

Joined to Our Suffering

Palm Sunday / Sunday of the Passion
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 50:4-9; Psalm 31:9-16;
Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 15:1-47

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today is a crazy and unusual day, isn't it? We began by waving palms and singing *All Glory, Laud and Honor*. It was as if we were back in Jerusalem, reliving Jesus' triumphant entry into the city. He has come with His disciples and followers to celebrate the Passover. The crowd embraces Him with shouts of Hosanna and treats Him like visiting royalty, spreading palms and garments on the road before Him. But see how quickly the mood changes, and so does the tenor of our worship.

In the days that follow His entry and precede His crucifixion, Jesus turns out to be a firebrand. He overturns the tables of the money changers and drives them from the Temple, and He engages the Pharisees in the most heated of verbal tussles. The result is that the authorities, both Roman and Jewish, are finally driven to do what it takes to get rid of this nuisance once and for all.

So a terrible clash between two great powers is revealed. The predominant power (or so it seems) is that vested in the Empire with its use of status and military might and coercion in order to get its way and secure its control. To secure the unthinking allegiance of the people of the Empire, the Empire promises comfort and security; it values and encourages self-interest; and it fosters greed and wealth. In the face of that, there appears to be very little that the Kingdom of God actually has to offer. The disciples vanish. So, too, it seems does God, since Jesus utters that haunting cry before He dies – "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Just like Jesus, just like the disciples, just like the followers back then, we find ourselves caught in the cross-hairs of a cosmic and ongoing crisis. There is so much the Empire continues to offer upon which we believe we depend, and which we cherish, to the point at which it is difficult to distinguish between those who claim to be the community of faith, and those who live as if enthralled by the culture in which they find themselves.

And here we are, confronted with the invitation to continue our journey in following Christ, to walk where He has led the way and risk the associated suffering, sacrifice, and servanthood. We surely can't have it both ways, can we?

Finally, we come face-to-face with that dreadful execution, the crucifixion of Jesus. The crowd that welcomed Him a few days earlier now mocks and derides Him and turns out to watch His agonizing death on the cross. They abandon Jesus to the powers of Temple and Empire. They

are not fools – they can see where things are going and they choose self-preservation over sacrifice.

The question we have to ask ourselves, beloved, on Passion/Palm Sunday, is whether or not we do the same thing when following Christ becomes inconvenient at best or, at worst, seemingly impossible?

Following Jesus often means sharing His unpopularity, be it at school, in the workplace, or even at home. It is in the midst of that conflict, right in its center, that we encounter the presence of Christ, who was deliberately sent by God to infiltrate our troubled and divided world in order that we might be set free from it.

Nowhere is that more powerfully evident than when we gather for a wafer of bread and a sip of wine, the evidence and the reality of the proclamation of our forgiveness and the assurance of our redemption.

It is a presence first spotted by the centurion in charge of the execution detail. We are not told how much he already knew about the man he was charged with crucifying, though given the events that led to this execution, he probably knew as much as the public. But do you notice how he was particularly observant of Jesus' last living moments, so that when death came the centurion had an amazing insight which caused him to blurt out a public announcement, "Truly this man was God's Son." And therein lies the solution to our dilemma and our struggle. No matter how difficult it is for us to walk where Jesus has led the way, to do so is to walk in the path of God.

It was left for Joseph of Arimathea to plead with Pilate for the body, to prepare it for burial, to provide its burial place, to lay the body at rest, and finally, by his own physical efforts, to close the tomb. But it is the women, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of Jesus, who witness all that has been done.

We might despair, beloved, if that is all we knew. But we know the rest of the story. It is fitting, therefore, don't you think, to ponder deeply the enormity of what it is that God has done, that God has done this for Himself and for us. For in this profound event, God has stood by allowing His only Son, His beloved Son, the Son in whom He was well pleased, to die. In so doing, God Himself joins to us in the most profound suffering any person can experience and endure.

Amen.

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