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Luke 22:39-46
NAMES OF WONDROUS LOVE-JESUS

INI

The Lenten season is such a wonderful time of the year. Every year we have the blessed opportunity to focus on God's love for a fallen world through the suffering and death of His Son Jesus Christ. Every year I have the privilege of going into the diamond mine of God's Word and choosing a number of gems to share with you, God's people. I pray that our faith is strengthened as we focus our attention this year on the names of wondrous love that our Savior had.

We know many if not most of these names, but we will start with the one that is most familiar and probably our favorite. It is the name Jesus. As little children we sang, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." It doesn't change as we get older. We think of many hymn verses and Bible passages with the name Jesus that brings peace to our troubled hearts.

Why is the name Jesus so precious to us? It is not a name made up by a man who liked how it sounds. Rather it is a name that came from heaven itself. God himself picked this name. Both Mary and Joseph were told by angelic messengers: "You shall give him the name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." This name fits him perfectly. It describes what he came to do in fulfilling God's plan of salvation.

As we have come to Ash Wednesday we are once again reminded that we are mortal. The wages of sin is death. Dust we are and to dust we will return. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves. Yes, we do need a Savior and God provides just what we need. Every name of wondrous love tells us a little more. In the name JESUS we see his love for a fallen world and his love for his Father's will.

We go this evening to a garden called Gethsemane. It is located at the foot of the Mount of Olives directly facing the city of Jerusalem. We encounter Jesus as he approaches the garden. It is a place where Jesus often went to pray. It is a quiet place, a secluded place, a place well known to Jesus' disciples. The apostles have celebrated the Passover meal with Jesus. He has instituted the Lord's Supper, but its meaning has not yet sunk in. There are only eleven of the apostles at this point. Judas has left the group to betray Jesus although the other apostles are unaware of that fact. Jesus knows what is coming. Peter, James and John join our Savior in the Garden. Jesus asked them to watch and pray so that they would not fall into temptation. But they are sound asleep.

Meanwhile Jesus is engaged in prayer, a prayer so powerful that blood mixed with sweat drips down his face. He is on his knees. He falls to the ground. He prays, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me." He prays the same thing a second and a third time. We fearfully watch in astonishment.

What is going on here? What is it that causes Jesus to fall to his knees and beg his Father to take a cup away? Isn't this the same Jesus who threw the money changers out of the Temple in Jerusalem twice? Isn't this the same Jesus who continually stood up to the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, calling them hypocrites and whitewashed tombs? Isn't this the Jesus who stood up to the winds and the waves and told them to be calm and they immediately were?

What is this cup that fills his heart with dread? This is the cup of God's wrath upon sin. God is a God of justice who demands that every sin be punished in full. In that cup is the disobedience and rebellion of Adam and Eve, the drunkenness of Noah, the deception of Jacob, the treachery of Joseph's brothers, the pride of Joseph, the impatience of Moses, the adultery and murder of David, the lust of Solomon, the despair of Elijah, and these are the great heroes of faith. We haven't even touched the sins of those we would call truly evil. You have every sin of every person who ever lived and would live including you and me. There was every open sin and every hidden sin, every sin against God and every sin against one's fellow man, every lie, every half-truth meant to hurt, every sin that accuses every day and every sin that has been long forgotten. There are sins so evil that we can't even conceive of doing such things. Yet they were in the cup that Jesus was asked to drink. And he was not merely to take a small sip of this vile, foul bitter cup, but he was asked to drain it completely. The stench of sin was so great that we could not even comprehend the smell of it. We cannot imagine the task set before our Lord as he would take on our sin and suffer God's just punishment for them. He knew what it would mean. In just a short while he would be forsaken by his Father's love for the first time in all eternity as he would become the Sin-Bearer. Was there any other way?

The world laughs when it hears the word "sin." How silly! How outdated! People are just expressing themselves. There is no standard of right or wrong, no standard of absolute truth. We have built-in excuses for everything. Everybody else is doing it. I couldn't help myself. Nobody really got hurt, did they? We get used to the pet sins that afflict us. They really don't bother us. The idea that they should bother God is foreign to us. And the idea that they should send the Son of God to the cross just boggles our minds. Is sin really that serious? Is sin really that deadly? The answer is "yes!" A just and a holy God cannot tolerate sin, let alone celebrate it as we do. A just and a holy God must punish sin, or he cannot be a just and a holy God.

Why is Jesus there in the Garden wrestling in prayer? Why does a mother get up in the middle of the night every night to feed her baby? Why will she stay up all night cuddling that child when he is sick? Why will a father take on a second job and go without many things he wants so that he can send his child to college? We know the answer. It is because they love them. Why would Jesus plead "take this cup from me," but then add, "yet not my will, but yours be done!"? Do we really have to ask why? It is because he loves us with a love that is impossible to comprehend, a love that is so incredible that we cannot find the human words to describe it. Sadly, many will never begin to comprehend this love because they refuse to see their sins. But that doesn't change Jesus' love for a fallen world.

As we marvel at Jesus' love for a fallen world, we also marvel at his love for his Father's will. We know how we react to God's plan for us. Adam and Eve lived in a perfect world and yet felt that they could not trust God to take care of their basic needs. They wanted to be like God, knowing good and evil. The Israelites rebelled against God time and time again in the wilderness. It made no difference what God did for them in love. They demanded more. They demanded something else. They constantly complained and accused, "You brought us out here to die." And we had better think of ourselves and how we react to God in our everyday life.

