

From Palms to Passion©

Philippians 2:1-13

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Remember Ash Wednesday, oh so long ago, we came here to this place, to be marked with the sign of the cross on our foreheads – marked with the ashes that remind us of our mortality? It was about “remembering.”

The somber words “remember ... remember you are dust and to dust you shall return” were a reminder of our frailty and our need of a Savior.

The humble act of allowing ashes to be smeared on our faces – occasionally falling on our noses is a sign of our commitment to join into the long Lenten journey.

But, 40 days is a very long time. We humans begin to get restless and weary. We long to just get back to normal, drinking our coffee, eating our chocolate or doing whatever we do in our normal lives. Some of us gave up. Some of us never even entered the wilderness journey this time. Yet, we have come to this place now together – however we choose to observe Lent.

Whatever the case – we are now at the end of the 40 days of this journey called Lent. But, the fact is, even with the 40 days past we are not yet “back to normal.”

Can you hold on for just a little while longer? Can you brace yourselves with courage and hope? Can you keep your focus on the end? Or, if you were not focused before, can you do it for this coming, somber week?

It is not going to be a normal week, but I encourage you to hang on and not allow distractions to take your attention away. This palm waving, hosanna singing celebration is short lived, just as it was for Jesus.

We have seen how quickly people turned from shouting “hosanna!” to “crucify him!” We have read it in the scriptures – we know the story of how fickle the people were – we know we are not that different from those people so long ago; we are aware of how easy it is to join the crowd.

We love a parade and I imagine on that day when Jesus rode into Jerusalem, there were some who sincerely believed Jesus was the King they were expecting who would finally reign in their favor. I’m sure some of them believed he was the long awaited Messiah – the anointed One from God.

Certainly the disciples were among those. And the women who had followed Jesus and been his helpers – and others who had experienced or witnessed Jesus’ preaching or healing. Some were authentic in their praises.

But, don't you imagine that some saw a parade and grabbed a palm branch and joined in – for the fun and the excitement of the week.

Many people were visiting Jerusalem because of the great celebration of Passover. There was a natural air of joy and anticipation.

The temple rulers, of course, didn't like the way the crowd was getting all stirred up. In fact, at one point, Luke tells us in chapter 19, some of the Pharisees in the crowd commanded Jesus to tell them to stop shouting and celebrating. And Jesus answered that if the crowds were silent, the very stones would shout out praises.

But that didn't last. The same crowd who was there praising Jesus with great expectation on the first day of the week, were standing outside the palace, stirred up by the rulers, angry and shouting "crucify him! crucify Jesus!"

I don't know about you, friends, but it is right here, as we stand on the edge of Holy Week, here at this place where I begin to be distracted. I WANT to be distracted.

We all know that Jesus was crucified. And most of us know that Pilate ordered the Roman soldiers to "scourge him."

But, I don't really want to think about what scourge means. Can't we just sleep until Easter?

The whip used on Jesus was not the kind of whip we think of today. Nails and other sharp objects were intertwined into the robe so they could grab the flesh and rip it off – one blow after another.

I can hardly stand to think about it. I want to think about Easter; about flowers; about happy children and Easter egg hunts and bright new spring clothes. Easter bonnets.

But Holy Week pulls me back. Whipping wasn't enough. They had to torture him with humiliation as well. They brought out about 600 Roman soldiers who stripped him of his clothing to be beaten and then put a robe over Jesus' shoulders. They twisted some thorn branches together to make a crown, and then they twisted it onto his head.

Come on, Easter. Hurry up. Let's plan our Easter meal. Let's celebrate with family.

And they mocked him and called him the King of the Jews. And they bowed down in front of his bloody, naked body and some of them hit him in the face with reeds. And they told him to save himself, if he was the Son of God.

I really don't want to think about it. Do you?

And Jesus said nothing. Paul says he had given up all his divinity, all his equality with God. He humbled himself, even to the point of death.

