

Palm/Passion Sunday

Lenten Worship Series: Christ Acts For Us; Sermon Title: In Life and in Death

Palm Scriptures: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Matthew 21:1-11

Passion Scriptures: Isaiah 50:4-9; Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 27:11-54

Salem United Methodist Church; April 5, 2020

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Six weeks ago, on the first Sunday in Lent, we gathered here to begin our Lenten journey. I wrote in the sermon for that Sunday, “Humans were built to be in relationships. We are not meant to be alone.” And now we find ourselves alone in our homes so that we can protect each other and ourselves from this pandemic. Today is the beginning of Holy Week, the week in which we journey to the cross, remembering “Christ Acts For Us.” During this time of isolation, illness, and death, how will we journey with Christ? And how will he journey with us?

Each year I look forward to Lent, a time for intentional self-reflection and spiritual growth. I begin Lent with the hope of growing closer to God. I have my own vision of what this might be; and then God enters and life changes. Last year the theme for Lent was “Preparing for the New Creation.” I was looking forward to seeing what the New Creation might be for us. Then during the third week of Lent, our granddaughter contracted an infection that took her life on Good Friday. Even though the pain of her suffering in life and the loss of her in death was unbearable, Lent brought a deeper understanding of the New Creation, as God entered into our family’s midst and as we celebrated her resurrection during the Easter season.

This year during the third week of Lent, the Covid-19 pandemic hit us. We have been in self-quarantine ever since. This year’s Lenten theme is “Christ Acts For Us.” I originally thought the focus would be on how Christ acts for us through the forgiveness of sins and the new life we receive through the resurrection. However, the focus became how Christ acts for us by being present with us in the midst of this pandemic, suffering with us, and providing us with new life. Christ acts for us in life and in death. With the numbers of death climbing, we need to be reminded yet again, that Christ acts for us by understanding what we are going through.

Holy Week begins each year with a grand procession, a parade of sorts, with the waving of palm branches. We love parades, but they have taken on a new form during this time of crisis. Because of the need for social distancing we are seeing lines of cars parading past a home of a person who is having a birthday or some kind of celebration. The parade that happened so long ago was a strange triumphal one. Usually when a king or general entered a city, they entered displaying their military strength. Riding a white, powerful stallion, they were escorted by soldiers with all their military regalia and flags flying. But Jesus doesn’t enter the city as a military leader. He rides a humble mother donkey with her colt, displaying humbleness and tenderness. All the while the people who believe Jesus will save them from the Roman occupation, cry out, “Hosanna” which means God saves. God saves. Hosanna. Words we can savor during this challenging time. Words we can cry out when we hope that a cough and a sense of not feeling good are not the early stages of the virus. Words we can pray for those who have the virus and for those who have lost loved ones. Hosanna, God save us! We need Christ’s acts of saving us, NOW! We need saving from this virus. We need saving from ourselves as we

lack patience with each other, and from those who may even harm a family member during the stay-at-home order. Domestic violence is at an all-time high. We need saving from ourselves when we think only of ourselves and do not care to whom we may be spreading our germs. We need saving from ourselves when we are selfish and hoard more than we will need, while others are going without. We need saving from ourselves! We need saving from this deadly virus! We are suffering. People are dying. Hosanna! Save us!

During this time of self-isolation, it feels like Lent will continue until we are able to gather again, whenever that might be. As the weeks stretch into months, how can we approach an Easter celebration in seven days? We are suffering. People are extremely sick and dying by the tens of thousands world-wide! How can we sing our Alleluias next Sunday when there is so much suffering, so much pain, so much fear? This Holy Week's journey to the cross, we will see the Crucifixion of Jesus through a different lens than other years. It may be a similar lens to how the artist, Matthias Grünewald, viewed the Crucifixion in the early part of the sixteenth century. Europe was experiencing their second plague. The monks in Isenheim, France turned their monastery into a hospital. Their patients would get sores all over their bodies. Grünewald painted Jesus on the cross with these sores all over his body to show that Christ suffers with them, that Christ shares their pain, that in the midst of suffering, Christ acts for them. As we think of Christ suffering with those who have this virus, sharing their pain, acting for them, perhaps an image of Christ hanging on the cross connected to a ventilator comes to mind. Or perhaps an image of Christ on the cross wearing a N-95 mask.

Christ both saves us and suffers with us. We move from a humble entry into Jerusalem through Holy Week to the Passion of Christ. Today when we hear the word, passion, we think of an intense feeling or desire, but the original meaning of passion means being moved to action where there is pain and suffering. The Passion of Christ is one in which he was moved by such great love for humanity, he was willing to endure pain and the suffering of betrayal, humiliation, torture, and even execution for us. Theologian Jurgen Moltmann wrote God's response to the cry Jesus gave from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" "For a brief moment I forsook you, so that you might become the brother of forsaken human beings, and so that in fellowship with you nothing can separate anyone at all from our love. I did not forsake you eternally, but was beside you in your heart." God suffers with Christ to show solidarity with us: God with us. Christ suffers on our behalf so that when our suffering leads to hopelessness, Christ intervenes on our behalf: Christ acts for us. Christ suffers in solidarity with us and from suffering comes great love and a new creation. As we continue to journey through this pandemic, suffering will continue to occur, but we do not suffer alone; keep the faith that God is with us; know that Christ acts for us is creating something new out of great love for us. So, we pray the words of Henry Francis Lyte: "Abide with me; fast falls the eventide; The darkness deepens; Lord with me abide. When other helpers fail and comforts flee, Help of the helpless, O abide with me. Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes; Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies. Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee; In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me."

Resources: Christ is For Us by April Yamiasaki; The Way of Jesus Christ by Jurgen Moltmann; The United Methodist Hymnal