

Sunday of the Passion / Palm Sunday
The Rev. Dr. J. Stewart Hardy

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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Matthew 21:1-11;
Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16;
Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 27:11-54

You may have noticed that today is a day where we have two Gospels, and so what I am planning to do is to weave my sermon and the Gospels together. I won't recall to you by reading it the Gospel that you just heard, but that's where we begin.

Pianist and comedian Victor Borge had a comedy routine that I think is a real classic. He sets his music on the ledge of the piano, and begins to play it. And it sounds fine to his audience. But something doesn't seem right to him, and after a few measures, he stops playing, and stares for a minute at the music. And then a light of recognition flashes across his face! He reaches for the music, holds it up close to his face, turns it right-side-up, puts it back, and begins to play again! And all the notes sound the same, except they're played meticulously in exactly the reverse order!

That's something like the gospel lessons that face us in this morning's readings. They start out with a tremendous homecoming. Jesus arrives, and people immediately recognize the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy for which they had longed down through the ages, "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey." The people cry: "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" And the crowds utter the proclamation: "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

But the celebration is short lived. For not everyone understands Jesus' arrival to be something to celebrate, and the city, from the slums to the palace, is in turmoil though for different reasons. Soon, too soon, the celebration will be marred by betrayal, first by Judas whose betrayal will lead to Jesus' arrest and trial and death. And then, while Jesus is being tried, Peter will betray his allegiance not once, but thrice as that dreadful dawn breaks.

Matthew writes: "Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus said, 'You say so.' But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, Jesus did not answer. Then Pilate said to him, 'Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?' But Jesus gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed. Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, 'Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?' For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. While he was sitting on the judgment seat, Pilate's wife sent word to him, 'Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.' Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. The governor again said to them, 'Which of the two do you want me to release for you?' And they said, 'Barabbas.' Pilate

said to them, 'Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?' All of them said, 'Let him be crucified!' Then he asked, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Let him be crucified!'

The king, indeed, has entered Jerusalem to receive a royal reception at the hands of the Sanhedrin and Pilate. But both, in their blindness cannot see the glory that is staring them in the face. Jesus speaks only three words to Pilate when asked if He is the King of the Jews, "You say so." Here everything lies in the balance. When Jesus entered the city it was, Matthew declares, in turmoil over exactly who this Jesus, this preacher, this prophet might be. And, given His history of marvelous works and astounding healings, controversy boiled as to whether He was an agent of the evil one, or the agent of God Himself. The issue was politically explosive, for here was a king who would challenge not only Pilate but the authority of Rome and that of Emperor Tiberius himself. But it was worse, the authority of the religious establishment hung in the balance. To make matters worse the city was filled with Jews gathered there to celebrate the Passover. Unless the whole affair was immediately defused there was a very real possibility for a violent and bloody riot of the type with which we have become only too familiar.

Faced with the potential of disaster, Pilate acted. Pilate, after all, the ancient historian Philo tells us, was always alert to finding expedient solutions to problems of governing and control, and would unhesitatingly sacrifice justice to keep control. While the crowd calls for Jesus' crucifixion, Pilate takes refuge in a little tradition of his to save the day. He offers the religious authorities and the crowd a choice as to who should die: Jesus A or Jesus B, Jesus of Nazareth or Jesus Barabbas. Take your pick.

The die is cast. The choice is made. The final solution arrived at. The troublesome and challenging Jesus will be put to death. Matthew's narrative continues: "So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.' Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!' So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified."

Pilate makes a measly attempt to avoid any responsibility for the outcome and symbolically washes his hands in an attempt to evade blame and accountability. But his evasion has proved to be entirely unsuccessful. For do we not remember Pilate's role every time we confess our faith by reciting the creeds? When we declare that Jesus, "...suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried," and yet, paradoxically, it is Pilate who enables Jesus to shine forth from the cross, to show the world the length and depth to which God would stoop to save us.

So Matthew concludes his account: "Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him. As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this

man to carry his cross. And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; then they sat down there and kept watch over him. Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.' Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.' In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son.'" The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way. From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'This man is calling for Elijah.' At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, 'Wait; let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.' Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

A scarlet robe, a reed for a scepter, thorns for a crown; a bruised and bloodied but not broken Jesus is led to His crucifixion amidst the crowds' mocking royal acclamation and the derisive taunts of the chief priests, the scribes and the elders. He is abandoned by everyone, though Simon of Cyrene is pressed into service to carry the throne, the splintered, rough hewn cross, the instrument of Jesus exaltation and execution. In the final hours Jesus is provided an honor guard – two common criminals, one stationed to His right and one to His left – who are crucified with Him. Jesus gives voice to His last words, His cry of despair and abandonment, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" A wretched, heart rending cry, which has and will echo through all the years of time bearing witness even to God's own agonized, paralyzed grief. For God, who must if He is to prevail, stands aside and allows His beloved, His only son, to suffer a terrible and excruciating death. And at this, only a few people, those left watching and a pagan, a Roman, the centurion in charge of the execution detail, realize who Jesus was and is, as they declare in terror over what they have done, "Truly this man was God's Son."

It is over. Now foundation for the work of salvation has been laid. For in these horrible moments, beloved, the cost of humanity's royal pardon is paid. And that pardon, beloved, is secured for you and me. A pardon offered freely for and ours to accept.

During the Presidency of Andrew Jackson, a postal clerk, George Wilson, robbed a federal payroll from a train and in the process killed a guard. He was tried, convicted, and sentenced to hang. But because of public sentiment against capital punishment, a movement began to secure

a presidential pardon for Wilson, and eventually Jackson provided one. Amazingly, Wilson refused it. Since this had never happened before, the Supreme Court was asked to rule on whether someone could indeed refuse a presidential pardon. Chief Justice John Marshall handed down the court's decision. It reads: "A pardon is a parchment whose only value must be determined by the receiver of the pardon. It has no value apart from that which the receiver gives to it. George Wilson has refused to accept the pardon. We cannot conceive why he would do so, but he has. Therefore, George Wilson must die." Consequently, Wilson was hanged. Pardon, declared the Supreme Court, must not only be granted, but be accepted.

Come beloved, come. Let us gather once more around this table to receive and accept once again the forgiveness, the pardon, and the salvation paid for at such great expense and so freely and so unconditionally and so graciously given.

Amen.