

Sunday of the Passion/Palm Sunday
April 8-9, 2017
Matthew 27:11-66

“At the Crossroads: Suffering”

Sunday of the Passion or Palm Sunday – which is it? The answer is that it is both! Today we enter into what is called Holy Week, the finale and climax of the Lenten season. These sacred days lead us into the mystery of what is central to our Christian faith: the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. And it begins today with what we call Palm Sunday, commemorating Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem amidst shouts of “Hosanna!” and the waving of palm branches. In the ancient world, palm branches were a symbol of victory, triumph, peace, and eternal life in the ancient world. This is how our worship began today – a joyful acclamation of Jesus as our triumphant King! The mood is upbeat as we shout our hosannas and wave our palm branches, processing into the house of the Lord. But then things shift; the mood for worship today takes a decidedly somber turn as Palm Sunday becomes the Sunday of the Passion – Jesus’ passion, his suffering and death upon the cross. That word “passion” needs some explaining. In today’s world, most people think of passion as a powerful emotion that you can barely control. But that’s not what we mean when we say Jesus’ *passion*. This meaning has its roots in the Latin and Greek languages (*passio*) and it means “to suffer.” Ah! There’s the connection: Jesus’ passion means his innocent suffering and death, which is where the name for this day, “Sunday of the Passion,” comes from. Our Lenten preaching series, “At the Crossroads,” continues this day as we focus on Jesus’ suffering for you and for me. May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

No one likes suffering. It is unpleasant at best, and we avoid it if we can. This is why many put off going to the dentist and delay that medical test that we’d rather not think about. And yet, suffering is something we see every day in news reports of famine, natural disaster, warfare and violence, acts of cruelty, man’s inhumanity to man. Suffering can hit a lot closer to home than watching the news. How many of you have watched a loved one grapple with a major illness and suffer through all the testing and treatment that sometimes seems worse than the disease? How many of you know it means to endure the pain of a family member’s addiction or abuse? How many of you have suffered silently through injustices in life? Yes, we do know what suffering looks like from our own life experience, but we often see no meaning or purpose in it. We cry out to God and we may rail against God because we see no meaning or purpose in it. This can and does foster resentment and bitterness toward God on the part of people who feel abandoned by God in their time of need. We question why God is allowing this to happen. What good can come from all this suffering? The truth is that we often see no redemptive value in our suffering. Do we see redemptive value in the suffering that Jesus endured? We hear it and read it in Scripture; we see it depicted in art form; we think and meditate upon it. And yet, these do not begin to touch the awful reality of Jesus’ suffering, his Passion.

“It is difficult, after sixteen centuries and more during which the cross has been a sacred symbol, to realize the unspeakable horror and loathing which the very mention or thought of the cross provoked in Paul’s day. The word *crux* was unmentionable in polite Roman society (Cicero, *Pro Rabiro* 16); even when one was being condemned to death by crucifixion the sentence used an archaic formula which served as a sort of euphemism: *arbori infelici suspendito*, “hang him on the unlucky tree” (Cicero, *ibid.* 13)” (*The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, by F.F. Bruce. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982; p. 271). That’s usually what we think of suffering: someone was unlucky. Was Jesus merely unlucky? In the wrong place at the wrong time? Or is there something deeper at work here? As we heard in the Passion reading from the Gospel lesson today, even after Jesus was nailed to the cross, hanging suspended between heaven and earth, the religious rulers came by to taunt and ridicule him: **“He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the**

cross and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, 'I am the Son of God'" (Matthew 27:42-43). They were almost right, but not quite. It's not "He saved others; he cannot save himself," but "He saved others; he *will not* save himself." This opens the door to see the redemptive value of Jesus' suffering: he would not save himself in order that he might save you and me. He would not save himself in order that he might save us from sin, death, and hell, rescuing and redeeming us for eternal life. That's what is at work here! Jesus took upon himself our sin, our shame, our suffering, dying the death we deserved. He died for us that we might live for him! This is why we tell and re-tell again and again this amazing story of Jesus. He was forsaken by the Father on the cross in his suffering, in his hour of utmost need, so that we might not be forsaken by the Father, now or ever. In faith, we say with that centurion: **"Truly this was – this is! – the Son of God!"** (Matthew 27:54).

I've worn glasses since the fourth grade, but more recently I've started wearing computer glasses. Know what I'm talking about? As we get to a certain age, these things are great for that close-up work on the computer screen. I see differently through these. And that is how it is when we view our own suffering through the lens of Jesus' suffering. In our suffering, whatever it may be, we find ourselves at a crossroads. We may choose to see this only as a burden, an inconvenience, a random affliction. Or through the lens of Jesus' suffering for us and for our salvation, we may see our own suffering as something different; something that we might not necessarily have chosen for ourselves, but through which God may accomplish good, even wonderful, things. God, who is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20), is more than able to transform suffering into blessing. This is why we can say with Paul: **"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us... And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord"** (Romans 8:18, 28, 37-39).

A blessed Holy Week to you in Jesus, our suffering Savior, who gave his life for us that we might give our lives to him. Amen.