

THE SECOND WORD

He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.'

-Luke 23:43

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Ecumenical Service at The First Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) of Colorado Springs

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In the 23rd chapter of the Gospel According to Luke, we hear these words:

"One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'" (Luke 23:39-43)

Would you pray with me? God of the criminals and God of our savior, in these words that I share, if there is a word that you would have us hear, let us hear that word and forget the rest. Amen.

I.

Paradise. Living in Colorado Springs, do you ever have the feeling that you're living in paradise? Of course, we have our social, urban, political, and environmental issues that are less than paradisaical, but don't you have moments where you think, "Wow, what a place to live!?" Maybe it's early on a Sunday, and you're driving to church, and Pike's Peak has that glorious pink glow to it. Maybe a snowstorm has just passed and the high bright blue sky quietly reflects the still, white earth. Maybe it's summer and an afternoon thunderhead arrives right on time with loud cracking and flashing, turning the foothills and trees a menagerie of multi-colored forms. Or maybe it's the calm that follows, and the lingering scent of rain on native meadow grasses. Have you noticed the springtime cacophony of birds yet this year? The crocuses from the crusty ground? The pink blossoms against beautiful black bark? Wow, what a place to live! A place where, at times, we're given a glimpse, a scent, a sound, a feeling of paradise.

It strikes me that today is a unique occasion, among the holiest of days in the Christian liturgical calendar, a day that we audaciously, or unwittingly, call Good. Today is also Earth Day, founded by a U.S. Senator in 1970 and now celebrated in more than 175 countries. Good Friday and Earth Day sharing the same date. Hmmm. What might happen for us as Christians to ponder the events of Good Friday in light of the contemporary witness of an Earth Day? And what might it do to us as fellow humans to ponder that most ancient of life forms, the Earth itself, in light of Jesus' promise to a criminal, while both hung on a cross: Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise?

II.

Paradise. In Greek, *paradiseo*, a word meaning a kind of garden. In the Septuagint, the oldest Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, from the 4th century preceding Christ, the word *paradiseo* is used in the second chapter of Genesis, verse 8. You remember it: “And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there God put the *Adam* whom he had formed.” God created the earth, its life-sustaining environment, and its creatures, including Adam, a Hebrew word meaning, “from the dirt,” and having created this creature out of the earth itself, God placed Adam in a garden, a paradise, a place where all of Adam’s needs would be met, a place with enough air and water and food and beauty, not only for Adam, but enough to share with a human companion, an equal, which God also provided.

This ancient story of humanity’s beginnings evokes a deep memory in humans, that is, those of us who are created from the humus, the soil of the earth. We have a pre-historic, primordial memory of paradise. When we think of paradise, we remember all of those things, of which we are aware, that grant and sustain life. For folk of the ancient near east, people who had lived in or passed through vast deserts, paradise was green and lush and filled with fruit and clear, fresh water. True paradise would be a place where these good things would abound. There would be enough for everyone. The bounty would renew itself and there would never be any lack. This is the earth God created, an earth which sustains not only the humans, but all life forms which God created and called good.

The memory of that place comes back in those moments where we apprehend paradise anew. I was in the garden again as a ten year old growing up in a California coastal town, cruising around on my bike on a Saturday, coming across an enormous blackberry bush, the shiny, purplish-black forms boasting perfect pickableness. I lost track of time as I pinched the sun-hot berries from their place on the vine and placed them on my tongue. When dusk came I was surprised at my juice-stained hands, but I was happy to have feasted for free at the table called Earth, a gift from the hand of the first, and really the only, giver.

III.

But the memory is fading.

Fading as humans choose greed over abundance.

Fading as people choose profits over preservation. Fading as we pursue economic growth to the detriment of the resources that enable economy in the first place.

The memory is fading.

Fading in clouds of ash and sulfur billowing in the sky. Fading in giant spiraling gyres of plastic waste in the oceans. Fading with the loss of 27,000 species of plants and animals each year, which means about 2200 each month, 560 each week, 80 each day, and 3 each hour. One sacred species, a unique and irreplaceable gift of God, will vanish from this ancient earth forever in the course of my presentation today.

The memory is fading.

Fading as we allow partisan bickering to impair our ability to work toward the common good of all life forms. Fading as we are content to accept our failure as stewards of creation. Fading as we place our hopes in another world and say “to hell with this one.”

IV.

The memory of paradise is fading, but it is not yet gone. Our tradition has preserved a word to prompt our memory on this Good Friday Earth Day. This word blows over us today, stirring up a fragrant waft from the garden.

Truly I tell you. This is the last of eight truly I tell you's found in Luke's gospel. Like the gospel preachers who echo him, when Jesus really wants to drive home a point he uses the word Amen, which we translate as “truly.”

Amen I tell you. Whom does he tell? One of two criminals hanging on a cross next to him. We don't know what their crime was, but the story tells us that Jesus was led out to be crucified along with two criminals. One of the criminals, in his own agony and despair, could only mock and deride Jesus of Nazareth: ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’ The other, we know nothing about him, must have seen in Jesus something that moved him in the depth of his being, stirred up something long forgotten, though he could not say what it was. It was deep memory of a gift given, entrusted, bestowed. He couldn't access the deep memory, but he sensed that Jesus could. “Jesus,” he addressed him by name, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

The criminal's request is our own request when we sense a deep memory that we've long forgotten: Jesus, remember it for us and remember me, for I want to be a part of it. And Jesus responds: Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise. Today, in paradise. The memory is from long ago, but the reality is not far away in time or in space. To remember paradise is not to escape from this earth into some disembodied tomorrow. To remember paradise is to earth today, the only home we've ever known, and to live out of the memory of God's kingdom “on earth as in heaven.”

V.

Can you see yourself in the person of the criminal who asks Jesus to “remember me?” We are all, in some sense, criminals, in that we have taken what wasn't ours, and turned our heads when our fellow creatures suffer. We are all condemned by our own inability to remember. We all suffer as a result of our colluding and conspiring with the powers of greed and fear which wreak havoc on creation itself, including our own vulnerable bodies and souls. But look there, there on the cross next to you. There is one who remembers, remembers the precious gift God gave and continues to give through the life, death, and resurrection of the one who remembers us.

Wow, what a place to live. Remember?

Let us pray.

Remember us, O God, as we express our longing to remember you and your gifts of the garden which sustain us still. On this Good Friday Earth Day, may these words of your servant Francis of Assisi stir in us the deep memory of what we were, and who we continue to be:

Praised be You, our Lord, with all Your creatures, especially Sir Brother Sun, who is the day through whom You give us light. He is beautiful and radiant with great splendor. Of You, Most High, he bears the likeness.

Praised be You, our Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars. In our skies you have made them bright, precious and beauty-filled.

Praised be You, our Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air, whether fair or stormy, You cherish all that You have made.

Praised be You our Lord, through Sister Water, so useful, humble, precious and pure.

Praised be You, our Lord, through Brother Fire, by whom You light the night. He is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.

Praised be You, our Lord through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, producing varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs.

Have mercy, again and again and again, upon your creation and its creatures, especially upon your people, that we, the children of God, might remember that we were first, and will remain ever, children of your earth. Amen.