

The Rev. Joel Petruschke
Our Saviour/St. Stephen's
April 2, 2023
Palm Sunday

Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, I want to do something a bit different today.

I am shifting the sermon in the order of service to before the reading of the Gospel.

Indeed, I want to use the time of our sermon as a means of introducing our very long Gospel reading.

And if you bear with me, you will see that there is a method to my madness.

PAUSE

Now for as long as I can remember, certainly since I have been serving as an ordained pastor for almost 25 years now, the Sunday before Easter has been known as Palm/Passion Sunday...

And in this regard the Sunday before Easter has been a bit of an enigma.

This Sunday has been a bit of a puzzle. It has been a bit of a quandary.

Why? Because we start off celebrating the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem.

We wave our palms, we sing our "Hosannas," we rejoice in the arrival of Jesus as a king riding on a donkey.

And then, by the time we reach the Prayer of the Day in the order of service, the entire mood of the service has changed and we are focused on the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is enough to give one whiplash.

And we have to wonder, why don't we just let Palm Sunday be Palm Sunday? Why do we morph abruptly into the long Passion narrative?

And so, if we didn't know, the reason for this dramatic shift is because the powers that be in the larger church recognized at some point in the past that many church worshippers attended church on Palm Sunday with all its festivity and celebration, and then attended Easter Sunday with all its festivity and celebration...

BUT, those same church worshippers missed the story in between.

The majority of church worshippers were not attending Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services in between the Sundays, and so were missing a part, and no small part at that, of the story of salvation.

And, so the powers that be in the larger church fused Palm Sunday and the story of Jesus' passion together on the Sunday before Easter.

PAUSE

Now, the question that begs to be asked then, is what...what is so special about this story?

What is so special about this story of Jesus' passion that the powers that be in the larger church decided to impose upon Palm Sunday?

What is so special about this story of Jesus' passion that the powers that be in the larger church saw to making sure it is heard?

Have we ever stopped to think about that? What is so special about this story? What is so special about the story of Jesus' suffering and dying on a cross?

I mean when we come down to it, it is just a narrative account of a gruesome death and burial. So why is it so important?

PAUSE

Now, I have to say that I love reading. And I read a lot.

And I read all kinds of stuff—fiction, history, poetry, philosophy, biographies, anything that catches my fancy.

And I have read a lot myths: Native American myths, Norse Myths, Greek and Roman Myths.

I have been intrigued with the varied myths and stories that have grasped the religious imagination of various peoples over the human past.

And I have read a lot of the classics, again because I have been intrigued with the stories that people have elevated as truly exceptional within the corpus of literature.

Now, probably my personal love of reading evolved in my college days, particularly when I came across the quote by Mark Twain, who said, "A classic is something that everybody wants to have read, and nobody wants to read."

Well, I sort of took that as a personal challenge and began avidly reading the classics, and then launched into reading more widely from there.

But, it is this story, this story about Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection, that continues to inspire me most.

It is this story after all, around which I have devoted my entire life as a pastor.

I enjoy and have a lot of favorite books and stories, but the story of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection which rises above them all.

Why? Why? Because for me, there is no better story about the grace of God. There is no better story about "grace" period.

And, when I speak of "grace," what I mean by that is the unconditional, all-inclusive, accepting love of God in his Son Jesus Christ.

This passion story describes how God gives himself to the world, right?

This story tells of God's very self, the great creator of the entire cosmos...this story tells of how God comes to be among us and dies on the cross for us.

And this self-giving God is abandoned by his closest followers.

This self-giving God is denied by his dearest friends.

This self-giving God is rejected by the very nation whom he had rescued from Egypt earlier in the story of human history.

And yet, this self-give God forgives all that.

This self-giving God offers peace in response to the indifference of his people...

This self-giving God offers peace, when this self-giving God could very well have washed his hands of all of us.

This story then is most of all about grace. It is a most amazing story about what grace is.

Now, yes, this story is about salvation.

Yes, this story is about how God accomplishes salvation for world.

But even more so, I think this story teaches us, in God's own example, how we are to be with one another, how we are to be grace-ful to each other.

That is why this story speaks to me, personally.

This story is about grace and no other story in the world even comes close to it.

So, as we listen to this story again today, consider for yourselves why you keep coming back to this story.

In particular, I invite you to consider what "grace" really means to you.

PAUSE

Now, I invite to remain seated during of the reading of this narrative, until we come to that place in the story where Jesus dies.

At which time, I will invite you then to stand as you are able.

The Passion Narrative according to St. Matthew.

(Gospel Acclamation—Return to the Lord your God...)