Yes, Jesus knew what was coming. He knew the painful toll that his suffering would take on both his body and soul. The physical suffering would be great but the spiritual and emotional suffering would be so far off the charts that we could not even begin to comprehend it. Is there any wonder that Jesus would look for a different way if such a way were available? Yet when he Father said, "No, this is the only way!," Jesus did not question his Father's will. He did not grumble or complain about his Father's will. He did not doubt his Father's wisdom. Rather he would pray for strength to carry out that will. He would surrender his own will to that of his Father. He would give up what was comfortable in order to do what had to be done. It would intensify as he would go from Gethsemane to Calvary, but God's will would be done!

We forget how selfish and self-centered we really are. We think that the world revolves around us. We want to have our way all the time and woe to anyone who gets in our way. I would much rather eat donuts and double cheeseburgers than vegetables and I would much rather sit around watching football games than going to funerals. I would much rather be the one being served than the one doing the serving. I would much rather have plenty of money in my bank account, a new car, a body much younger than I have now and plenty of other things that I would love to tell you about if you have a couple of extra hours. If I have those things I will indeed pray, "Thy will be done!"

But when God doesn't give me those things or takes them away from me, when my health gets worse and my legs get weary, when my checkbook gets depleted and doesn't balance, when my children don't do what I think they should be doing, when my plans don't work out again and I spend my money on car repairs rather than new golf clubs, when the cross God has given me to bear plunks down on my shoulders and seems far too heavy for me to carry, then what do I do? Do I pray, "Not my will, but yours be done!" Or do I grumble and complain that God once again has been unfair to me?

We always have to remember that we are not dealing from a position of strength. We have nothing to offer God but our sins. We like to come to God as the Pharisee did, boasting of his good works and thanking God that he was not like other men, especially that good for nothing tax collector. I pray that we don't. Even our so-called good works without Christ are as filthy rags. This is a day when we approach God as the tax collector did, falling to our knees and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

My friends, God has indeed been merciful to us. He does not treat us as our sins deserve. He gives us the very opposite of what we deserve. The Lenten message is that Jesus Christ is our Savior. He would do anything and everything that it took to rescue you from your slavery to sin, death, and the power of Satan. Remember that each and every day of our Lenten journey. Remember it each and every day of your life. Jesus lived up to the meaning of his name and changed our eternal future. Glory be to Jesus! AMEN.

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John 18:3-12

NAMES OF WONDROUS LOVE-IMMANUEL

INI

It is something that we cannot comprehend in our limited minds, but somehow there was a conversation in heaven. God the Father spoke to his beloved Son and said, "Son, the only way to free mankind from the curse of sin is for you to become a human being. You must become mankind's substitute. You will come into the world as a single human cell, implanted into a virgin by the power of the Holy Spirit. You will continue to grow in her womb for nine months and then you will be born a helpless child. You will become a servant who will forego most of the things that humans desire. You will be put under the Law, and you will also die a very painful death. You will be forsaken not only by the human friends that you will meet, but you will also be forsaken by me. It will be a very painful and shameful death, but you will rise from the dead on the third day. Would you be willing to accept that mission?"

We know the answer to that one, don't we? That is why we are here this evening. We don't know the actual words that The Father and the Son used, but we do know the results. When the fullness of time came, Jesus Christ, true God from all eternity, also became true man. As the Athanasian Creed states: "Christ is not two persons but one, one, not by changing the deity into flesh, but by taking the humanity into God." Jesus did not give up being God, but rather he also became something that he had not been before. He became man. He became a human being. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. Ponder that one for a while.

And ponder these things as well. As God, Christ gave the law. As man, he was subject to it. As the God-man his perfect keeping of the Law counts for you and me. As God, he could not die. As man, he was subject to death. As the God-man, he died and with his holy, precious blood he paid for the sin of the world.

God is with us. Doesn't that boggle the mind? Imagine that in your daily life. Someone at your office is really God. Someone standing in line at the grocery store is really God. Someone sitting in the barber chair, getting his haircut is really God. Someone sitting in the bleachers, watching the Tiger game is really God. Would you believe that? It was very difficult for people 2000 years ago to believe it as they saw him preach on the mountainsides or walk along the shore of the Sea of Galilee or teach in the Temple courts of Jerusalem. But it was true. God was with them.

It should not have been surprising. God predicted this miracle through the prophet Isaiah. Joseph was told by the angel: "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel which means God with us.'" Yes, that child that would be born would be God with us.

Most people did not recognize that God was with us because he did not always use the power that he had as God. There was always a demand for a miracle or two or twenty. After all, isn't that what we would do if we were God, and we came to earth? Wouldn't we make ourselves comfortable? Wouldn't we want to destroy our enemies? Jesus looked and acted like a lowly servant. How could that possibly be God with us?

What do you think Malchus would have said? He was the servant of the high priest who stood there in shock as his ear had been sliced off by Peter's sword in one second and in the next, miraculously restored by Jesus' loving touch. Do you think that Malchus viewed Jesus as a mere man?

Or how about the Roman soldiers who were sent to arrest Jesus? There were a lot of them. John uses the word "cohort" which denotes a body of 600 soldiers. Perhaps not all of them were there that evening to hunt down this dangerous man, but there were many. All the Gospel writers speak of a large crowd or multitude that came to the Garden of Gethsemane. The Jewish leaders were not going to leave anything to chance. They would make sure that Jesus was not going to get away.

The soldiers had to be surprised for a number of reasons. They had come equipped with torches and lanterns to hunt Jesus down when he tried to flee, yet Jesus would walk forward to meet them. They had come armed with swords and clubs to fight Jesus' followers, yet Jesus would tell them to put their weapons away. They had come to arrest this man, yet as he spoke the words, "I am he" they all fell to the ground helpless. How could such a thing be possible? These were Roman soldiers, tough, rugged, and ready for anything.

