**St. Paul’s Lutheran Church
Wildwood, Missouri**

**Last Sunday of the Church Year
November 24, 2019
Luke 23: 27-43**

 It struck me this past week that it has been just about six years ago that I stepped into this pulpit to deliver my first sermon to you all. Now, for me, the time has simply flown by. Granted, for you, you might be thinking, *“Gee…only six years…it feels like an eternity!”* Regardless, as I am sure you can well imagine, first sermons to a new congregation can be a bit unnerving. A pastor wants to leave a good first impression and the last thing in the world he wants is for his new congregation, fresh off his installation to think, “*Did this guy come with a return receipt?”* That is just not a good way to start off your ministry!

 Now, I am not the most nostalgic guy in the world but when I thought about that, I did think back on all the memories that have been made in these past years. The first sausage supper of my tenure was certainly memorable as I had no idea of three things. One, how good the sausage is. Two, how many people we actually serve in one day. I am still astounded by that. And three, how exhausted I would be at the end the day. I don’t think that I have been that tired in my entire life. Of course, there is also my two-time win over Mike Pollman in the pulled pork throw down! I would like to say I feel badly about that, but I don’t! Then there are all the bible classes which, honestly, are a joy for me to teach. However, I never thought a recurring theme in class would ever be that we won’t be married in heaven. Thank you, Dale Friedhoff,! And, of course, there are just the many relationship that have been established as we have moved from strangers to friends.

 Now, while all those are kind of fun points to remember, and while I would hope that you all would remember them fondly also, I have to admit I don’t really mind if you forget all that. It’s not that all that is unimportant but there is something more important that I have wanted you all to remember. If you should remember anything at all about these last six years, let it be this: during my time here, from the first sermon I preached to this sermon I am preaching now, I have preached Jesus Christ crucified and nothing else. In fact, I would prefer that Jesus and his cross be the foremost thing in your memory because that is the essence of the Gospel. It is the essence of our salvation. I mean, being your pastor has been great, but that doesn’t matter. The cross of Christ does.

 That is why I was so excited that the text today, the last Sunday of the Church year deals specifically with the crucifixion of our Lord. For one who has always preached Jesus Christ and him crucified, there could be no more appropriate text. To put this plainly and simply, the cross of Jesus, which is really our Christian shorthand for saying “*the death of Jesus”* is all about life. That is the bottom line. That is what our faith boils down to. In Jesus' death, in his crucifixion, we see life!

 Granted, when you look at what St. Luke records for us there doesn't seem to be much *“living”* going on here, does there?. Rather, the whole account seems to scream death. Of course, the whole process of crucifixion itself screams death. That was the point. With an economy of words, Luke barely makes mention of it. In verse 33 he simply states, “*When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals – one on the right, the other on the left.”* Luke doesn't unpack the term “*crucified.”*  I suppose he assumed that those living at the time in the Roman era were very familiar with it. And, without getting in to all the ghastly and ghoulish details of how one was crucified, suffice to say that no more cruel method of execution could be devised. From beginning to end, crucifixion was designed to maximize for the victim both his humiliation and his physical pain. In his humiliation in that he was stripped naked, exposed before the entire world. I know that in our artwork we always afford our Lord the dignity of a loincloth but that was not the case. And, in his pain, from the scourging that opened wide his flesh, to the first century equivalent of railroad spikes driven through his hands and feet, the victim would have experienced a level of anguish you and I, by God's grace, will hopefully never experience. It was all about death; Jesus' death.

 Then too, we see the hunger for death with the crowds who jeered and mocked our Lord as he hung from that tree. The blood-lust is apparent and it began with Jesus' trial. The religious leaders wanted Jesus dead and they made no attempts to hide their desire. Pilate, three times rightly declares Jesus to be innocent. One would think that three times would have been enough but for those who wanted Jesus dead, justice being served was not exactly a high priority. *“Crucify him! Crucify him!”* became their cry. It was all about death; Jesus' death.

 Luke continues and records the desire of the mob who gathered to watch the Son of Man die. I don't know about you but whenever I read the accounts of our Lord's passion, I am amazed at the complete lack of compassion, the absolute absence of basic humanity and the sheer cruelty expressed by those gathered there on that Good Friday. St. Luke tells us that the people sneered at him. The soldiers stood by and mocked him. Even one of the criminals, with his own death imminent, hurled insults at him. I guess what confuses me is that there could have been a no more pathetic looking individual that Jesus hanging from the cross. He was beaten. He was bloodied. He was weak. He was dying and the mob was happy to see him die. There was no sympathy. There was no mercy. It was all about death; Jesus' death.

