eternity into the hands of the King. And the King tells you what you need to hear this morning as your prepare for death: **You will be with me in paradise.**

Paradise is yours because this man has done nothing wrong. Paradise is yours because this man has prayed for you: **Father, forgive them.** Paradise is yours because this man cried out: **It is finished!** Paradise is yours because this man said: **Behold, I was dead, but now am alive!** Paradise is yours because this man is your Savior, your King and he promises paradise to you. And whatever the King says will happen.

As you prepare for death, let the words of the King ring in your ears and close your eyes in quiet confidence, knowing that when you open them again, you will see the face of your King, smiling at you. And you will hear him say: **Come, come into the kingdom that I have prepared for you and promised to you.**

With John, we say: **Come quickly, Lord Jesus, my Savior and my King!** Amen.

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