There was only one explanation. Jesus would show them who really was in charge. They were not arresting him. Jesus would voluntarily surrender himself into their hands, foregoing the power that he had as God. Yes, it was truly laughable. Jesus could have simply given the command and 72,000 angels could have surrounded his enemies and wiped them out. Jesus would go willingly. "He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth."

Jesus was not caught off-guard. Jesus knew all that was going to happen to him. There were no surprises. There was no point in Jesus' suffering where he could say, "This isn't what I signed up for." He knew it all in the Garden of Gethsemane, every lash of the whip, every punch to the face, every cruel and sadistic word, every nail that would pierce his flesh, every friend that would run away, every bitter fire of hell that would sear his soul. He knew what was coming and yet he willingly gave himself up.

Did you stop to consider those simple words, "I am he?" They're easy to overlook. Yet let's step back a minute. When Moses was called to lead Israel out of slavery, he asked God what was his name. God replied, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM' has sent me to you." The very name LORD comes from the Hebrew verb form "to be." God is the great I AM. He is not "I was," a has-been, nor "I will be," hoping to evolve into something greater. He is the same yesterday, today and always.

How many times don't we see Jesus in the Gospel of St. John describe himself with the words I AM? I am the Bread of Life. I am the Resurrection and the Life. I am the Good Shepherd. I am the Gate. I am the Light of the World. I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Every time Jesus uses these words, he is speaking of his deity. He is truly God. These are things that can be said only of God. They are exclusive. No mere man may make those claims. Even those words "I am He," were used before. As our Lord met with the Samaritan woman at the well, she said, "I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." Jesus replied, "I who speak to you am he."

He was God and always was God and always is God and he is with us. He loved us and he loved the world with a love that we cannot understand. As he described himself as the Good Shepherd, he said, "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again."

Jesus is Immanuel. He is God with us. So many people have this idea of God being some thing far out there in the universe. It might be more powerful than we are and it might be smarter than we are, but this thing called God is as detached from us as we are from an ant hill. Is that really the case? Absolutely not! Jesus is here with us, and he is here to comfort us. He tells us through his Word, "Be of good cheer! Your sins are forgiven! He paid for them in full. Every time we celebrate the Sacrament, he reminds us of that, giving us his very body and blood to assure us of that forgiveness. If he is God, then we receive the very body and blood of God. That shows the complete payment for all our sins.

He is with us in all our troubles, and they are many in a sinful world. Jesus knew the troubles of this world because he experienced them himself. He knows what it is like to lose a loved one to death. He wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus. I'm sure that he wept at other funerals as well. We know what it is like to fight temptations that come upon us. Jesus fought those temptations. Last Sunday we saw his victory over Satan in the wilderness. His victory is our victory. He knows what it is like to be lonely and hurt by friends. Everything that he experienced in the passion was real.

He knows the struggles we have. He knows the sinful condition of our souls. He knows our frustration to want to do what is right before God, yet our inclination to do what our sinful flesh wants. The good things we want to do, we don't, but the evil we don't want to do, that we find ourselves doing. He is there to pick us up when we fall and to give us strength for a new day. He is there to encourage us and to forgive us. He is here with us through Word and Sacrament.

And he is here with us as our life here on earth comes to its end. We say with the Psalmist: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff comfort me." Jesus knows that valley well. He walked through it before us. He defeated death by his resurrection. He assures us that death cannot harm us. We are his forever. He is God with us, and he gives us the same assurance that he gave the first century disciples, "I am with you always even to the very end of the age."

What a wonderful blessing we have. God is with us through his Son Jesus, now and forever! Thanks be to God!
AMEN.

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John 18:37, 38

NAMES OF WONDROUS LOVE-THE TRUTH

INI

Have you ever watched the game show Jeopardy? I think that there is a pretty good chance that you have somewhere along the way. After all the show has been on television since 1964, first with Art Fleming as host and then Alex Trebek. It has gone through some rotating hosts since. It's on every night and sometimes during the day as well depending upon the market. It's a very simple show although the questions are hard. You have to be pretty smart to win once and you have to be very smart to win more than once. There are all kinds of different categories so that a person has to be very well rounded in his or her knowledge. You may be very proficient in your knowledge of American Presidents or television shows, but that probably won't help you with the categories on Thailand or potent potables. Jeopardy gives you the answer and you have to give the correct question.

Now the question "What is peanut butter" is, I'm sure, the correct question to something, but it is not the correct question to every answer. "The principal author of the Declaration of Independence," "Lansing, Michigan," and "He hit 60 home runs in 1927" are just a few of thousands where it wouldn't work. There is only one correct answer for each question. One answer is true, and all the rest are false answers. It seems so simple.

So why is it so different when it comes to our eternal soul? Why is there such an emphasis that all answers are equally true and valid? If you insist that there is only one correct and true answer, you are accused of being filled with hate and threatened with death. Pontius Pilate had questions as well. He had the answer standing right before him as he asked, "What is truth?" His problem was not in asking the wrong question, but rather in not accepting the right answer. Instead of listening to Jesus' answer, he simply turned and walked away. That was a big mistake with eternal consequences.

Jesus had much to say to his disciples before his death. On that Maundy Thursday evening he tried to teach them as much as he possibly could before his arrest and trial. Most of it would go over their heads until after the resurrection when it would all come together and make sense. He had told them, "I am the Truth." If we listen very carefully, we see that he did not say, "I am truthful." Of course, he is. The Son of God cannot lie. Nor did he say, "I'll tell you the truth." Many people have told the truth. The apostles were called upon to speak the truth as they represented God and his Word. Jesus was much more than that. He is the Truth. What did he mean by that? We see the answer to that this evening as we look at the NAME OF WONDROUS LOVE – THE TRUTH.

