

LENT 3: I WILL LET YOU CHOOSE/ I WILL NOT ABANDON YOU
MATTHEW 6:24; 7:13-14; 25:32-33; ROMANS 5:6-10
2025-03-23

This is the third week working through Max Lucado's book, *He Chose the Nails*. The emphasis is "You did this for me?" We discovered anew that Jesus will and has borne our dark side, loving us enough to become one of us—in fact, exchanging places with us. We gave Him our sin—which He willingly accepted; in exchange, He gave us His righteousness. 2 Corinthians 5:21 "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God."

We considered why God gives so much. We could exist on much less. But He didn't give us less: Every gift reveals God's love, but none more than the gifts of the cross—wrapped in passion, not covered with ribbons, but sprinkled with blood. Of course, there is the gift of the cross. But what about the nails, the crown of thorns, Jesus' garments and the burial garments, the wine-soaked sponge, a sign, two crosses beside Christ—divine gifts. Each week of Lent we're taking time to open them. We're bound to utter: "You did this for me? He answers: "I did it just for you."

In the first week we looked at what happened beyond what Roman law expected—when the soldiers stripped Jesus and put a red robe on Him, used thorny branches to make a crown and put it on His head and put a stick in His right hand. They bowed before Him and mocked Him: "Hail, King of the Jews". They spat on Him—to degrade Him and took His stick and beat Him on the head.

When we do the same, we do it to Jesus too. The spit symbolizes the filth in our hearts that Jesus didn't remove but carried to the cross. Mingled with His blood and sweat was the essence of our sin. The 1 who chose the nails also chose the saliva. Jesus the Beauty became the beast so the beast could become the beauty. He changed places with us and put Himself under the curse. The sinless One took on the face of a sinner so we could take on the face of a saint. The greatest thing about the coming of Christ, wasn't that He refused to defend Himself when blamed for every sin ever since Adam or that He stood silent as a million guilty verdicts echoed or even that after three days in a grave He emerged to say to Lucifer—"Is that your best punch?" Very great, but no. The greatest thing was that He did it for you. Just for you.

Last week we looked at forgiveness and how God speaks to us in our own language. Jesus turned His face to the nail as the soldier lifted the hammer to strike it. Jesus could've stopped Him. But He didn't resist. Because He loved us?—true, but only partially. He saw the mallet, the nail, the soldier's hand, but He also saw the hand of God. Appearing common, but

anything but. These fingers formed Adam out of clay; this hand toppled Babel's tower and split the Red Sea. The hand of God is a mighty hand. Hands of healing, of inspiration, of salvation.

The crowd at the cross thought the pounding was to skewer Christ's hands to a beam—only half right: “He canceled the record that contained the charges against us. Between His hand and the wood there was a list. A long list—of our mistakes: our lusts and lies and greedy moments, our sins—the bad decisions, the bad attitudes—in broad daylight for all of heaven to see. But the mistakes are covered. The sins are hidden. Those at the top hidden by His hand; those down the list are covered by His blood. Your sins are blotted out by Jesus. He's forgiven all your sins: He's utterly wiped out the written evidence of broken commandments and has completely annulled it by nailing it to the cross. That is why He refused to close His fist. He knew the price of those sins was death and since He couldn't bear the thought of eternity without us, He chose the nails. Jesus Himself chose the nails. Jesus swung the hammer—the same hand that stilled the seas stills your guilt, the same hand that cleansed the Temple cleanses your heart. As the hands of Jesus opened for the nail, heaven's doors opened for you.

God knows we sometimes miss signs. Maybe that's why He's given us so many. The rainbow after the flood to signify God's covenant, stars to portray the size of His family. Communion is a sign of His death; baptism a sign of our spiritual birth. The most poignant sign however, was found on the cross—trilingual, hand-painted, Roman-commissioned sign: “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews”, written in Greek, Latin and Hebrew.

Why is any sign placed over Jesus? Why written in 3 languages? Could it be a picture of God's devotion of His passion to tell the world about His Son? A reminder He will do whatever it takes to share with you the message of this sign? There is no person he will not use. The sign bears immediate fruit. The 1 criminal turns and says, “Jesus, remember me when you come into Your Kingdom.” Luke makes the connection—the thief's appeal and the mention of the sign are four verses apart. Because of the sign, a soul was saved. All because someone posted a sign on a cross.

Pilate didn't intend to spread the Gospel. The sign was intended to threaten and mock the Jews. But God had another purpose. Pilate was God's instrument for spreading the Gospel. He took dictation from God and wrote it on a sign. There is no one God won't use and there is no language God won't speak. Every passerby could read the sign; every passerby could read Hebrew, Latin or Greek. Christ was declared king in them all. God had a message for each: Christ is King. Since Jesus was King for all people, the message would be in the tongues of all people.

