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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/29/2013, Good Friday
Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12, Psalm 22:1-22, Hebrews 10:16-25, John 18:1-19:42

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AND HE SAID, "JESUS, REMEMBER ME WHEN YOU COME INTO YOUR KINGDOM." AND JESUS SAID TO HIM, "TRULY, I SAY TO YOU, TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE." St. Luke 23:42-43

"Remember me!" There is something intensely poignant about this brief cry of longing. Indeed it is a longing that we human beings share with God Himself. This is clear from the Old Testament! Look where you will in the Five Books of Moses, in the prophets and in the Psalms, and you find the call of God to His people, "Remember Me!" Remember that I chose Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and their descendents to be my people. Remember that I brought you up out of Egyptian bondage and did so with mighty acts. Remember that I led you into the promised land, the land flowing with milk and honey. Remember that I fought valiantly for you and led you from victory unto victory. Yes, remember my wrath and my punishments when you forgot me to go whoring after gods that were no gods. Above all remember the covenant that I made with Abraham, the covenant that I have never broken, even though you broke it so often. Remember Me your Lord and your God, whose mercy endures forever.

The inspired Evangelists recognize this, for with one accord they strive to make certain that whenever or wherever the Gospel of Jesus Christ is read or proclaimed the actions of Christ on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday would always be remembered. It must be so for on these two days God reached out once and for all to reconcile the world to Himself. In meticulous detail the Evangelists portray the last supper of Christ with His disciples. The prevailing sadness in the upper room, the monologue of Christ and His high priestly prayer, the washing of the disciples' feet! The paradoxical statement of Christ that He would glorify the Father and Himself through His coming sacrificial death! The departure of Judas into the dark night of treachery. The love revealed in the Holy Eucharist--the Sacrament that would unite Christ and His followers through all time! Christ's lonely agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, the loveless kiss of betrayal! The barbarous treatment of God's Son at the hands of the priests' guards! The trials that made a mockery of divine and civil justice! The implacable hatred of the High Priest and the Sanhedrin! The cowardice of Pontius Pilate and the sentence of death!

No less memorable are the descriptions of the way of sorrows, the arrival at Golgotha and the terrifying act of crucifixion--hands and feet nailed to the cross, blood flowing from the head of Christ because of the crown of thorns! Pilate's ironic superscription, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews!" The bowed head, the physical agony, the final words of our Divine Lord! The death of Jesus of Nazareth! The pierced side and the flowing water and blood!

Christ's was, of course, no ordinary crucifixion! Jesus of Nazareth was not an innocent victim who suffered at the hands of unscrupulous religious leaders and an ineffective arm of Roman law. The Son of God was enacting the final scenes of God's drama of redemption. About Him, in the midst of physical agony and suffering, there was a divine radiance. He was a King, though not of this world. Neither Rome nor the religious leaders of Jerusalem would have had power over Him except it had come from above. It was the Son of God and of the Blessed Virgin Mary, united in a single Person, who was impaled on the cross. Though darkness veiled the battle for the life of the world, Christ did indeed reign and triumph from the tree. As the Holy Spirit entered the beings of the Evangelists He breathed into them the wondrous truth that those who would come to God and His Christ for redemption must remember all that God had done for them on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday

On this Good Friday we cannot but be touched by the prayer of the penitent thief. Whatever evil deeds the malefactor on Christ's right hand may have committed, whatever dark shadows may have haunted him at the last moments of his life, he looked to the serene, holy figure next to him who had no fear of death and who remained a King in the midst of unspeakable suffering and prayed to Him; "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." The Son of God answered this prayer immediately. "Truly I say to you, Today you will be with Me in paradise." Here is the wonder of this brief exchange. The God who desires to be remembered, declares that he will remember this penitent, dying malefactor.

You and I have come together on this Good Friday to remember all that God and His Christ have done for us. You may ask if we really need this annual call to remember. The answer is unfortunately a resounding "Yes!" Here in this holy house it is easy to remember. It is the place in which the Gospel is read and expounded. God's altar is here reminding us of Christ's all-sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the world. It is also our altar on which we offer our corporate sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving for God's inestimable love. Here we show forth the death of Christ as often as we eat and drink His true and substantial Body and His most precious Blood. Here the creed and the hymns and anthems

are continuing calls to remember. However, in the world as we go about our daily tasks and satisfy the demands of our professions and meet the needs of our families our minds wander, forgetfulness takes over, and we do not always remember that which is of the utmost importance--the work of our Divine Redeemer that has made it possible for us to be the children of the heavenly Father.

The prayer of the penitent malefactor is especially touching because it is both our prayer and the desire of God. Now and in the hour of our death we depend on God and His Christ to remember us with grace and mercy. At the same time God wills that we remember Him now and through all our days. Let there be no mistake! God is different from us. We may forget; God does not forget! The great comfort that comes to us on Good Friday is knowing that God's ways are not our ways, that His thoughts are not our thoughts, and that He never forgets us. He is God and not a man! Our minds may wander and be distracted. Our memories may falter and fail. At given moments we may forget who we are and how we came to be what we are. God does not forget us. No one will ever simply be left behind.

Let us learn to pray today and every day, "Jesus, remember me." Then, let us listen to the response of our Divine Lord to our prayer. "Truly, I say to you, today you shall be with me in paradise." The paradise of which Christ speaks does not have to wait until we have passed through the dark valley of death. One of the greatest and most precious promises of Christ was given to His disciples just before His ascension. "I am with you always, even unto the end of the age." Perhaps the greatest gift of Good Friday is knowing that we share with Christ a bond of loving remembering. As He always graciously remembers us, so let us always remember Him. In this union of remembering we can begin to experience paradise. You see, where Christ is, there is paradise. Amen!