There was no doubt that the religious leaders of the Jews wanted Jesus dead and they were going to get their way. They had everything set up in their favor. They had paid people to lie about what Jesus had said and done. All they had to do was to get two people to agree to make things look fair and legal, but they couldn't even find two liars who could agree. Finally, they had to put Jesus himself under oath and ask him if he was the Son of God. Jesus said that he was, and they declared him guilty of blasphemy, of calling himself the Son of God and demanding the death penalty.

They had one little problem. They did not have the authority to put Jesus or anyone to death. They were under Roman rule. They would have to go to the Roman governor and get him to agree. They were not going to be able to use

the blasphemy charge with Pilate. He would simply laugh and walk away. They would have to come up with something more serious. They would. "We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king."

The Jewish leaders had to be choking on their own words. They wish that they could have found someone to drive the Romans out of the land and restore the glory of Israel. Jesus would not be that man. But they knew that Pilate could not ignore these charges. Pilate could not let a threat or rival to Caesar simply go free. Pilate would ask Jesus point blank, "Are you a king, then?" Jesus gave his answer, "I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." Pilate would simply say, "What is truth?" and walk away.

Should we be surprised at Pilate? Pilate acted like a Roman. He acted like a man of his time. Even though the Romans had many gods for many occasions, most of the people really didn't believe in any of them. The emperor or Caesar was more of a practical god who demanded blind obedience, but did the people really believe that Caesar was God? Not really! Pilate was a skeptic, an agnostic. Maybe there was a God, maybe there wasn't. Did it really matter? For him the answer was simple. There is no such thing as absolute truth.

Does that sound familiar? Doesn't that sound just like our world today? The world tells us that there is no such thing as absolute truth. What was true yesterday is not necessarily true today and what is true today might not necessarily be true tomorrow. What is true for you might not necessarily be true for me and what is true for me might not necessarily be true for you. The opposite of truth is lies and there are many of them. And we know where they come from. They come from Satan the prince of lies.

There are a couple of mistakes we can make with Satan. Both can prove to be fatal. The first one is that we totally underestimate him and refuse to take him seriously or even think that he doesn't exist. He likes that because he is very powerful and very crafty. He wants you to be lulled into a false sense of security and then he will strike at your weakest point. As St. Peter tells us, he is like a roaring lion walking about looking for someone to devour. He succeeded in getting Adam and Eve to doubt God's goodness in a perfect world. We dare not underestimate him.

The other thing that we can do is to give him too much credit. I have said many times before that Satan has never changed his tactics. Every temptation is a variation of the first one: "Did God really say?" He wants you to doubt God and he wants you to doubt truth. The names and the faces may change throughout the ages, but he basically uses these ways to lead us to leave the truth for his lies.

Advertising executives know that there are two big words that get people to buy and try their products. They are "new" and "improved." Satan uses the same thing in religion. He tries to lead people away from the historic Christian faith in favor of the latest trends. People today look for "spirituality" whatever that means. They look for something that makes them feel good. That obviously would have nothing to do with the mention of sin or the need for a Savior. There are always new things out there in the religious world. They make a lot of promises but can't deliver.

Then there is the quest for knowledge. People ask, "How did the universe come into being?" There was no human being present as the universe was formed, so the best man can come up with is his best guess. You have learned men with all kinds of advanced degrees from all the best universities. They speculate that somewhere there was an explosion in space that created the universe over the period of billions of years. Human beings evolved from a pool of primordial protoplasm. Even though there are no "missing links" that can be found, evolution must be true because we

have smart men who say so. We have to ignore what the Scriptures say about God and creation because our men are just too smart.

Others go to prosperity. If there is a God, he wants you to be rich in this world. That of course appeals to all of us who want to be wealthy without ever really having to do anything for it. Even though Jesus tells us that we will have to face many difficulties and persecution, they assure us that prosperity is the only way to go and that you should find a religion that promises that to you.

Then you have pragmatism. Whatever works is good. If it works, it is good. If it doesn't work, it's not good. Pragmatism works hand in hand with prosperity. People look for their own version of the truth and if it makes them happy, it must be good. There are places out there that call themselves church. I don't know what they are. Are they coffee shops, gymnasiums, theaters, or something else? Is the pastor preaching from God's Word or delivering a comedy monologue? Does it really matter? People are flocking to the place. They must be doing something right.

Satan will always try to substitute lies for the truth. All these things are false Christs. Jesus is the real thing, the real truth. Truth will always confront us in the person of Christ. He shows us what we really are – sinful and condemned. He strips away all our pride and self-righteousness. He shows us that we cannot stand up to God's standard of absolute perfection. He shows us that he can be our substitute. He shows us what we are in him – forgiven and righteous before God. We do not have to search for anything else. We already have the truth.

Isn't it amazing how people flock to other people for answers? They fawn at all the celebrities at the Oscars. I don't even know who these people are, and I don't care. I'm not looking for their so-called wisdom. Tom Brady was a great football player, perhaps the best ever, but I wouldn't pay \$2000 for his autograph and I really wouldn't look to him for the meaning of life. Not when I have the real truth in Jesus.

Jesus stands before us this evening. He tells us, "From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." He reminds us through the apostle Paul: "Faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ." Jesus tells us, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free." The truth is always found in Jesus who shows us how sinners become saints, how enemies of God become his precious children, how slaves of sin become servants of our Savior, how people hell-bent become heaven bound. We need to diligently search the Scriptures because they testify of Jesus, the Truth.

"What is truth?" Pilate asked. He had the Truth standing before him and simply walked away. Don't exchange the Truth for Satan's lies. Look to Jesus alone. AMEN.

