|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| |  | | --- | | Sermon 11-24-2019  Jesus, Remember Me  Luke 23:33-43  **Sermon Starter**  Very few of us crawl out of bed on Sunday morning, stumble to the shower, **GRAPHIC: feast on some Pop-Tarts** and then drive to church because we ache to know more about the liturgical seasons. We are more likely thinking about what **GRAPHIC: football teams might be playing today,** where they are in the standings, or possibly what might **GRAPHIC: fill our day once we get out of church, like where’s lunch.**  We’ve heard pastors assure us that the lectionary makes for good discipline, but we have way too many thoughts jostling around in our brains to care. We just don’t come to church hungering for a word about where a particular Sunday falls in the church year. We want a word that speaks to us, no matter what Sunday the calendar says it is. On Sunday, we want some salve for our hurts, some brace for our fear, some light that evaporates our anxiety. Who cares about the church year?  Well, some of us do, especially if you are tasked with replacing the paraments. By the way, paraments[[1]](#endnote-1) is a churchy word for the **GRAPHIC: cloths hanging from the pulpit and lectern, as well as the banners and altar cloths.**  For the record, today marks the last day of the church year. Next Sunday we start over with Advent, the first Sunday of the church year. If we expect the liturgical calendar to make sense, we might find a surprise waiting for us. Christians start the new year at the end.  If we read Isaiah next week, we will talk about how “in days to come” God will bring us all together.[[2]](#endnote-2) We start at the end. If we read from Matthew, we will hear about the coming of the Son of Man, once again beginning at the end.[[3]](#endnote-3) We begin the church year with the promise of what God will do, how God will act in the future.    If we are surprised at how the church year begins at the end, what do we make of the way the church year *ends*, at least in this gospel reading? We might argue that the church year ends in the middle of things. On the last Sunday of the year, Jesus remains alive, not resurrected, but alive. We remember Jesus’ death in the spring and celebrate the resurrection months before the last Sunday of the year, but on this day, we’re back to when Jesus is being crucified. We again come face-to-face with the resurrection.  Who would end the church year this way? The year ends before Jesus’ death and resurrection, with all their significance. Just as troubling, the year ends with the forces of evil in the world at full throttle. **GRAPHIC: Jesus’ opponents drag him before Pilate.[[4]](#endnote-4)** The lies start pouring out: “This man perverts our nation. He tells us to refuse to pay taxes to the government. He calls himself a king!” When Pilate raises an eyebrow to all of that, they ramp up the shrillness: “He’s stirring everyone up.” **GRAPHIC: Pilate passes the buck to Herod, where Jesus endures mocking, contempt and ridicule.[[5]](#endnote-5)**  Jesus’ people turn on him, shouting against him. Jesus loses a vote to a rebel. Herod and Pilate both want to just let him walk, but the people won’t have it. **GRAPHIC: On the human level, Jesus might have avoided the crucifixion and death if the two politicians had talked more persuasively.** We might see Jesus’ death as a close call. If one or two things had broken his way, he might have avoided the cross.[[6]](#endnote-6)    **Left hanging**    When the scene opens on our segment for today, Jesus hangs in humiliation between two criminals. Brutish, callous soldiers gamble for his clothes, even if those clothes aren’t much to roll the dice about. The Roman government has made all three men victims. One might expect that the three would find some comfort in solidarity.  We might think they would support each other, saying something like “Look what the Romans have done to us!” One of the criminals didn’t see an “us.” Even he lashed out at Jesus: “If you are such a big-deal Messiah, here’s a chance to do some saving. You can start with yourself and us.”  So ends the church year. **GRAPHIC: Jesus hangs on a cross, still alive, but deep in humiliation and degradation, treated worse than any person ought to endure**. The violence, aggression and hatred of the world stand unchecked. The ugliest side of humanity comes into full view. What do we make of this scene at the end of the church year?  We can say that if the church year leaves us hanging, so does life. Some of life’s wounds never completely heal. When we long for a happy ending, we may find things unresolved, with loose ends frayed and open.    