God speaks to us in whatever language we will understand. There are times when He speaks in the language of abundance or in the language of need? In such times He says “I will take care of you.” Or how about the language of affliction? God speaks all languages—including yours. It might also be a good time to ask Him if you’re missing any signs He is sending your way.

So to today. Lucado tells the remarkable story of two brothers from the 1800s—Edwin and John Thomas. They were actors, Edwin quite famous in Shakespearian works. John, in 1865 became famous as the assassin of Abraham Lincoln. Some time later, Edwin was awaiting a train when the shove of a crowd pushed a man between the platform and a moving train. Without hesitation he locked a leg around a railing, grabbed the man and pulled him to safety. He only found out weeks later, in a letter from the secretary to Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, thanking him for saving the life of...none other than the son of Abraham Lincoln!

Edwin & James Booth—same parents, same profession, same passion. Yet one chooses life; the other, death. Dramatic, but not unique. Abel and Cain. Abel chooses God, Cain chooses murder. And God lets him. Abraham and Lot, both pilgrims in Canaan. Abraham chooses God. Lot chooses Sodom. And God lets him. David and Saul, both kings of Israel. David chooses God. Saul chooses power. And God lets him. Peter and Judas, both deny Jesus. Peter seeks mercy. Judas seeks death. And God lets him. Throughout Scripture, throughout history, God allows us to make our own choices. We can choose a narrow gate or a wide 1, a narrow road or a wide one, the big crowd or small 1 (Matthew 7:13-14). We can choose to build on rock or sand (Matthew 7:24-27), serve God or riches (Matthew 6:24), be numbered among the sheep or the goats (Mt. 25:32-33). We have a hard time with this, but God gives us eternal choices & these choices have eternal consequences—never more evident than at Calvary, with Jesus in the centre between two thieves. The two have so much in common. Both convicted, both condemned to death, same crowd, same proximity to Jesus, both beginning with the same sarcasm (Matthew 27:44). But one changed. One of God’s greatest gifts—the gift of choice. “Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom”...Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, **seems** you will be with Me in paradise (Luke 23: 39-43).”

But what about the thief who didn’t change? Wouldn’t a personal invitation be appropriate or a word of persuasion? The shepherd left the Ninety-Nine sheep to pursue the lost one; the house-wife swept the house until the lost coin was found, but the father of the prodigal did nothing. The sheep was lost innocently, the coin was lost irresponsibly, but the prodigal left intentionally. The father gave him the choice. Jesus gave both criminals the same. There are times when God sends thunder to stir us or blessings to lure us but there are times when God sends nothing but silence as He honours us with the freedom to choose where we spend eternity. What an honour, but also what a responsibility. Adam and his descendants (that’s us) were given free will. Have we been given any greater privilege than that of choice?

It's a gift that can offset any mistakes. The thief who repented had made some bad mistakes, behaved wrongly, but would you consider his life a waste? He is not spending eternity reaping the fruit of all the bad choices he made. He is enjoying the fruit of the 1 good choice he made. All his bad choices were redeemed by a solitary good 1. We've all made bad choices in life. "If only...I could make up for those bad choices." You can. 1 good choice for eternity. The choice is yours. Jesus loves us enough to allow us to make our own choices.

Max tells the story of a little five year old girl, raised alone by her father since her mother had died in childbirth. They loved to dance, and that was part of the Christmas eve tradition when the extended family arrived at grandmother's house. Well, she grew and became distant and defiant and left home with a less than stellar boyfriend and ended up dancing on tables to make enough money to keep herself. The boyfriend had left and it seems he was the 1 who gave her father his daughter's address. He wrote to her two or three times a week, and though she kept the letters, she never opened them. One day when she came to work, a letter was there from her dad but with no postmark. She asked a colleague if her father (by description, not by stating who he was) had been there. That was indeed the case. She opened the letter. It said, "I know where you are and I know what you do. This doesn't change the way I feel. What I've said in each letter is still true."

The daughter didn't know what he had said, so she opened one and then another and another—they all had the same sentence. Each asked the same question. It was Christmas time and she caught the next bus home, arriving as Christmas eve was winding down and people were leaving. The dad's brother called him (he was in the kitchen) saying, "Someone is here to see you." He stepped out to see her with a backpack in one hand and a card in the other and a question on her face.

"The answer is 'yes'" If the invitation is still good, the answer is 'yes'". Dad answered: "Oh, my. The invitation is good." And so they danced again on Christmas Eve. Every letter had the father's request: "Will you come home & dance with your poppa again?" Where's God? Right here waiting for you all along— and overjoyed to see you. "I will let you choose—I will never abandon you!" Share that this week.