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John 18:33-37

NAMES OF WONDROUS LOVE-KING

INI

We have often said that the word Christ or Messiah means the Anointed One. In the Old Testament a person was anointed with olive oil to be a prophet, high priest, or king. When the Messiah came, he would be the ultimate Prophet, the ultimate High Priest, and the ultimate King. He would be anointed not with olive oil, but rather with the Holy Spirit and with power. We know that is true of our Lord Jesus. He is the Christ.

From the very beginning, Jesus and the word King have been used simultaneously. When the Magi came from the East looking for Jesus, they asked, "Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?" As Jesus began his ministry after having been baptized at the Jordan River by John, he called Nathanael to be his disciple. Nathanael said, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel." Jesus did not refute his declaration. He did not say, "Nathanael, you have it all wrong here. I'm just an ordinary man like you." Zechariah foretold the Messiah's entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. "See, your king come to you...gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." As Jesus entered the city, the people threw their cloaks before him and put palm branches in his path, crying out, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord."

We cannot study the events of Holy Week without seeing the words "king" and "kingdom" come up over and over again. As Jesus celebrated the Passover with the apostles he said, "And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." The Jews charged Jesus before Pilate, "He calls himself Christ, a king." Pilate would ask Jesus if he was a king. Jesus never tried to dodge or sidestep the question. He would give a clear answer and in that answer, we find this evening's NAME OF WONDROUS LOVE – KING!

We see the superscription above the cross, INRI. What does that mean? It means: JESUS OF NAZARETH, KING OF THE JEWS. It was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. That means that just about anyone, Jew or Gentile, would see and hear that Jesus was some kind of king. The religious leaders protested to Pilate, "Do not write 'The King of the Jews' but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews." Their protest went unheeded. Don't get the wrong idea. The Pharisees and chief priests and teachers of the Law very much wanted the Messiah to be a king. They wanted a king who would reward them for their holiness and good works. They wanted a king who would reward them for continually creating new laws for people to follow. Ten Commandments weren't good enough. They had 613 of them. Jesus wasn't going to do that. He summed up the Law with a single word: love. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength and all your mind. Love your neighbor as yourself." That was the one thing the religious leaders didn't have for anyone but themselves.

Jesus exposed them for who they truly were. They looked good on the outside to many. Jesus called them whitewashed tombs and hypocrites. They didn't like that very much. They demanded nothing less than Jesus' death.

"We have no king but Caesar!" They showed their hypocrisy. They anticipated their Messiah to be a physical descendant of King David who would also return Israel to the glory days of David's kingdom. They wanted that so badly,

but he had to be the right kind of king. He had to be one who was in their pocket, to do their bidding. He would also have to be very successful in his campaign so that the Jewish leaders would not be punished if this new king failed. Jesus did not fit the profile. He preached, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's" and spoke of a kingdom without geographical borders. They weren't going to listen to him.

But it wasn't merely the religious leaders who were disappointed. The common people were as well. The turning point of Jesus' ministry was the one miracle recorded in all four Gospels, the feeding of the 5000. It took place just about a year before Jesus' death. The people saw what Jesus was able to do in multiplying the bread and fish. They liked that. If he could do that, he could multiply other things like money, clothes, homes, and whatever else people wanted. They wanted to make him their bread king and if Jesus didn't want that, they would just make him king by force. Jesus then went into his Bread of Life discourse which told the people that Jesus came to be their answer to sin. They didn't want that, and the crowds started shrinking and the opposition continued to grow.

What about you? What kind of king do you want Jesus to be? Are you content with what you have or are you looking for someone or something else? We want him to watch over us and protect us. We want him to supply our daily bread. We want him to provide for all our daily needs. Is that enough? Is that sufficient? If we are honest with ourselves, I think that we will say "No!" We want him to keep all problems and pains away from us. We do not want to deal with any problems here in this world. We don't want to hear any of this talk that he knows what is best for us. We feel that we know what is best for us. And if we know what is best for us, then Jesus had better be providing that. Forget this daily bread. We want stuff stored up for us that will last for years, just so that we can be secure. What are our needs in life? Food, clothing, and shelter? You've got to be kidding. What about our dream home, fast cars, vacations in exotic locales, perfect health, and piles of money? I'm sure that we can think of a few more things. What happens when we don't get everything that we want? What happens when the doctor tells us that we have cancer, our friends forsake us, our bills mount up, our plans fail, and our earthly goods evaporate? Do we then look for a new king? Do we question our king's love for us?

Sadly, we have all questioned our king's love for us, not just once but many times. We question his judgment. We want things that can harm our souls and we don't want the things that draw us closer to him. Most people, including many Christians, would prefer a cheeseburger to the Lord's Supper. They would prefer a hundred-dollar bill to Holy Baptism and they would prefer any number of things to Sunday morning worship. Satan, the world, and our own sinful flesh do not make things easy for us. Lord, forgive us for our discontent and disobedience!

Jesus is the king that we need. Jesus told Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place." Part of our problem is understanding what "king" and "kingdom" mean. To our ears kingdom means some sort of organizational setup with the king having a throne and his subjects live in a well-defined area with geographical borders. When Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God, he speaks of an intense activity. Jesus our king rules with his grace among sinful men. He frees us from the chains of Satan's rule and makes us his willing subjects who serve him out of love and gratitude.

The kingdom of Jesus is not of this world. Jesus did not have an organized army to prevent his arrest. He did have twelve legions of angels at his command who could have done anything he asked, but Jesus would voluntarily allow himself to be arrested, bound, tried and condemned. His kingdom had no earthly origin. His kingdom is not of this world. His kingdom is like no kingdom here on earth. His kingdom is from heaven. His kingdom is from God. Those terms "the kingdom of heaven" and "the kingdom of God" are used interchangeably.