Jesus’ accusers lied about him to Pilate. They twisted his message out of shape. No one refuted them. By the end of our narrative for today, no one had challenged those lies. Perhaps we have felt the hot sting of a lie told about us.  We may have had to repair our reputation with those who believed the lie, which only added to the pain. If no one has lied about us, we may burn with rage over the lies that fill social media. The fact checkers work double overtime but can’t keep up. Every lie does more damage to our sense of trust.  Herod and Pilate had no reason to rescue Jesus, but they did not think he deserved to die. If they had figured out a clever way to speak to the crowd, they might have saved Jesus from his fate. Humanly speaking, Jesus died after a close call that could have gone either way. How much pain have we suffered that we might have avoided? How often have we faced a tragedy that did not have to happen? How many times have we asked, **GRAPHIC: “If only?”**  The cruelty that seeps up through the human heart often leaves us stunned. **GRAPHIC: How can people be so mean?** Jesus never hurt anyone, and he certainly didn’t hurt the soldiers who mocked him, gambled for his clothes and treated him like dirt.  We all know that memories of cruelty from our childhoods can pop up when we least expect it. The pain seems just as fresh as the day it happened. **GRAPHIC: People of good will throw their best efforts to stop bullying, but bullies keep marching on.** No one admits to being a bully, but we see the hurt everywhere. Anyone who is gentle, anyone who is different, no matter how innocent or helpless, can move into the crosshairs of a bully.  We might expect trouble from a stranger, or someone who has never liked us, **GRAPHIC: but the betrayal of a friend, or one we consider an ally, hurts much more.** The criminal might have considered himself in solidarity with Jesus, but instead, his taunts ring in Jesus’ ear. He was never Jesus’ friend, but he could have created common ground. He could have offered support in the midst of their mutual predicament.  A betrayal destroys a relationship and wrecks even our memories of the good times. Love can morph into anger. Warm feelings can sour and turn bitter.    **On this side of the resurrection**  So, this time around we end the church year with Jesus on the cross. We may not come to church eager to know more about the liturgical seasons, but we can begin to see the wisdom of ending the year this way. Our own lives often just leave open wounds and unresolved problems.  For now, we are on this side of the resurrection. Maybe no one corrects the lies others tell about us. We experience and see cruelty that shocks us. We regret the close calls that might have gone the other way. We feel the hot burn of betrayal. By ending the year with Jesus on the cross, in pain of mind and body, the church recognizes that we find life this way. What Jesus experiences in this passage mirrors our experience.  Yet, the passage contains more than just Jesus’ suffering. We call this day **GRAPHIC: “Christ the King Sunday,”** or “The Reign of Christ Sunday.” We might wish that Jesus had power over the lies, cruelty and betrayal we experience now. What Jesus shows us, however, is **GRAPHIC: the power of the Spirit**. Hanging on the cross, Jesus forgives the soldiers who have riveted his body to the unyielding wood of the cross. Jesus opens the possibility of Paradise to the criminal who repents.    **GRAPHIC: Forgiveness releases us from the hate in our hearts.** Paradise, a reference to the restored Eden, holds out the promise of God’s work of renewal of all creation. Jesus shows us where to find healing for our souls and draws out hope for us.  Let us take that healing and hope and use it to sustain ourselves when the cruelty and pain of life threaten to overwhelm us. Let us remember that Jesus has been where we are, and he has shown us that the pain of life does not have the last word. Let us live into the triumph of Jesus over the hurt and humiliation that life can throw our way. Let us follow Jesus the Sovereign Lord, who knows our pain but trusted God with the final outcome.  **GRAPHIC: Let us also pray, “Jesus, Remember me.”**  In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen. | |

1. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parament>, accessed 10/29/19 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Isaiah 2:1-5 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Matthew 24:36-44 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Luke 23:1 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Luke 23:2-12 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Luke 23:13-25 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)