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

Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion (Series B)

March 29, 2015

Text: Mark 15:1–47

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

The most important week in human history is what we Christians call Holy Week. It began with Palm Sunday and ended with Easter. Those eight days, like no other, changed the course of human history. More than that, eternity is described in terms related to what happened to Jesus during these eight days. Dear saints of God, this is our week of weeks. For us, nothing is more important, nothing more glorious and joyous, nothing more mysterious, nothing more victorious.

It all began with the joy and expectation of Palm Sunday. Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey to the shouts of “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!” Those are Messianic words taken from Psalm 118. That’s what the people of Israel said when their king was riding by. The expectations were high. The crowd thinks Jesus is a king.

And they’re right. But Jesus is not just a king; He’s the King of kings and Lord of lords. And yet, this divine, sovereign king will establish His kingdom in a way that the crowd doesn’t expect. Not even His closest disciples are prepared for what will take place later in the week. The prophet Zechariah provides a prophetic preview of what kind of king Jesus will be and what kind of kingdom He will establish. After describing the Messianic King coming to Jerusalem mounted on a donkey, Zechariah writes, “I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall speak peace to the nations...” (9:10). Jesus isn’t riding into Jerusalem to start a revolution with legions clad in armor and weapons of death and destruction. The instruments of war are not His weapons of choice for His kingdom is a universal kingdom of peace.

The crowd waved palm branches as Jesus rode into Jerusalem. Their expectations were high for palm branches were ancient symbols of triumph and victory. Remember I said a few moments ago that eternity is described by the events of Holy Week? Revelation 7 describes the white-robed saints surrounding God’s throne worshipping Him in triumphant with palm branches in their hands. To be sure, the Jerusalem crowd

expected Jesus to be their next king. And they're right, but this King doesn't do things as expected.

The next few days in Holy Week reveal growing tension between Jesus and the Jewish religious establishment. Jesus running out the money changers in the Temple and driving out the merchants with whips and cords certainly did help relations. On Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday of Holy Week, Jesus gives some of His most challenging teachings. He exposes the Scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy. "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees for you are blind guides and white washed tombs of death." Jesus laments over Jerusalem and predicts its destruction. With Jerusalem's ultimate demise as the backdrop, the Lord preaches about the end of the world and the Last Judgment. The righteous will enter into the joy of the Lord, the unrighteous into the lake prepared for the devil and his angels.

The last words of Jesus spoken before His Passion are, "And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake" (Mk 13:37). King Jesus is preparing His people for the attitude that they must adopt and practice: patient and alert vigilance. And then things transition into the events of our Lord's Passion. Mark 14:1–2 describes the transition like this, "It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him, for they said, 'Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people.'"

The power of religion has had enough of Jesus. They work the much-vaunted Roman legal system and the weakness of its representative, Pontius Pilate, to their sinister advantage. Jesus is betrayed (by one of His own disciples – Judas Iscariot), then arrested, taken before the Sanhedrin, denied by Peter (another of our Lord's own disciples), and eventually delivered over to Pontius Pilate for examination.

The irony surrounding Pilate is that he knows what's going on. Jesus isn't guilty; the chief priests are envious of Jesus. Pilate attempts to release Jesus by a shrewd political maneuver. A custom had been established where a single criminal would be released with a full pardon during the Passover. Pilate offers the crowd a choice between releasing Jesus and Barabbas. This Barabbas was an insurrectionist. Today, we'd call him a terrorist. He was guilty of murder and wanton destruction. Surely, the crowd would choose to release Jesus, the miracle working King of the Jews, over Barabbas, the murdering thug. It's a no-brainer.

But Pilate didn't consider the chief priests' hatred of Jesus. They stirred up the crowd to cry out "Crucify Jesus, Crucify Jesus." Pilate is dumbstruck. It doesn't make a lick of sense. But crucified Jesus will be. Shrewd political wisdom failed.

Remember what John said at the very beginning of his gospel. He (i.e., Jesus) came unto His own and His own received Him not (Jn 1:11). The world chooses Barabbas every time. Don't kid yourselves, dear saints of God. The Bible teaches clearly and convincingly that the Jesus of Holy Week is always a stumblingblock and foolishness to man's wisdom. Worldly wisdom understands Barabbas. We may not follow his course of violence. But we understand it. History is filled with it; today's events are soaked with it.

Whereas the way of the cross? That can only be understood and grasped by faith. Oh we understand the events surrounding the Good Friday, even the mechanics of crucifixion. We understand that Jesus was betrayed; that the religious and political systems of His day turned against Him. Unbelievers and atheist know those things. But faith sees behind the mere externals and understands why this is our week of weeks.

Through faith, we know that the truly Innocent one – Jesus – dies for the truly guilty one – Barrabas and us. Yes, that death was for me, for you, for the world. The chief priests and scribes mocked Jesus while He suffered on the cross by saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the king of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe." King Jesus couldn't come down. Because His love for the world would not allow Him to do so. His kingdom of peace, prophesied by Zechariah, could only be established by Him dying. Eternal peace achieved through His suffering; victory through His defeat; life through His death; joy through His sorrow.

Human wisdom never understands this about Jesus. Even some Christians don't. They sometimes treat the crucifixion and resurrection as an embarrassment; as if it must be mentioned on occasion but quickly passed over to the really good stuff like sanctified, Spirit-filled living, building stronger homes, extolling the virtues of godliness in public life, or whatever. But none of these things happen without the Jesus of Holy Week. According to Scripture, Jesus is our wisdom, sanctification, and power. Without Him, we can do nothing. So we embrace the Jesus of Holy Week, wounds, scars, thorns, empty tombs, and all.

Yes, we even embrace the Jesus who cried out in dereliction “My God My God, why have you forsaken me?” Our Lord quotes Psalm 22 on the cross; this is the psalm of abandoned saints composed by King David as a prophecy of Jesus’ crucifixion. God the Father remained silent as His Son suffers in obedience. This abandoned Jesus, suspended between heaven and earth, is our King. His kingdom of peace is established in this dereliction. Faith sees beyond the mere externals and believes this is God loving the world unto salvation. This is the Father loving the world by giving His Son so that whoever believes in this Jesus of Holy Week will have eternal life.

Another irony of Holy Week 1) is that the single greatest confession of faith comes at the moment of Jesus’ death and 2) it comes from the mouth not of the Lord’s disciples or the religious establishment – those are the ones who should have known but didn’t – no, it comes from the mouth of the Roman centurion charged with the responsibility of overseeing the crucifixions of Good Friday. Mark describes the scene like this, “And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed he last, he said, Truly this man was the Son of God!” (vs. 37–39) It’s Jesus’ death that leads this pagan man to confess truly who Jesus is. On the cross, Jesus establishes His kingdom of peace. There, He is truly our Savior, our King who comes in the name of the Lord.

It was early in Holy Week when Jesus said, “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself” (Jn. 12:32). It’s to the foot of Calvary that the world is drawn into the love of the Father. This is our week of weeks, dear saints of God. Through the Jesus of Holy Week, we are drawn into God’s perfect love and victory. A blessed and joyous week to you all!

✠ 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.