Are You Almost There?

All 4 of the gospel writers told about Jesus being brought by the chief priests & rulers to stand trial before Pilate, the Roman Governor. And they demanded that he sentence Jesus to die. Today, I want us to turn to the Gospel of Luke & once again view that scene as Pilate tries to release Jesus. Please listen as I read Luke 23:13-24.

*"Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers & the people, & said to them, `You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined Him in your presence & have found no basis for your charges against Him. Neither has Herod, for he sent Him back to us; as you can see, He has done nothing to deserve death. Therefore, I will punish Him & then release Him.’ "With one voice they cried out, ’Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!’ (Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city, & for murder.) "Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again. But they kept shouting, `Crucify Him! Crucify Him!’ "For the third time he spoke to them: `Why? What crime has this man committed? I have found in Him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore I will have Him punished & then release Him.’ "But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that He be crucified, & their shouts prevailed. So Pilate decided to grant their demand. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection & murder, the one they asked for, & surrendered Jesus to their will" [Luke 23:13-24].*
A poet once wrote, "Of all the words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these, `It might have been.’" If that is true, then one of the most tragic words in human language must be the word "almost."

"Almost" speaks of aborted opportunities & missed chances. And I’m sure that as long as this world exists, "almosts" will dot the pages of human history. "I almost climbed the mountain." "We almost reached our goal." "I almost closed the deal." "We almost got there in time." We’ve all had those "almost" experiences, haven’t we? I suppose that the most infamous "almoster" in history would have to be Pilate because he almost released Jesus. He almost lowered the gavel & said, "Not guilty." He almost said, "I dismiss all the charges because this man is innocent." He almost set Him free.
What a change that would have made in our perception of Pilate. Why, we might be calling him "St. Pilate" today. He almost did it, you see. But he didn’t. Yet he could have, & that is his tragedy.

He had the authority to do it. He wore the signet ring that said he had the power to do it. All he had to do was speak the word decisively, & Jesus would have been set free. And he did it, almost.

Verse 23 says, "But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that He be crucified, & their shouts prevailed. So Pilate decided to grant their demand." He listened to their voices. We could even say, I suppose, that he listened to the voices of evil, to the voice of Satan.

We’ve heard the voices, too, haven’t we, voices saying, "Go on ahead & do it. No one will ever know!" or "Just one little drink won’t hurt." Satan beckons us into paths we should not go. But Pilate didn’t have to listen to those voices. There were other voices he could have listened to.

1. He could have listened to his wife who sent a note that said, "Don’t have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of Him" [Matthew 27:19]. He could have listened to her voice. And he almost did.

2. He could have listened to his own voice. Pilate was no dummy. He knew what was going on. He knew that Annas & Caiaphas, the chief priests, were corrupt & greedy. He knew they were lying about Jesus. He could have listened to his own voice, to reason & common sense. He almost did, but he didn’t.

Pilate is not the only one who has played the game of "almost." Some of us have played that game, too. "Preacher, I almost made the decision today." "I almost took the invitation of Christ seriously." "I almost said, `Here I am, Lord, use me.’"

But the Bible very clearly teaches us that there are no "almosts" with God. There is no "almost" heaven, no "almost" place where we can go. It is either heaven or hell. And Pilate’s tragedy could be our tragedy too.

FATHER, FORGIVE THEM

So when we open our Bible & begin to read the story of Jesus, we read about a crucifixion. Even though Pilate came that close to freeing Jesus, he didn’t. So, as we view that scene we see soldiers going about their tasks. They were used to crucifying people. They had done it many times before.

First, they laid the crosses down upon the ground. Then they placed Jesus & the two thieves upon them, driving sharp spikes through their hands & feet. Then they hoisted the rough wooden crosses into the air & dropped them into the holes that had held crosses before.

They probably even drove some stakes into the ground around the crosses to steady them, & then they were done. Jesus was crucified.

You would think that by now Annas & Caiaphas would have been satisfied. But there was something about the sign placed on the cross that angered them. It read, "Jesus, King of the Jews."

Once again they stormed into the presence of Pilate. And we could only wish that Pilate had been as firm & decisive earlier, as he shows himself to be now. For when they come rushing into his presence, protesting the wording of the sign, Pilate says, "That’s enough. What I have written, I have written. The sign stays. `Jesus, King of the Jews.’"

So there He hangs between heaven & earth. Looking through tears & blood He could see the faces of the people who had gathered around Him. It was an unusually large crowd, perhaps, for there were no football matches to watch in that day. So they went to watch the crucifixions.

