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Palm/Passion Sunday  
March 29, 2026

Text: Luke 23:26 – 49

Title: The Passion...A Place of Seeking & Saving (based on a sermon by Dr. D. Schmidt)

Earlier in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus summarized his ministry. He said: “the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost” (19:10). Seeking and Saving. This morning we’ll look at the words of Jesus to the thief on the cross and discover our God as one who seeks and one who saves. First, consider how Jesus is a God who seeks.

Have you ever had those moments when you didn’t know what you were looking for? You’re not sure what you want but you know that you’re hungry. That is the kind of seeking we could call the “I’ll know it when I find it” approach. It doesn’t just happen in the kitchen. It could be in the mall, a grocery store, or Wal-mart. This search happens when you are trying to find an object that meets your expectations and answers your desire or need. This is the “I’ll know it when I find it” approach.

On the other hand, there is another kind of seeking: the “I know what I’m looking for” approach. This is when you know exactly what you’re looking for, and you’ll do whatever you can to find it. Take for instance your keys. You can’t find them, so you start looking all around the living room, asking yourself where you last saw them and where they might be. Between the cushions, in the pile of magazines and newspapers, under the couch . . . it’s amazing the places you’ll look. You are certain of what you’re seeking, you know its size, shape, color, you’re sure of its value and you go to the places where you hope it will be.

So we have two types of seeking: the “I’ll know it when I find it” and the “I know what I’m looking for” approach. Which kind of seeking is God doing in our reading this morning? Earlier in his gospel Luke gives us hints of the kind of seeking God does. He tells us the

parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. In each of these cases, God goes seeking, knowing exactly what is lost. This is the “I know what I am looking for” approach. In Luke, the seeking of Jesus is one where He goes to the ends of the earth, to the wood of a cross, to seek and to save that which was lost.

This is what is happening with Jesus’ work on the cross in our text this morning. Consider this: Jesus has placed Himself in the middle of people who are lost. We know little about the thieves on the cross next to Jesus. But one thing we do know: whatever they did they became thieves, and that brought them here. In speaking to the other criminal the second said, “Don’t you fear God, since we are under the same sentence? We are punished justly for we are getting what our deeds deserve” (v. 40-41). This man feared God and yet his life was in a shambles. He confessed that he had done wrong and was being crucified for what his sin deserved. And it is next to such a person that our Lord has placed Himself in death. Jesus, in dying, places Himself next to a lost life. God knows precisely what He is seeking, sinners who are dying under condemnation, and He goes right to the place where their sin takes them. And on the day when this man dies, Jesus brings him home.

How different this is from the way some people today think God’s searching to be. People today operate under the misunderstanding that God comes into this world searching for only those people who have it all together, whose lives are upright. They look at the Church and they think that we worship a God who has the “I’ll know it when I find it” approach. He wants justice and purity and honesty and love and He searches all over the world looking for those few who have these things. And, if He finds them, then He will take who He finds and brings them home. Sometimes, we in the Church tend to give them that impression, as if we were born or continue to live without any sin in our lives. And so, many don’t come to the Church because

they figure, “I don’t have what that God is seeking. I can’t live that kind of life.” But God did not come and call us into His kingdom because we were better than others. He did not look at our hearts and lives as if these made us worthy of His love.

The God we worship is one who knows the consequences of our sins. He comes, knowing what He is looking for, children who have gone astray, people who have sinned against others and against Him, and when He finds them He opens His heart in the death of His son. God placed Himself at the end of our journey, there on a cross, so that we might discover the beginning of His grace. Today we confess that we have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We’ve reached the end of our rope and, when there’s nothing left for us to hold onto, we end up falling right into the hands of God. Our God seeks His lost children. He sends His Son into this world to die for their sin and by that work He forgives us. He is a God who seeks those who are lost.

Now consider how our God is not only a God who seeks but also a God who saves. At times, it is hard for us to understand the work of God’s salvation. Consider how Jesus explained this work to His disciples. Jesus said: “It is written, ‘and he was numbered with the transgressors’” and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment.” (v. 37). That is the way Jesus talks about salvation. Jesus says He would be found among transgressors and here on the cross we see Him just as He said He would be. Jesus hangs dying between two criminals looking for all the world as if He were one of them. How can this be salvation? God’s way is different than ours. For God, it is precisely transgressors, criminals, those hanging on crosses, and those sitting in pews and walking about in the streets of this world, that He has come to save. And He saves transgressors by bearing the punishment of their sins, even though He is innocent. He is numbered among transgressors not

only by the world but also by His Father. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, “God made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (5:21). This is what Luther calls the marvelous exchange. God numbers His Son as a transgressor for us and miraculously numbers us as children for Him. This is how our God is a God who saves; He forgives our sins through the death of His Son, who was numbered among transgressors.

To our world, this is an offensive act of God. Some only want a god who helps people avoid death and destruction. Not one who carries them through it. The other criminal on the cross is an example of this. Luke writes, “One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: ‘Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!’” (v. 39). He wants a god who saves by escaping death, by avoiding anguish, by delivering his people from any experience of trouble or sorrow. He wants a god who will get him off of this cross so that he can leave all this suffering behind. He would latch onto any god who would get him down from this cross and people continue to act the same way today.

For many, salvation means a life without trouble. Some worship in churches hoping to find a god who acts this way. The good life is their goal, and their god is whatever gets them to it. Will prayer work? Then they’ll pray. Will right living? Then they’ll do it. They are into any god for what it can give them in this life. This is the false god of America, where if you do the right things, you will be rewarded by being able to move up the ladder and away from suffering. You can hear this false understanding of salvation all around you, especially in most TV ministries. Or just go into the Christian living section of most bookstores: you are promised health and wealth and the pleasures of the good life if you only believe enough.

And, unfortunately, this type of saving ultimately brings you to a very dangerous place. When suffering inevitably enters your life, what happens to God? Has God left you behind? Maybe you just didn't have enough faith, try harder. But it turns out that this is not the God we worship. Jesus is not some self-help guru that takes away suffering in this world: this is not what it means to have a God who saves.

Instead, listen to Jesus: "the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." Look at how Luke reveals Jesus in mission this morning. God saves not by avoiding the poor but by entering their world and bringing salvation to it. One thief curses Jesus for not taking Him away from suffering, the other shows faith and begs Him for salvation. He recognizes that even in suffering Jesus is the Savior. As Luke records it, "Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' Jesus answered him, 'I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise'" (v. 41-43). Here, Jesus brings a kingdom more powerful than this present moment, a kingdom that even death itself cannot take away, He does not need to avoid suffering. Instead, He works in the middle of it. He saves by forgiving sin not by denying it. This is the life of salvation we receive. This is the way of God in the world.

In our text, Luke reveals to us that Jesus is a God who seeks and a God who saves. He goes to the ends of the earth to seek out all sinners. When He finds them, He goes to the wood of the cross to offer His life in exchange for theirs. Now is that moment of grace. Today, our Lord seeks us and saves us and offers the fullness of joy that is His salvation. It's a joy unlike the "good life" of America. It doesn't run from suffering, leaving behind the poor and needy. It doesn't equate God's blessing with wealth and prosperity. Rather, it trusts in a Savior. It holds on to His word. It carries the cross. It knows that, even in suffering, God seeks and He saves His people. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.