

The Sign of Decision
(Luke 23:18-23)
Pastor Espinosa

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. The cross of Jesus demands a decision. What are you and I going to do with it? Something must be done. Something *will* be done! A decision must be made! Everyone therefore has made and will make a basic decision about where they stand in relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ and His sacred cross. Jesus asked the apostles, "But who do you say that I am?" (Matt 16:15), this question is all the more compelling when you see that the One asking it hung on the cross...just how significant is this sign -- the cross itself -- in how it plays into your decision? It is literally a life or death decision. There is no more important decision to be made and when it comes to accepting/following OR rejecting/abandoning Jesus Christ, it usually boils down to the sign of the cross. The sign of the cross therefore is also the sign of decision.

When Isaac Watts wrote, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," he inevitably described his decision: "When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died, My richest gain I count but loss, And pour contempt on all my pride." (stanza 1) In light of the Lord's cross, Watts chose/decided to count his richest gain as loss and chose/decided to pour contempt on all his pride. His decisions as a result of the cross of Christ continue to be described in stanza 5: "Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small; love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all."

His decision becomes clear: In light of the Sign of the Cross, the Sign of Decision must follow. For Watts the whole realm of nature he decided would be too small a gift to the Lord who gave His life on the cross for us, and so he decided to dedicate his soul, his life, and his all to the Lord. He would live out the meaning of "Christian" = one who belongs to Jesus Christ. These words describe his very real decisions.

Lutheran Christians who hold themselves to the Word of God are of course properly on guard against "decision theology," and we should be, because we do not initiate our salvation by choosing Jesus. No, He chooses us first! (John 15:16), but this is not to say that we do not believe in the necessity of decisions as produced by the powerful Gospel! To be recipients of the grace of God in Christ which through Christ's Word and Sacraments create faith in us, is to be led to some *serious* decision-making! To have faith shine in your heart is also to make some real decisions that flow from faith. In fact, if we find we haven't made some real decisions about Jesus, well then, *now* we have an enormous problem! God doesn't allow fence straddling and not to make a decision is always to make a decision. Everyone decides on Jesus, everyone! The question is: what *is* that decision?!

We are beckoned to make decisions: Joshua demanded a decision from the Israelites:

"choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell." (Joshua 24:15) Then he expresses *his* decision: "But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." (Joshua 24:15) The Lord comes and asks us each new day: "Choose this day!" Who are you going to serve? The options and false gods are many: 1) worldly success? 2) power-or the striving to control others? 3) money? 4) sex or what the world perversely calls "love;" and/or 5) pleasure...and this of course takes on many forms in what we put into our bodies or put in front of our eyes or what we put into our hands. When these gods become what we cannot do without, then bingo! They've taken over, they've laid claim to your heart and they lead you to make a decision towards Jesus...one which is not in favor of His cross, because to affirm the cross is to affirm that He died for your sin. So to hold onto sin is to decide not to hold on to Jesus.

The sign of decision therefore is also a decision about sin. And this is where our faith can never be said to be a thing of convenience or ease. Decisions are constant; decisions are daily...and it is easy to tire...this too we confess.

During Lent we struggle. We see our sin. We see the truth and while we love the true conviction of the faith so powerfully described by Watts, we see that we are full of other decisions. God's Law continues to convict us. It is as if -- like my old seminary professor Dr. David P. Scaer wrote in his essay on the Third Use of the Law -- that the Christian continues to be addressed by God as if he or she were still unconverted. It's true. And this is why we need the preparation of Lent: we have two minds. We are duplicitous. Certainly we strive to remain in Jesus so that we would not be dominated by the flesh, the sinful nature; and thank God that to sorrow over our sin is perhaps the best indicator that you remain in Christ, but sometimes we do not sorrow. And this a most disturbing sign! There is no resting on imaginary laurels as Christians. Sometimes people complain: "Why do we hear Law and Gospel over and over again?!"

The answer is because we are hard-hearted people who need re-conversion. We must daily decide for Christ, because our flesh daily decides for everything else! Recall the author to the Hebrews who is addressing Christians. He's speaking to believers. So to Christians -- like you and me -- he writes at chapter 3, verse 7: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." You have a decision to make! At chapter 3, verse 15 he repeats himself; our decisions are crucial: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." You have a decision to make again! And at chapter 4, verse 7 (such repetition reminds us that a decision is unavoidable): "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." Yes, you must decide again this day! Will you remember your baptism today? Will you pray? Will you hear the Word of the Lord? What choose you?

Ever notice how this works in everyday life? I know that Traci loves me and included in that love is a genuine celebration of -- a loving for -- all that we've shared in the past, but, these things do not preclude the need to express love today! All over again, decisions must be

made to keep marriage strong. Today parents must choose again to sacrificially serve their children, to discipline them, to train them and to love them unconditionally...parents have to be volitional about such things. They must choose.

But in spite of all spiritual pep talks such as these the sign of the cross always indicates a decision God has made about us. Jesus had to die "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) The proof is in the pudding. The proof is in our souls. It is easy for us to say, "We aren't like them!" Those poor blind sinners who cried out together, "'Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas' – a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city and for murder. Pilate addressed them once more, desiring to release Jesus, but they kept shouting, 'Crucify, crucify him!' A third time he said to them, 'Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no guilt deserving death. I will therefore punish and release him.' But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed." It is easy for us to say, "But not *all* were shouting this way. There were still the faithful ones and we are surely like *them*. *We would have made the right decision!*"

But do we? How often have we in fact made the wrong decision and betrayed our Lord's call to repentance? How often have we made decisions that make us ashamed in the shadow of the sign of the cross? We can't escape this fact: as the cross demands a decision from us, we will never be at peace.

We must therefore take into account that the sign of the cross is a sign of the Lord's decision for us. "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." (Romans 5:6) and "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8) And, "if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life." (Romans 5:10). The cross demonstrates the single most significant set of decisions ever made in the history of the world: out of astounding love, God chose to send His Son to save you Christian; out of amazing grace, Jesus chose to go to the cross in obedience to His Father and out of the same love for you; in these decisions, the sign of the cross is the sign that God chose – He decided - - to save you not because you make such great decisions, but precisely because you've made some very bad ones.

In this sign of decision from the Lord, we are utterly relieved. We are set free from the bonds of our sin which always lead us to make the worst decisions; we are forgiven this terrible state. And in this sign of the Lord's decision for us, we rejoice and in this Lenten joy the Lord gives to us His life and being in His life, His good decisions are reflected in the lives of His people, all of you. He loves, now you love; He came for you, now you come to Him; He prays for you, now you pray to Him; He chose you, and by His grace and by His grace alone, you choose Him. His decisions for you have removed your cloak of guilt and shame; His decisions have bestowed in you a new heart. His sign of decision for you leads you to choose this night to worship Him...but only by His grace that opens your lips so that your mouth may declare His praise. Thank God for this sign: His decision which has delivered you from the

bonds of sin and death; which has washed away any decision you've ever made against God, His will and His Word; which gives you complete assurance: a decision has saved you...the sign of the cross is your guarantee that this is so.