They put his clothes back on him and put the cross beam on his back and made him carry it as far as he could. Can you imagine even taking a few steps after nearly being beaten to death?

But because he had given up his Godly power, he was human and he was weak and he was bleeding and in pain. We are told a man from the country – Simon of Cyrene – was there and that he was told to carry the cross when Jesus could not go another step with it.

Where is Easter when we need it so badly?

We don't really want to think about it all – the pain, the blood, the viciousness of it all.

Yet, Holy Week calls us to turn and take the steps into this dark place – we who call ourselves disciples of Jesus - we have to think about it. If we don't have a clear picture of what Jesus did, what he went through, what he suffered – how can we who follow him obey the command Paul gives to “have the mind of Christ?”

Our 21st century lives are so different from the lives of those in the 1st century. And while we sometimes witness injustice and have seen the bloody consequences of violence, most of us have never witnessed anything like the suffering and torture Jesus went through.

But if we don't allow ourselves to envision it – if we don't go to this place in a season called Lent – then it seems to me that we are at risk of never getting very far in understanding the depth of love that was poured out for us in Jesus. We are at risk of accepting the gift of grace and forgiveness of sin that God offers through Jesus, his son – without ever considering the costliness of the gift.

We say “God's grace” is a free gift to us. Forgiveness for our sins and the eternal life that we count on and hope in at the time of death is not something we earned ourselves, but is a free gift given to us by God through Jesus' death and resurrection.

And it is free. It has to be free because you and I have no power to save ourselves from the death that sin brings. Sin separates us from our Father. The invitation to confess our sins says: “If we say we are without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”

Only Jesus was without sin and yet Paul writes: " He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point to death -- even death on a cross."

A gift is not a gift unless it is free, right? Of course, it usually costs something for the one who gives it.

If I had a child who was dying, I would do whatever I could to save that life. I would go bankrupt if need be. There would be no limit to what I would spend to save that precious life. It might be costly to me, but it would be worth every dime, every cent I had. In fact, I feel confident that I can say I would give my life to save the life of my child or grandchild.

If we take that kind of sacrificial love and magnify it a thousand times, we might begin to understand the kind of amazing love God gives us in Jesus.

You see, you might be the nicest, most generous person around. You might do good things for people every day. But when it comes to saving ourselves from the sin that separates us from God our Father, we are helpless. Only God could save us – and he has done that in this costly gift that involved great suffering.

We call it the Passion of Christ. Jesus' intense suffering and death was about passion. Christ was passionate about saving the world from sin and death.

Jesus Christ was passionate about his love for you. When he stood there being beaten and bruised and bloody – when they nailed his hands – first one and then the other – and then his feet – when they pushed the crown of thorns on his head until it bled – when they mocked him and humiliated him and finally killed him –

It was all passion – passion for you and for me. Thank God for the long hard journey of Lent because it is a special time set aside when we do try to understand the passion Jesus has for us.

The 40 days of Lent now are over but we still have to journey through dark Gethsemane and up to Calvary before we can finally get to the other side – the place where we are back to normal ... the place where Easter greets us with shouts of "Alleluia! He is risen from the grave!"

Perhaps we might even dare to hope that our normal will be a new normal – a brighter, more joyous, more hopeful normal than before we began this journey.

Whether you walked the wilderness journey of Lent or not, whatever you chose to do in this season – I invite you to look at where you've been and what you've learned about yourself and your relationship with Jesus.

We all have lessons to learn from our intense focus or our avoiding it all, right?

But, how about we make a solemn commitment to take one another's hand and to hold on tight and to take those steps together where fear and dread and pain will meet us.

How about we enter Holy Week with a renewed promise to devote our attention and our love to the one who gave his all for us.

In a few minutes we will sing, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." We will sing, "See, from His head, His hands, His feet, Sorrow and love flow mingled down; did e'er such love and sorrow meet, Or thorns compose so rich a crown?"

Paul writes: "... be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

"Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

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