

Where Old and New Meet©

John 12:12-19; Philippians 2:5-11

Rev. Dr. Sharlyn Gates

Palm Sunday

April 9, 2017

Year after year we do this. We come to this place in the Lenten Journey – a journey we started 40ish days ago with a willingness to have ashes put on our foreheads and hear the somber words spoken to us in the candlelight – “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

Not everyone participated in that service. Some were out of town. Some had other commitments. Some just chose not to do it. And that’s okay. Jesus loves you just as much whether you had ashes on your face or not.

But, some of us just like the rituals that get us started on something that is kind of difficult to commit to and stay with for such a long time. Some of us made commitments too fast – to do without something during Lent. Some of us decided to add something like journaling or more prayer time. Some of us have come this far and stuck to it.

And some of us didn’t make it this far.

We do what we can do in our busy, crazy lives. I hope and pray that for each of you there has been some extra time where you have thought about the purpose of Lent and where you are in your faith journey; in your walk with God. I hope that the wilderness lessons we’ve looked at with the covenants God made with God’s people have been helpful in seeing how faithful our God really is.

I hope that you have been open to the Holy Spirit showing you the places in your life where you might grow – or perhaps where you would want to turn away from something and go towards a stronger relationship with Christ.

That is the purpose of the Lenten Season. A time for reflection and sometimes repentance; a time for seeing more clearly how you can be a stronger disciple.

Lent is a time to evaluate your life and see just how the love of God through Jesus has changed things – perhaps the way you care for people; or maybe it’s how you live your life; maybe you are more compassionate, more forgiving because of the compassion and forgiveness you have experienced.

Maybe it is just little things you do like setting standards for yourself that look like the kind of standards you believe God calls you to.

Every year we do this. We come to Palm Sunday with a joyful anticipation. We have spent several weeks in a more somber kind of worship. We haven’t sung the alleluias since Lent began. And, even though we won’t sing alleluia today, we WILL sing Hosanna! which is kind of close to singing hallelujah. It is almost as joyous.

And we have a parade, after all! How could a parade be anything but happy?

I guess in a way, it's a little bit of a teaser because we start with joy and it's almost like we forget that we will go out into an even more somber week as we face Holy Week, as we come to Maundy Thursday, remembering Jesus' last supper, sharing together in that meal, and being reminded then of Jesus' arrest, knowing that Good Friday and the memory of the crucifixion - the darkest day ever - will be next.

When I think about Lent and how difficult it is for us to make it through forty days of whatever we commit to, and then I think of Jesus, and what he faced, I have two emotions - one is that I feel somewhat ashamed of myself. I am disappointed that I can't stay focused and that the little thing I commit to for Lent is such a struggle.

My commitment for this time is so small, in comparison to what Jesus committed to for me ... which leads to the other emotion - a very humble gratitude for Jesus' commitment to face the pain and suffering he knew was coming.

And that pain and suffering would lead to a horrific death on a cross - one of the cruelest forms of execution there could possibly be.

And the people who were so wildly enthusiastic about Jesus on that day when he rode into town on a lowly donkey - those same people quickly lost their loyalty for him.

Why would so many people go from waving palms and shouting "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord - the King of Israel!" to shouting angrily "Crucify him!" just a few days later?

But, why wouldn't the people get angry at Jesus? They had witnessed powerful things happening when Jesus was around. The blind see; the lame walk; demons leave the one they have tormented; the winds calm; the masses are fed on a few loaves and fishes.

The dead rise. He had, just before this, called his friend Lazarus to rise up and come out of the tomb, where he had laid dead for four days. I mean, come on, if Jesus can do all those things, surely he could overthrow the Romans. Surely he had the power to lead them in a war that would change the way things were.

But he didn't. He remained humble and mostly silent. He allowed them to go through with the whipping, the mocking, the torment, the spitting, the thorns on his head.

He went to the cross and never resisted when they drove the nails into his hands. He just said, "Father forgive them. They don't know what they are doing."

This is the new covenant that is sealed in the blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This love is full of mercy and grace. This amazing love is very humble.

Listen to what Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians, chapter two, beginning at verse five:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
 who, though he was in the form of God,
 did not regard equality with God
 as something to be exploited,
 but 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 of death—
 even death on a cross. (NRSV)

This love is the new covenant – God’s promise to be our God, no matter what. This promise, this love is found in a humble servant named Jesus.

And in this humble servant is a surprise. There *is* power in the humble Savior. He *will* rule. He *will* be King – not just King of Israel, or of the Jews, but of all who will put their trust in him.

Paul’s letter continues, beginning at verse nine:

Therefore God also highly exalted him
 and gave him the name
 that is above every name,
 so that at the name of Jesus
 every knee should bend,
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
 and every tongue should confess
 that Jesus Christ is Lord,
 to the glory of God the Father. (NRSV)

Hang on a little while longer. If the struggle of Lent seems to be too much, remember the passion of Christ – who in fact did not struggle at all, but gave himself completely for our sakes so that we might have forgiveness of sins, a relationship with God and new life – eternal life with him.

Easter means resurrection to those of us who believe that Christ was risen from the dead. The stone rolled away. The tomb empty.

But please, don’t skip over the hard stuff of the coming days. The week we call Holy Week is dark and sad as we remember what our Lord went through.

But, it is in the reflecting and the remembering, and in understanding that it was Christ's passion for us that caused Him to carry that cross up the hill to Calvary.

And it is God's everlasting love for God's people that caused God to make a new covenant – to give His best gift in this promise to be our God – the gift of His one and only Son – Jesus Christ. A costly, precious gift.

When we realize the covenants God made from the beginning of time – a call to trust in the Lord with all that we are – a promise that God would always be our God and we see how the old covenants with Abraham and with Moses and the Israelites finally now come together in this new covenant that is given through the life, death and resurrection of God's own beloved Son, we can surely understand that God loves us beyond measure.

And that should make Easter Sunday – Resurrection Sunday – so very joyous and meaningful!

1 John 4 says: “This is love. Not that we have loved God but that he loved us.” (1 John 4:10) So much love that gave Jesus for us so that finally, we would know him deep in our hearts and souls.

Even if you did nothing to observe Lent up until now, I want to invite you, and encourage you, to join the journey for this week. Take some time each day this week to read Scripture, to pray, to contemplate what Jesus' death on a cross means for you and for your life. Come join us in the Maundy Thursday meal and service and experience what that night might have been like.

I feel certain that, if you do, you will discover great joy when we gather back here next Sunday. Be of courage, my faithful brothers and sisters. Our Lord Jesus Christ walks with us into this week and beyond.

Thanks be to God!