“You are right in saying that I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” Jesus was not merely speaking to Pilate here. He is speaking to you. Jesus is not going to make you a citizen of his kingdom by force. He is not going to make you love him. That is your free choice.

We say that Jesus has three kingdoms. The first one we call his kingdom of power. Jesus as the Son of God rules over all creation. All people are subject to his rule whether they know it or not. President Biden is the President of all Americans whether they know it or not, including newborn infants, children with learning disabilities, senior citizens with dementia and people who don't like him and didn't vote for him. Jesus will ultimately be accepted as king by all people. Every knee will bow before Jesus and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

We Christians speak of his kingdom of grace. Jesus does not want our land, our possessions, our money or anything we have. He wants our hearts. He wants us to love him because he loved us first. We had nothing to offer him, but he offered up everything he had for us, including his own life. He paid for our sins with his holy, precious blood. He allowed Pilate's soldiers to nail him to a cross and his love for us kept him there until every last sin was paid for in full. He wants us to live for him as he lives in us.

Finally, we have the kingdom of glory. That is our eternal home in heaven. We possess it now, but the full realization of this blessing will come when we die or when Jesus returns, whichever comes first. There are many who are there already. Their names are well known. They are Noah, Enoch, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Samson, Samuel, David, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Peter, James, John, Matthew, Thomas, Paul, Timothy, Titus and Barnabas. And then there are those that you have known personally, your grandparents, your parents, your aunts and uncles, teachers, pastors, fellow church members and many more. They waited patiently and Jesus welcomed them into his loving arms. And he will do the same for you. That day is coming soon. And we will reign with our king forever and ever.

Keep your eyes set upon your king. We say with Paul, “Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever.” AMEN.

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John 19:16-18

NAMES OF WONDROUS LOVE-CHRIST CRUCIFIED

INI

Can you believe that we are still talking about the cross and crucifixion 2000 years later? It isn't merely that we talk about it occasionally. We talk about it every week. We confess it in the Creed. "He was crucified, died and was buried." "For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate." It doesn't matter which Creed we confess. We are still talking about crucifixion. We really don't hear about it anywhere else. We might hear about it in a world history course that talks about barbaric practices of the ancient world or in a conversation of people laughing at the Christian religion, but we seem almost obsessed about it.

What does the cross mean? I suppose that depends upon who is looking at it. To many, it is simply an ornament worn about the neck. In that case there probably is no body on that cross. To an architect it might be the focal point of designing a house of worship. To an atheist, it is a stupid superstitious symbol of something that does not exist. To the Romans, it was an instrument of torture, devilishly simple but horribly painful. To the Sanhedrin it was a symbol of victory but not for long. To one thief, it was the doorway to hell, horrible and eternal. To the other thief, it was the gateway to Paradise, more than he had ever dreamed possible. The cross is many things to many people.

What does the cross mean to you? That is the important question this evening. There is no doubt that the cross is important to us in our worship. Take a look around. We have crosses all over the place. We have a large cross up there on the wall. We have a smaller cross just beneath it at the top of the altar. We have crosses on the altar paraments and the large banner. I'm wearing a crucifix and the service bulletins are one more reminder. It is difficult to imagine a Lutheran church where the cross is not the focal point of our worship.

But that is not necessarily true of other congregations that call themselves Christian. Especially in the newer larger mega churches you won't see a cross anywhere. You'll see a coffee shop where you can buy your latte, but you won't see a cross. The reason they say is that it is too gory, too violent, too controversial. They want to just focus on love. Can we speak of God's love for the world outside of the cross? That's the question that needs an answer.

It does seem rather silly when you think of it. The cross is an instrument of death and torture. If we put it in today's terms, it would be just as though we had an electric chair mounted on the wall. Maybe we might even have a few sparks just so people would notice. Wouldn't that be weird? Wouldn't that turn a lot of people off? Well, the cross did that in the first century. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God...Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

Yes, Paul was obsessed with this idea of a cross. He told the same Corinthians: "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." Why is it so important? Very simply because our eternal future depends upon what happened on that cross. It means nothing to most of the world, but to us it means everything.

Tonight, we look at another name that is probably more of a term, inexorably linked with his title. It is his NAME OF WONDROUS LOVE – CHRIST CRUCIFIED.

“They crucified him.” Those are the three words central to our text this evening that tell us so much. Crucifixion was not something invented by the Romans. It came from the Phoenicians, but the Romans raised it to an art form. Some soldiers must have cringed when they were assigned this duty while others probably were more than willing to volunteer. Death by crucifixion could be very agonizingly slow. A master of crucifixion could stretch things out for four days or so. We think of Jesus on the cross. His back was cut and bleeding from the lashes of the whip. Maybe we think of the cross as a nice piece of sanded and varnished wood. Jesus’ cross would be a rough piece of timber with lots of splinters. We think of those nails pounded into his hands and feet as he lay helpless on the ground. Quickly the victim is raised into the air and then dropped into the supporting hole in the ground. It would hurt. The pain would be indescribable. You would have the pull on the flesh. But the vital parts of the body, brains, heart, and lungs would remain undamaged. You had the burning sun, the mockery of the bystanders and scavenger birds that circled above. This was a death reserved for the worst of criminals. It was never used on Roman citizens.

I think that it is fair to say that most people who were crucified were people that only a mother could love. Most did not have fan clubs who hung on their every word. Any friends they might have had left a long time ago. These were criminals, robbers, thieves, rapists, and murderers. They deserved their fate. They were destitute and deserted. Jesus was different. But people had deserted him as well. Only John was there from the apostles. Judas had betrayed him; Peter had denied knowing him and the rest all ran away. Emotionally it would hurt.

