

When our boys were young, they loved a bible story series titled VeggieTales. In their version of the story of Jonah, they introduced a companion for him that they referred to throughout the story as his “*pint-sized traveling buddy*.” So whenever I wanted one of the boys to come with me to run an errand or go shopping, I would ask them to come as my “*pint-sized traveling buddy*.” As we ran errands one day in that time period, I had to go from Jonestown to Lebanon. As we sat at a light in Lebanon, I heard a pint-sized voice pipe up from the backseat of the car to ask a question: “*It was Jesus that died on the cross, right, and not the Father and Holy Spirit?*” “Yes,” I replied, wondering where this question was going. “*Why then,*” he went on, “*does that church on the corner named Trinity have the image of three crosses on its wall?*”

I didn’t have an answer to his question, even after asking the pastor of that church how they decided on the image of three crosses when their church was named Trinity. In all likelihood, there was no link. They probably chose the name Trinity because they liked it, and based on the passage from Luke before us today also decided they liked the image of the three crosses. They are not alone in doing so, however. For centuries, the image of the three crosses has been used in religious artwork since it reminds us that while we are all under the sentence of death for our sins how we respond to what Jesus did on the cross determines our eternal destiny.

If we live an unholy life, for instance, or try to be religious on our own terms, we will reap nothing more than what we sow. But if we repent of our sins, admit we need God’s forgiveness, and seek the power of His grace to live a holy life, then (as the Apostle John declares) God will “*forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness*.” But the choice of how we respond is up to us. We can be like the first criminal and refuse what Jesus did on His cross for us. Or we can be like the second criminal and respond to what Jesus did by inviting Him into our lives, asking Him to forgive our sins, and leaning on the power God’s grace supplies. We see these two paths in lives of two brothers: Edwin and John.

At only 15 years old, Edwin debuted on stage as King Richard. He did so well that it quickly led to him becoming a famous actor. John became famous too. But not for a good reason. That is because on April 14, 1865 (which was also a Good Friday), John was also in a theater. But not as an actor. John was there as an assassin. For on that night, John Wilkes Booth shot and killed President Abraham Lincoln. A few years later, Edwin was at a train station when a well-dressed young man pushed through the crowd. As he got to the edge of the platform, he slipped and fell in front of an oncoming train. With no regard for his own safety, Edwin quickly reached down to pull him up. The young man instantly recognized the famous actor. But Edwin didn’t recognize the young man. Weeks later, however, Edwin learned that he had saved the life of Robert Todd Lincoln, the son of the man his brother had killed.

The two divergent paths the Booth brothers took in life, and the two ways the thieves responded to Jesus, call us on this Good Friday to ponder how we are responding to God’s offer of salvation. They call us to examine if we are seeking God with all our “*heart, soul, mind, and strength*.” And they invite us to analyze if we are just puttering around spiritually, living more for ourselves than for God and His kingdom. Which is something we should think about on Good Friday, as Jesus said

*“Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. [For] many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you.' ”*

To make sure we know Him, Jesus laid the process out plainly. For just before He said those words, Jesus said we get to know Him by so walking with Him that He can do what needs to be done in our lives to save us. That is because while Jesus said *“by their fruit you will recognize”* those who know Him, He also said spiritual fruit wasn't something we can produce in our own strength. For *“I am the vine,”* Jesus also said, and *“you are the branches. [and] If you remain in Me and I in you, you will bear much fruit.”* This means that to know God in such a way that we are saved by Him, and produce spiritual fruit as a result, us unholy beings need to trust God.

But doing the ‘believing’ that the Apostle John was talking about when he wrote that *“God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life”* can be tricky. That is because when we use the word *“believe,”* we usually mean making an intellectual acknowledgment that a certain thing is true, like saying I believe 2 plus two equals 4. But when the Bible uses the word *“believe,”* it is referring to the process through which we confess our sins, ask forgiveness, make amends, and allow God to take the lead in our lives, tell us how to live, what to consider important, and why we should value certain things. And as we have been hearing all through Lent this year, the key to doing those things is to be willing to obey Jesus’ statement to *“take up your cross.”*

But the phrase *“take up your cross,”* like the word *“believe,”* is one we need to define as well. That is because it does not mean being crucified. It means letting God lead us. It means doing what God says. And it means letting Jesus give us the power we need to live as His disciple. For He is the vine and we are just branches of the vine when it comes to living a godly life. But if we are willing to trust God lift us up to new levels of life, He will not only bring us into “paradise” one day, but will also enable us to help others be brought into “paradise” through the fruit of what we let Him do in us and through us.