And as we view that scene & look at their faces, we look for a friendly face, someone we might recognize. Where was Peter? Surely Peter would have shown up, but Peter is not there, nor James nor Andrew nor Bartholomew.

The soldiers gather underneath the cross & begin throwing dice, gambling for His robe. And every time we look at those soldiers we see a little bit of ourselves, don’t we?

Sometimes we’re so close to the cross, & yet so far away. They were right there, right next to the blood that was dropping to the ground. They could hear the cries of pain. They could look up any time they wanted to & see Jesus dying there. And yet, their minds were someplace else.

They were rolling dice to see who would get his robe. Listen, Jesus is praying, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." "Father, forgive the soldier who drove the nails into my hands. Forgive Pilate who found me innocent, but sentenced me to die anyway. Forgive Annas & Caiaphas & the Sanhedrin & all the rest."

"Father, forgive the Christians who will meet in a church building in Ashington, Northumberland in the spring of 2013 because their sins nailed me here too. Yes Father, forgive them all."

I don’t know if we could ever pray that kind of prayer. Sometimes we have a hard time getting along with our neighbours. Sometimes we have a hard time forgiving our spouses, or our children, or even our brothers & sisters in the church. But yet Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

ELOI, ELOI, LAMA, SABACTINI

The gospels tell us that Jesus spoke 7 times on the cross. Three times he spoke before the darkness came. "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." Then He turned to one of the thieves & said, "Today you shall be with Me in Paradise." He also looked at Mary, His mother, & John, the apostle, & said, "Woman, behold your son, & son, behold your mother."

Suddenly darkness covered the earth. The winds started to blow. Lightning & thunder rolled across the sky, & even the ground began to shake. And when the storm was at its height, Jesus cried out, "Eloi, eloi, lama sabactini." Those who stood in the distance could barely hear His words. Some said, "Maybe He calls for Elijah. Lets see if Elijah comes."

But those who were closest heard what He said. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" At that moment in time the sins of this world - your sins & mine - caused God the Father to turn His face from His Son.

Then the darkness left, & 3 more cries came from His lips, "I thirst," "It is finished," & "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Then it is all over. The greatest victory of all had been won. On a hill that looked like a skull, outside of Jerusalem, everything that God had worked for & planned was finally realized in the death & burial & ultimate resurrection of Jesus.

III. THE MESSAGE OF CALVARY

You know, there is probably nothing more consistent about life than its inconsistencies.

Life is like a tossed salad, isn’t it? You stick in your fork & you never know for sure what you’re going to get. Life is like a roller coaster with its ups & downs & twists & turns, & you never really know what will happen next.

But if there is one very strong message that comes to us from Calvary, it is that God is able to weave it all together. He can take all the inconsistencies, all the fragments & pieces of our life & weave them together into a beautiful tapestry, just as He planned.

And that is a message we need to hear. Because one day the sun shines, & the next it rains. One day we think everything is going our way, & the next our world comes crashing down around us. One moment we’re young & healthy, & the next the doctor tells us that he has some bad news for us.

Yet, Jesus is saying, "It really doesn’t matter because all of you who have really committed yourselves to Me will find righteousness, & goodness, & victory, not defeat. You’ll find that your despair is replaced with eternal hope, because that is the message of Calvary."

So in the light of all that, our prayer this morning ought to be, "O God, almighty God, help us never, ever to look at the cross & see the One who died there without feeling the touch of a tear on our cheek, without feeling our hearts strangely moved & broken." "Let us never come there, Lord, & just casually look at it, & almost be moved by it. But then turn away from it & go on with life as usual."

CONCL. You see, the ultimate tragedy in every worship service is that there are people who are almost ready to make a decision. There are people who stand right on the brink of saying, "I surrender all. I’m going to follow Jesus." And they almost do it.

Others are just like those soldiers casting dice at the feet of Jesus. They’re so engrossed in what they’re doing that they never look up & let the message sink in & make a change in their lives. They’re so near & yet so far.

So this morning, once again, we offer the invitation of Jesus, praying that if you’re almost there, you won’t turn away like Caiaphas & Annas & Pilate & the soldiers. But that you will look & see & listen & make that decision.

It is the invitation of Jesus Christ, our Saviour & our Lord. I really don’t know how anybody can say "No" to Him. But some do. I pray that you will not, that you will answer "Yes," & come to make your commitment to Christ as we stand & as we sing together.