But the greatest pain of all would come as Jesus was forsaken by his heavenly Father. Jesus was left alone to drink the cup of the world’s sins and God’s just punishment upon those sins. For all eternity Jesus was in perfect harmony with his Father. Now the Father said he had no Son. He only saw the greatest sinner in the world, and he would punish that sinner with hell. We cannot even begin to probe the meaning of Jesus’ words, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

“They crucified him.” Who are the “they”? We know who they were, don’t we? They were the soldiers who pounded the nails into his flesh and now sat beneath the cross drinking cheap wine and laughing at this crazy man who was called King of the Jews. And then there was Pontius Pilate who did not have the courage to free an innocent man, but was still trying to wash that innocent blood off of his hands. And don’t forget the chief priests and the teachers of the law who had planned every aspect of his death and would do anything they could to accomplish their goal. And what about the Jewish people who would let the murderer Barabbas go free while Jesus died?

Don’t forget Judas and Peter and Matthew and Thomas and others guilty of denial and cowardice. And then we look further into the crowd and we see those people we know: our parents and our grandparents and our brothers and our sisters and our children and our friends and our neighbors and yes, ourselves. There is one thing that all have in common. All are sinners. All have missed the mark. All bear the stamp and stain of sin. All are included in the “they” who crucified him.

Do you see yourself as the one responsible for Jesus’ crucifixion? We certainly say such things in Lenten services. We sing such things. “Ah! I also and my sin Wrought your deep affliction; This indeed the cause has been of your crucifixion.” “My burden in your passion, Lord, you have borne for me, for it was my transgression, My shame, on Calvary. I cast me down before you; Wrath is my rightful lot. Have mercy, I implore you; Redeemer, spurn me not!” “Whence come these sorrows, whence this mortal anguish? It is my sins for which you, Lord, must languish; Yes, all the wrath, the woe that you inherit, This I do merit.” Do we really like to sing these hymns? Is it the slow, methodical minor

key music or is it that we really don't like to hear these words? We want something livelier and less guilt-inducing. Do we really want to say, "Yes! I crucified him!"

We are guilty but I'm not going to end the sermon here. Who wants to go home feeling guilty? That will not be the last words here this evening. We go back to the cross, not to see who put him there, but to see why he stayed there. It was not the nails in his hands and feet that kept him on the cross. It was his love for you and me. Christ was crucified for me.

That is the good news of the gospel. The Scriptures hammer out that truth over and over again for us. "He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities...By his wounds we are healed." "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." "The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin." The cross has a story to tell. Each of us hears the good news that our sins have been forgiven. They were nailed there with our Lord. They were buried with our Lord, and they stayed buried. They were paid for in full. They will never be brought out again.

Do people care? We struggle to get a crowd of thirty on a Wednesday evening. Meanwhile down in Detroit we hear this: "The Book of Mormon' is set to unleash its gleeful vulgarity at the Fisher Theater. 32,000 seats were available and completely sold out. Prices on the secondary market are going for as high as \$700 a seat. The show's nothing-is-sacred approach will leave theatergoers smiling. It makes fun of many things, including the Christian religion. It doesn't discriminate. At the end of the day, the message of the show is to let people do what they want, believe what they want, and live their own lives." That was the first time it came, and it has been back a few more times.

Nothing really has changed. People mocked Christ when he was on the cross and they still do today. Some are even willing to pay hundreds of dollars to do so. It will always be that way, but the cross will also always be the only way to salvation. We kneel at that cross, confessing our sins and rejoicing in our forgiveness. "Oh, the old rugged cross, so despised by the world, has a wondrous attraction for me – For the dear Lamb of God left his glory above to bear it to dark Calvary. So I'll cherish the old rugged cross till my trophies at last I lay down; I will cling to the old rugged cross and exchange it someday for a crown." AMEN.

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Luke 23:39-43

NAMES OF WONDROUS LOVE-THE WAY

INI

Do you plan your trips? I assume that you do in some way. Some people are very meticulous. Every detail of their trip is planned. They know where they are going to stay. They know where they are going to eat. They know where they are going to buy gas. They have everything planned including how long each step of the journey will take. They sometimes get bogged down with orange barrels and road construction, but they know where they are going. Others simply have a general idea. They will go from Point A to Point B, but they don't mind a detour or two if something sounds exciting.

I remember when I was a boy. My father would plan a trip and he would go to AAA and he would come home with a whole packet of stuff. There would be brochures and maps and what was called a Triptik. Every road would be marked with a marker, and you would flip the book open and follow each page as it came. Today people have Mapquest and global positioning systems in their car that actually speak to them and tell them when they are to get into the next lane and turn within the next mile. Very few people would ever jump into their car and start driving without having any idea of where they want to go and having any idea of how to get there.

If only people would put the same effort into planning where they will end up after they take their last earthly breath. Sadly, most people have no idea of how to get to heaven. Contrary to popular opinion all roads do not lead to heaven. There is only one way, and it is through our Lord Jesus Christ. He is very clear on that point. "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Tonight, we continue our series on NAMES OF WONDROUS LOVE with the very important title THE WAY.

Jesus was not the only one being crucified that day in Jerusalem. I don't know if crucifixions were frequent occurrences, being held daily, but they were not uncommon. The two people who were crucified with Jesus did deserve to be there. St. Luke describes them as criminals, men guilty of serious crimes. And it wasn't a frame or a bum rap either. One of them put it this way: "We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve." Were they murderers, robbers, enemies of the state? Were they members of Barabbas' gang? We don't know and it really doesn't matter. They were bad men. They had committed evil deeds.

