

Link to Readings for Palm Sunday

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Sermon for Palm Sunday

Palm Sunday Matthew 26:14- 27:66 April 5, 2020
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Palm Sunday begins a week of unexpected happenings in the life of Jesus and the disciples. As we read the Gospel story, we easily see that it's full of changes as it moves from Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, cheered by a crowd shouting hosanna, to a crowd that suddenly changes its allegiance and shouts for Jesus to be crucified. Perhaps we see this more easily in the Gospel story this year, because never have we been more aware of the fragility of life, of the reality that life as we know it can all change in an instant.

When we are reading a novel or watching a movie and the plot begins to pick up its pace, we begin to know (and fear) what is about to happen next. Today's Passion Narrative is like that. It's like a bad dream and we cannot wake up. Nothing is going like we thought it was supposed to go but instead everything goes from bad to worse, the whole thing spiraling downward until it hits rock bottom. This drama is all too real for us this year. It's a cosmic drama and we all have a part to play even though we are not in church hearing the various voices reading the parts. Maybe we can take a moment to consider what our part is this year, in light of our current situation.

Here's what I am noticing as I read the story this year as our world moves through a pandemic. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus enters Jerusalem and is praised by the people. Fulfilling the words of the prophet Zechariah, he is called the King, the son of David. Life is looking good with the arrival of the hoped-for Messiah. He cleanses the temple, challenging the religious authorities; he teaches with parables, answers questions about the Resurrection, and gives the commandment to love God and neighbor.

As we move through these strange days, we are cleaning everything – our hands, our homes, our closets and garages, and there is no disinfectant to be found anywhere. We are debating where authority should lie, we are teaching one another on the best ways to stay safe, we are more concerned than we previously have been about the details of the Resurrection, and we are trying harder to love God and neighbor.

And yet, we also find ourselves to be like many of the characters in the Passion narrative. We are in denial like Peter, we make selfish decisions like Pilate, we follow the crowd and hoard toilet paper, bread, meats, and disinfectants. We are bystanders who say a lot but do little. Like the elders, scribes, and priests we judge and convict others, because somehow finding someone else to blame makes us feel better. We have a hard time praying and sleeping because when we get still and quiet, the fear creeps in.

What stood out for me as I read the narrative this week was the palpable sense of fear. It's as if everyone was afraid of what might happen next. Everyone had just enough information to be dangerous. It's a trait of human nature to let our fear direct our actions, to let our need for self-preservation override our care and concern for others. This theme runs through Matthew's account of the last week of Jesus' life and through every week of our own lives right now.

Fear is a powerful thing. It will cause us to lie, cheat, steal, hoard, vilify others, and even harm or murder that person or thing we perceive to be a threat. It's hard to be compassionate, it's hard to love God and neighbor when we are living in fear. We see that clearly in today's Gospel account.

Perhaps we are so afraid of others because we see ourselves in their behavior, because we know we are just as capable of the same behavior.

But here's something to think about as we read the Passion narrative - In Jesus' last hours none of the disciples is a model of faithfulness. Peter denies knowing his Lord three times. After the awful crucifixion, none of the Twelve even attend to Jesus' body. At a time when loving God and neighbor could endanger them, all the disciples fail. The truth is that everyone in the story was fearful in some way or another.

One of the messages of Holy Week is that sooner or later, because of our fear, every disciple will betray Jesus. We will betray him in the workplace when it will cost too much to think like a Christian. We will betray him in our homes when the anger is so great that we hurt those who trust us the most. We will betray him in the sacred commitments we make that we simply cannot keep. We will betray Jesus by our indifference to the poor, by our refusal to turn the other cheek to our enemies, and in all the ways we fall asleep rather than stay awake with Christ.

I invite you to listen for the truth in today's Gospel. Find yourself in this narrative and acknowledge the truth that you hear. And we will spend some time on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday more deeply exploring why it is that we need a Savior. Holy Week is an essential journey in our faith, as it helps us to see what fear can lead us to do or not do, and what redemption we receive through the amazing grace and gift of God in his Son Jesus Christ. Because while our story today ends at rock bottom, it is not the end. It is Jesus who clues us in to the hope that there is something more than death. And in these pandemic times, it is Jesus alone who can calm our fears and show us what love looks like.

Take some time, maybe in the prayer space you've created at home, to read the Passion narrative. It's in Matthew, chapter 26:14- 27:66. Notice the fears in the characters in this holy story, and the fears that rise up in you as you read. And then offer your fears to Jesus and let him carry them to the cross for you. Amen.