We see how God might do this in a legend called the Tale of the Three Trees. It tells how three little trees once stood on a mountaintop dreaming about what they wanted to become. The first tree looked up at the stars and said: *“I want to be covered with gold and filled with precious stones. I want to be the most beautiful treasure chest in the world!”* The second tree looked out at the small stream trickling by on it's way to the ocean. *“I want to travel mighty waters and carry kings. I want to be the strongest ship in the world!”* The third tree looked down into the valley. *“I don't want to leave the mountain,”* she said, *“I want to grow so tall that when people look up at me they'll raise their eyes to heaven and think of God.”*

Years passed. The rains came. The sun shined brightly. And the little trees grew. One day, three wood cutters climbed the mountain. The first wood cutter looked at the first tree and said, *“This tree is perfect.”* With a swoop of his ax, it fell. *“Now I shall become a beautiful chest,”* the first tree

said, *“and I shall hold wonderful treasures!”* The second wood cutter looked at the second tree and said, *“This tree is strong. It’s perfect.”* With a swoop of his ax, the second tree fell. *“I shall soon sail mighty waters!”* the second tree said to itself, *“for I shall become a ship fit for a mighty king!”* The third tree felt her heart sink when the last wood cutter looked at her. She stood straight and tall and tried to point to heaven. But the wood cutter didn’t even look up. *“Any tree will do.”* he said. And with a swoop of his ax, the third tree fell.

The first tree rejoiced when the wood cutter brought her to a carpenter’s shop. At first. For the carpenter did not make her into a treasure chest, but a feed box for animals. Nor was she covered with gold, but saw dust. And she wasn’t filled with precious jewels but hay for hungry animals. The second tree smiled when the wood cutter took him to a shipyard. At first. But he was not made into a mighty sailing ship. Just a simple fishing boat. And he was not taken to the sea, but only to a small inland lake. The third tree was cut into beams, dumped on a pile in a lumberyard, and seemingly abandoned. *“What happened?”* she wondered. *“All I wanted to do was stay on the mountain and point to God. And here I am, cut down and not even being used.”*

Years passed. And the three trees nearly forgot their dreams. But one night, starlight poured over the first tree as a young woman placed her newborn babe in the feed box. *“I wish I could make a cradle for him,”* her husband whispered. The mother squeezed his hand and smiled. *“That’s ok,”* she said, *“This manger is beautiful.”* Suddenly the first tree knew she was holding the greatest treasure in the world: the Messiah, the Savior, the very Son of God. And this little child, it would turn out, was the greatest treasure the world would ever know.

Decades later, a tired traveler and his friends crowded into the old fishing boat. The traveler soon fell asleep in the stern as the second tree quietly sailed out onto the lake. Suddenly, a storm like none the second tree had ever seen rose up. He knew he did not have the strength to carry so many passengers safely, and worried what would happen to them. But then the man asleep in the stern woke up. He stood up, stretched out his hand, and said, *“Peace! Be still!”* And the storm just went away! The second tree instantly knew that he was carrying the King of kings and Lord of lords, the one who whom everything in heaven and on earth would one day bow.

One Friday morning, the third tree was startled when she was yanked from the wood pile. She was distressed even more when she was cut down into two short beams. And she flinched when those beams were then nailed to one another in the crudest manner possible. Later she shuddered some more as she was carried through an angry and jeering crowd by a man who had already been beaten and scourged. And she wept even more when several soldiers nailed the sorrowful man’s hands to one of her beams. As a result, she felt ugly, and harsh, and cruel. And she cried repeatedly as she watched his agony over the next several hours. But then, three days later, the sun rose up and the earth trembled with joy beneath her. The third tree realized that God had changed everything. And now, every time people even thought of her, their minds would be pointed toward heaven, and they would think of God.

How is it with you? Is the greatest treasure of all the world in your heart? Are you willing to let the King of Kings through your fruit bring peace to the storms of life? And when people think of you, will they be pointed to God? For that is what it means to choose the second cross, the one from which we say to Jesus “*remember me when you come into your kingdom,*” and the one through which we not only find the gift of eternal life ourselves, but also the power to offer the gift of eternal life to others in Jesus’ name.