You couldn't say that about the man on the center cross. At first both thieves joined in the mocking of this man called the King of the Jews. The people were mocking him, the soldiers were mocking him. Why not join in? But the one thief saw some remarkable things. He looked at Jesus' face. It was not filled with hate and bitterness toward those who were crucifying him. In fact, he heard words that he could not believe. "Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing." Those weren't the words he was thinking of. This thief came to a conclusion and expressed it. "This man has done nothing wrong." Jesus was not a criminal who had lost his way.

And yet at the same time this man truly belonged on the cross. "We all, like sheep, have gone astray; each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." On the cross was the greatest sinner who ever lived, a man worse than Hitler, a man worse than Lenin, a man worse than any mass murderer. He had the burden

of the sin of the world placed upon him and he was being punished for it. Darkness would cover the world that day as this man would be forsaken by God and punished with hell so that you and I might escape that sentence.

Do you see yourself on that cross next to Jesus? Do you think that you belong there? I think that our first instinct is that we don't. That cross was for criminals, real sinners who committed real sins. Do we really want to say that we are getting what our deeds deserve? Oh, we do some bad things now and again. We say some bad words and we have thoughts of greed, pride, lust, and hatred, but then so does everyone else. We think that God has a scale of some sort. Our sins don't really weigh all that much compared to others. The people in the state and federal prisons, the people who have committed murder, rape, armed robbery, and a few other things are the real sinners. They deserve to be punished much more than I do.

Isn't that the way we view things? If we were stopped by a policeman for going three miles over the speed limit or not making an absolute lack of forward motion complete stop at the stop sign, would our first reaction be to say, "Officer, you are right. I am guilty of this violation" or would it be to say, "You've got to be kidding! Why don't you go out and arrest the real lawbreakers?" We have charts and scales in our own minds of what sins are bad and what sins are not so bad. It's usually pretty simple. The sins you do are bad. The sins I do are not bad. God simply says, "The soul that sins is the one that will die," and "The wages of sin is death."

Sin is our natural condition. Our sinful nature leads to real and actual sins. There are the sins of commission, the bad things we do. There are the sins of omission, the good things we should be doing but don't. There are the sins against God. There are the sins against our fellow man. There are the sins that we are well aware of, that bother us regularly. There are the sins that we are totally unaware of but just as guilty. There are the sins we thought about doing, but didn't, but we still wanted to do them. There were the sins we just did and wondered what we were thinking. The truth is that we sin each and every day and without number. We are guilty!

The important thing is that we realize who was on that middle cross. He is our only hope. He is our way to heaven. This man came to faith. Did he grow up in a pious Jewish household, celebrating the Passover and looking forward to the coming of the Messiah? Did he rebel against his parents and the church as a teenager, vowing to do his own thing? Did he have any religious upbringing at all? Had he heard of Jesus before this day? Did someone tell him, "You really should hear this Jesus of Nazareth? He could really help you." It really doesn't matter. What matters is that the Holy Spirit worked faith in this man's heart in some way.

He knew his sins. He knew what he deserved. Yet he hoped that Jesus would look upon him with favor. He was able to see what most of the people circling around the cross could not see. He prayed, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He saw Jesus the king. Forget that crown of thorns on his head now. He saw Jesus for who he really was through the eyes of faith. He didn't ask for some great position of honor in Christ's kingdom. He asked merely to be remembered. He asked for crumbs that would fall from the master's table. He asked that Jesus would remember him in mercy.

He would be remembered and much more. Look what Jesus promised him. "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." Each and every word here is a treasure. Jesus tells the truth because he is the Truth. He is the King of Truth. This is the one who created the universe. When he speaks, it is as good as done. "Today!" That thief had only a few more hours to live. Crucifixion could be drawn out for three or four days, but this one would be over that day. It was the Sabbath, and the bodies would be taken down that day because the Jews would not touch the bodies for burial. This thief had the assurance that Jesus' promise would come true that very day, not weeks, months or years later, but today! His cross would be exchanged for a crown.

“With me!” Is there anything more that really needs to be said? Eternal life begins and ends with Jesus. We will see him face to face. We will be with him for all eternity. “In Paradise.” The life this man led was anything but Paradise. We could imagine him trying to stay two steps away from the law every day, always looking over his shoulder. He had nobody to blame but himself. He made the choices and most of the time they were bad ones. And now here he was with nails in his hands and feet, hoisted up on an instrument of torture and baking in the hot sun. Blood was pouring from his wounds and later that afternoon his legs would be smashed with sledgehammers. His body would be taken down from the cross and thrown into a pit, a common grave with other criminals. Not exactly a lot to look forward to. Oh, yes, there was! Jesus promised him Paradise that very day and he would be there. His soul would be there with Abraham, with Moses, with Joshua, with Samson, with Elijah, with Isaiah, with John the Baptist. How about that! This man would now be with great heroes of faith. 2000 years later we would be speaking about the thief on the cross, not for what he was but for what Christ made him. And then the day would come when that crucified body would also rise from the dead, obeying the same voice of the one who promised Paradise.

He learned to know the way to heaven. He was there on the cross right next to him. Jesus is the same way to heaven. Jesus is not some road marker, pointing us in the right direction. He is the road itself. He doesn't come to show us the way. He is the Way. He is the freeway. We don't have to pay a dime. He paid it all, with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death. He is always the Way for those who cannot earn Paradise themselves and that includes all of us!

Jesus is the Way. That is our name of wondrous love tonight. May God keep our eyes ever focused on that beautiful road! AMEN.