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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion (Series A)

April 14, 2014

Text: Matthew 26—27

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Holy Week begins today. And what a week it is in the life of Christ's Church. Everything we hold dear and true as God's redeemed people is found somewhere and in some fashion in this week. This week defines us for it defines Jesus. The apostle Paul declares in Philippians 2:7–8, "Jesus made Himself nothing, taking on the form of a servant, being born in likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

The wonder and mystery behind these words defies human speech. Ponder for a few moments...the eternal Son of God incarnated in human flesh and blood lowers Himself by taking on the form of a servant. As the divine, human servant, Jesus emptied Himself of all His divine majesty and glory so as to die the more heinous death ever conceived in the depraved imagination of human thinking. God of God, light of light, very God of very God suffered, died, and was buried for the salvation of every human being who has or ever will live. Holy Week is the greatest, clearest, most transcendently mysterious display of divine love and grace. Jesus did these things for the sake of His beloved people.

We typically think that Christmas is season of gift giving. And who would say that it isn't. The birth of Jesus is God's gift to the world! I would like you to think about Holy Week as being a celebration of gift-giving. Jesus surrenders Himself over unto sin, death, and Satan in order to destroy their power over the world. Jesus then gives Himself, His victory, eternal life, joy, and dignity, to you and me. That's what this week is all about. Jesus humbled Himself unto death on a cross, raised triumphant on Easter morning, and gives Himself to every man, woman, and child.

In celebration and commemoration of this week of weeks, various unique though traditional worship services are being offered. Starting with today, a one-of-a-kind service which combines the Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem and His purpose for going to the Holy City in the first place, His holy Passion. Later this week, services

will be offered every night Thursday through Easter Sunday. This week is a tour de force in the climax of human and divine history.

One person (not associated with our parish) heard about our schedule of services and exclaimed, “Isn’t that overkill?” Not being raised Lutheran, I can appreciate the sentiment. A couple of years into my time here I asked myself why we plan so many services in Holy Week. My question wasn’t asked with the intent of reducing or eliminating them but to understand why we do what we do.

Do the events of Holy Week warrant such attention? Can they be justified Biblically? Those were my questions. To find an answer, I quickly looked at the 4 gospels to see how much attention they devoted to Holy Week. I was surprised to discover that approximately 25% of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John recount the events of the 7 days in Holy Week. The significance of this is seen if you consider that Jesus’ public ministry lasted approximately 3.5 years or about 182 weeks. One week makes up 0.5% of our Lord’s public ministry. And yet the Gospel writers deem it best to commit a full 25% of their writings to 0.5% of our Lord life!

This rather crude, unsophisticated analysis suggests to me that the emphasis placed upon this week’s activity is in fact justifiable and good. This is the week of weeks, the time Jesus gave Himself unreservedly and completely in love for the salvation of this world. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son so that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

Holy Week began with a borrowed donkey and a sudden, triumphant entrance into Jerusalem. No planning committee prepared for what we heard at the beginning of today’s service from John 12. Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead just a few days earlier so the Lord was the talk around town. As people learned that Jesus might be coming to Jerusalem, they took up palm branches to greet Him, a symbol of royal victory and joy. Sure enough, Jesus came to the outskirts of the holy city and the crowd greeted Him with a royal welcome, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!” (Jn 12:13).

We don’t know what the crowd was thinking but it’s quite likely that many believed a revolution was afoot. And Jesus would soon be established as King over all Israel. The irony is that they were right! Jesus entered the Holy City to establish His eternal kingdom. It was the means of obtaining that kingdom that surprised, or better,

shocked so many people: death by crucifixion on Good Friday and resurrection three days later.

In today's service, the exultation of Palm Sunday gives way to the somber purpose for Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem: His holy Passion and death. The transition was felt today when after you guys proclaimed "Hosanna in the highest" (**St. John's**) Nathaniel played those somber, yet hauntingly beautiful cords of *O Sacred Head, Now Wounded* (**Immanuel**) triumph gave way to silence and the singing of *Christ Is the World's Redeemer*, a vigorous hymn describing the events of Holy Week set to a hauntingly beautiful Irish melody.

In Matthew 26, about midweek, we learn that Jesus was anointed in the house of Bethany by an unnamed woman. It was a lavish, extravagant display of love and devotion which Jesus said was done in preparation for His burial. The Lord described it as a "beautiful thing".

On Maundy Thursday, Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper as the on-going celebration of His passion, death, and resurrection given so that His people might be nourished and fed in the forgiveness of sin. Every Sunday we receive the gifts of our Lord: His holy body and blood shared in a feast of love and communion.

But that first Lord's Supper was celebrated in the shadow of darkness and death. Judas Iscariot, one of the 12, left His Lord with murderous betrayal captivating his heart and mind. Judas knew that Jesus would go to Gethsemane following the evening meal. That will be the time and place to arrest Jesus. And sure enough, the Lord takes the disciples to Gethsemane to pray. Jesus knew it was His hour of betrayal; He also knew the hour of His bitter passion and death was upon Him. And our Lord embraces this God-given fate with manly courage and devotion. He gives Himself on behalf of the world.

Eventually, Jesus is taken before the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish court, who then send Jesus to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. Before Pilate, we see Jesus standing in our place, taking our sentence of death. Remember what we heard at the very beginning, "he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Jesus submits Himself even to the petty authority of a cowardly government bureaucrat.

Jesus is beaten, mocked, ridiculed, scorned by the soldiers. They put a royal robe on Him and make mock homage to Him. They press a crown of thorns into His head. They spit on Him and beat Him. And Jesus absorbs it all. Every act of inhumanity inflicted on man by man, every act of prejudice, hatred, oppression, violence. He has come to redeem this broken world with His own blood, to make peace out of our violence, to take our rejection and make it the world's reconciliation. God was in Christ, this Jesus, reconciling the world to Himself, not counting men's sins against them.

He goes to His cross. Jesus is crucified between two criminals; the innocent dying with the condemned. The Lord's dies after six hours. Somehow through God's wisdom and power, Jesus endures the eternity of hell's torments in that time. At His death, the events of the Last Day are seen in advance: darkness, an earthquake, the temple curtain is torn from top to bottom, even the tombs of the saints of old are shaken open and they rise with Jesus in a preview of the Last Day resurrection.

The centurion watches these strange events and declares, "Truly this was the Son of God." And so Jesus is. Obedient unto death to save us from Sin and Death. Jesus gave Himself to the fullest measure of His divine and human natures. That's what the week of weeks is all about, the giving and receiving of divine gifts. The Son of God gives Himself to you and for you. May you receive Him this week and during all weeks into the eternity of eternities.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.