Church of the Lutheran Confession's

Ministry By Mail

"Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God." Romans 10:17

Last Sunday of Church Year

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Scripture Readings

Malachi 3:13-18; Colossians 1:13-20

Hymns from The Lutheran Hymnal (1941)

#9| #515 | #452 | #341

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Prayer of the Day

Lord Jesus Christ, from the cross You prayed for sinners and promised paradise to the dying thief. Grant us repentance and faith, that when our sins accuse us and death draws near, we may cling to Your word of forgiveness and rejoice that we will be with You in paradise. You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

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Sermon Text

(Luke 23:27-43 ESV) "And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. 28 But turning to them Jesus said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. 29 For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' 30 Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' 31 For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?" 32 Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. 33 And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the

criminals, one on his right and one on his left. 34 And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. 35 And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" 36 The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine 37 and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" 38 There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." 39 One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" 40 But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41 And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." 42 And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." 43 And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.""

Theme

Happily Ever After in Paradise

Dear fellow redeemed, beloved of God,

I don't watch much television. If the TV is on, it's probably for a game. And if I'm going to sit through a movie, I want a story that holds my attention from the first scene to the last. Most of all, I want a happy ending. Let the good guys win. Let good triumph over evil. Or at least give me a silly comedy.

As a pastor, I spend a fair amount of time in hospitals and with people facing troubles of all kinds. I've heard my share of stories from people who are sure that what they need from me is just a little money for gas. Through you, the Lord has called me to bring His Word to people in all sorts of situations. That's a privilege. And yet when I sit down to watch something, I'm ready for a little escape. I'd like to see a story that ends well.

You've seen your share of hardship, too. There are good memories and real joys in this life, and there are chapters that simply don't end well. Maybe there's trouble in your marriage, or your children have made decisions whose consequences you're helping them bear. Maybe you're still dealing with the consequences of your own decisions. Treatment may be going more slowly than you'd hoped, or the bills may be piling up faster than you can pay them. You don't need a movie to tell you how such stories can end.

In Malachi's day, people looked around and complained, "Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape" (Malachi 3:15). The trouble goes beyond our own lives. Look through the history of the world. What great kingdom has ever lasted? Kingdoms fall. People fall. To dust we shall return. It's little wonder that fear and anxiety creep in when we think about how our own stories might end.

Throughout His ministry, Jesus turns stories like these on their heads. Think of the lepers who had to live apart from their families. Jesus cleanses them and sends them home. People who have lived in darkness can see. A woman comes to Jesus with a past she can't undo. She wets His feet with her tears and wipes them with her hair, and Jesus forgives her and sends her away in peace. Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days when Jesus calls him out. Even death has to give way when the Author of life speaks.

And what does sinful humanity do with the Author of life? We put Him to death. Our Gospel reading takes us to Calvary. The rulers scoff. The soldiers mock. Even one of the men crucified beside Jesus joins in. "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" Put yourself in the disciples' place. Wouldn't you want to run and hide? God sends His Son to save dying men and women, and dying men and women kill His Son. Only a few verses after our reading ends, Jesus breathes His last.

And on that day, even as He goes to His death, Jesus speaks three times in our reading. Listen to what He says.

Jesus Warns the Daughters of Jerusalem: On the way to Calvary, the women are weeping for Jesus. He turns to them and tells them to weep for themselves and their children. He speaks of the destruction coming upon Jerusalem. The suffering would be so terrible that people would wish they had never had children and would beg the hills to cover them.

Hear the warning for yourself. Rejecting the Author of life leaves you with death. Jerusalem stood for decades after Jesus spoke those words. The Lord's patience gives us time to repent. Take His warning seriously. Confess the sins you've tried to excuse or hide, and turn to Him for mercy.

Jesus Prays for Sinners: As Jesus is crucified, He prays, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." The men who drove the nails are still there. Before the mocking stops, before anyone apologizes, Jesus asks His Father to forgive them. He has spent His life seeking sinners, and now He gives His life to save them. The One who prays for their forgiveness is paying for it with His own blood.

Hear that prayer when the devil tells you that your sins are too many, or that one sin in particular has put you beyond forgiveness. Jesus had you in mind when He went to the cross. He took your place and suffered the judgment you dread. He paid for every last one of your sins. You are redeemed. God has declared you righteous in Christ.

Jesus Promises Paradise: The second criminal knows that he deserves his sentence. He says so plainly. He also knows that Jesus has done nothing wrong. Then he turns to the man dying beside him and says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." With his eyes he can see a man nailed to a cross. By faith he sees his King.

Jesus answers, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” The man has no time to make up for what he has done. He has the word of Jesus. At the heart of that promise are two words, “with me.” The King who is dying beside him will welcome him into paradise that very day.

If all you had at Calvary were the evidence of your eyes, you would see a day of cruelty and death. But listen to Jesus. He warns sinners, prays for their forgiveness, and promises paradise. The cross is where He wins the forgiveness He asks for, and the empty tomb shows that the King who promises paradise lives and reigns.

You may still have plenty before your eyes that makes a happy ending hard to imagine. Hear your Lord’s promise with believing ears. The Jesus who died for your sins and rose again will bring you through death into life. In the Creed we confess the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting. Your story continues there.

Even now, Jesus gives you more than a glimpse of what lies ahead. In Baptism you were joined to His death and resurrection. You already have newness of life, even on days when it seems buried beneath everything you carry. In His Word you hear today the verdict you will hear on Judgment Day. You are forgiven. You are righteous in Christ. And in the Lord’s Supper, the Lamb who was slain and now reigns gives you His body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins. This humble supper is a foretaste of the feast to come.

So confess your sins. Bring your worries to the Lord who forgives you. Pray for your children, your parents, and the people whose troubles weigh on you. He hears you. And while He keeps you here, there are still people for you to love and serve.

On the last Sunday of the church year, we hear that Christ is coming soon. When Advent dawns, we hear it again. The One who came once, born of Mary, is coming again in glory. Whatever chapter you’re living through right now, that is how your story goes. Your sins are forgiven. Eternal life is yours. And in Christ, you will live happily ever after in paradise.

Thanks be to God. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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