 And, you know, there are many today who still view the cross this way. To be sure, those who do not believe don't understand the cross. It takes faith to see the cross for what it truly is but there are those who consider themselves part of Christianity who see the cross nothing more than a cruel, uncivilized and barbaric story of death. The Reverend Jeffrey John, dean of St. Albans Cathedral in St. Albans, England, to listeners on BBC Radio said that the crucifixion of Jesus for the sins of the world is, *“pretty repulsive as well as nonsensical.”* He went on, “*What sort of god was this, getting so angry with the world and the people he created and then, to calm himself down, demanding the blood of his own son? It is worse than illogical, it is insane. It made God sound like a psychopath. If any human being behaved like this, we would say they were a monster.”*

 Dr. John Dominic Crossan, former co-chairman of the theologically liberal Jesus Seminar, made a similar comment back in the year 2000. He said that he finds it *“an obscenity”* that God had somebody else suffer for our sins and that sacrificing his own son was, *“a sort of transcendental child abuse.”* Neither John nor Crossan can see beyond the dying. For them, the cross is simply all about death; Jesus’ death.

 And, you know, it might be hard to argue with that. On the surface, that is exactly what the crucifixion of Jesus seems to be all about. However, as that great and wise philosopher “*Judy the Elf”* said from the movie *The Santa Clause*, *“Seeing isn’t believing. Believing is seeing.”* By the gift of faith graciously granted by our Lord, we see the cross from a totally different perspective. And trust me; with eyes of faith, there is “*life”* in this text! There is life in this story and, actually, I don't even need to look beyond St. Luke's words to see it. We actually see the first glimmer of *“life”* in verse 34. Having been nailed to the cross, having been raised in the desert for all to see, Jesus looks out on the mob who wanted to see him die and he said, “*Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing.” J*esus' first words from the cross express his desire to forgive.

 Now, you may be wondering what those words have to do with life. Well, it is actually quite simple. Why do we die? Why does anyone die? And when I ask that I am not asking for a biological, anatomical or physiological reason. There are all sorts of ways to die and things that will end our lives but what is the root cause for our death? St. Paul makes that clear in Romans 6:23, *“For the wages of sin is death.”* We die because of sin. It really gets no more complicated than that. From the time that Adam and Eve ate that piece of fruit in the garden, we are all born with something wrong with us. We are not right. We are not right with each other and we are not right with God. That not *“rightness”* is sin. And don't think that the main problem of sin is the wrong that you do. The wrong that we do, our unfaithfulness to God and his will, the strife that we have with our fellow human beings, are simply symptoms. The main problem is us! *“We”* are sinful. “*We”* are what is wrong and the hard-hitting, unflinching truth of the scriptures is that *“we”* are sinful from the moment of our birth. Actually, we are sinful from the moment of our conception, and from that time on we are all on a steady march toward our death. Our sinfulness separates us from God and, by our very nature, human beings cannot survive without God. Without God there can be no life.

 That is why Jesus' words of forgiveness bring life. As Luther puts it in the catechism, *“Where there is forgiveness of sins there is life and salvation.”* This is the whole point of the cross. This is the whole point of Jesus dying. He paid the wages of sin for us. He paid the wages for your sin and my sin. He paid my debt and trust me, my debt of sin is huge. It is far too large for me pay on my own but God in his mercy has taken pity on me, he has shown me the compassion denied his Son, and he placed on Jesus all my sin so that he can make me right.

 He has done the same for you. Your debt of sin is huge as well. I don't mean that as an insult, it is just the facts. Think over your life and the sins you have committed. All them are the evidence that something is wrong with you. Like me, you were not right. Like me you were the problem. And, the cross is the punishment that we all deserved. By all rights, we should be sentenced to death on the cross. But, we are not. Jesus was crucified for us and for our salvation and now in his name we have life. It is not just our sins that are forgiven, we are forgiven. The cross moves us from sinner to saint in the eyes of God.

 And the beauty of this life-giving gospel covers all our sinfulness. It really does. With the words of forgiveness from our Lord, your sinful life is hidden. We see that so beautifully demonstrated in an individual sense here in Luke's gospel as well. Where? With the thief on the cross. Consider the thief. By his own admission, he is deserving of the punishment he is receiving. By his own mouth he declares that he deserves to die. You can imagine all the wrong he has done. You can imagine the godless life he lived. You can imagine what a sinner he was. And yet, at his the hour of his death, with the full realization that his situation was helpless and hopeless, he turns to the only one who can give him both help and hope. He turns to Jesus. *“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”* And with that simple plea, Jesus replies, *“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”* Paradise was his*.* Life was his.

 My friends, the cross of Jesus brings life. His shed blood for us is what has bought our salvation. In the lifeless body of Jesus hanging from the cross, by faith we see the promise of life to each of us. We live exactly and only because he chose to die. And when he rose on that first Easter morning, we see the hope of life that awaits all who believe.

 And, this is why I have always, and will continue to preach Jesus Christ and him crucified. I want you all to live. Actually, Jesus wants you all to live so much so that he was willing to die. And for however long our Lord keeps me here on earth or in this place, every sermon will point to the cross of Jesus because that I never want you to forget. To God be the glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.