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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Sunday of the Passion
April 2, 2023

Lectionary Year A: Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 26:14-27:66

What will you remember of this day? Certainly, we've managed to pack quite a bit into it, with the customary Palm Sunday procession and with palm branches in remembrance of the palms put before Jesus upon his entry into Jerusalem. The reason why I ask this "what will you remember" question is because, as a preacher, that's what I often wonder about. Do people remember stories from the sermon, for example, without remembering the point of them? Do people get fixated on some external -- and barely relevant -- part of the service and not "get" the main event at all? At this most sacred of times during the Church Year, I feel especially pressed to convey the importance of this day and the days that follow, and to do so in such a way that you'll remember it!

The reason why we mark this day the way that we do is actually quite simple. It has little to do with grand spectacle or schmaltzy sentimentality or cutesy display; rather, our palms and processions and our reading of the Passion are to make real the story of our Lord's betrayal and death. In doing what we're doing today, we become a part of the story rather than just observers of it. You see, in so many ways, we are the betrayers -- the Judases, if you will -- and we are the ones honoring Jesus with palms before him...only to turn around and crucify him a little while later. If you remember anything from this day, remember that you took part in your Lord's journey to the cross.

But maybe there's just a bunch of stuff about Passiontide and Holy Week that many people would sooner forget about. In truth, we would rather experience pleasure instead of suffering, joy instead of sadness, and -- as it applies here -- the empty tomb of Easter instead of the cross of Good Friday. So, instinct tells us to bypass Holy Week and head straight to Easter. But what gets lost in the process?

A lot...one might say about half the story or better!

The only way your "Christian story" has any meaning is if you're able to say, "Jesus Christ died for my sins." Well, where did that happen? On the cross! So, an Easter with no Holy Week tosses out the very costly grace you received that makes you right before God and a potential inheritor of God's kingdom. And again, your Christian faith calls you not only to "believe in" or "believe that," but also to participate in this extraordinary and precious gift that God gave to you.

The Church, therefore, is one of the key places in which you participate in this story. Granted, it's not the only place, but where else can you receive the bond of Christ's never-failing love in Holy Baptism, and where else can you receive Christ's Body and Blood in Holy Communion? So, yes, there are things that we offer here that cannot be offered elsewhere, and we hope that what happens in this place strengthens and deepens your trust in the reality of the story.

And this reality we know through the Scriptures, looking especially

on this day to Paul's letter to the Philippians. Of Jesus Christ, Paul writes that "though he was in the form of God," he "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" (Philippians 2:6-8). If there were ever any "minimum basic requirements" of what one needs to know about Jesus Christ, this might very well be all you need to know. But on this day, as we look to the cross and what happened there, we think not only of what Jesus did but of what Jesus did for us. That's when academic history becomes personal reality. Yes, there is the Jesus who "humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death," but there is also the Christ in whom we believe who did these things so that our sin might be forgiven.

So what does our participation in today's story of Christ's suffering and death require of us? Actually, just a simple acknowledgment that this story is real for us! Long before things like creeds and confessions were formulated, there was an earlier and much simpler creed/confession of the Christian faith, and it went like this: "Jesus Christ is Lord." When you think about it, there's a lot packed into that little statement of faith. You're saying that Jesus is Lord over you, that he forgave your sins, and that he lives forever at God's right hand. Now, knowing that, you can go back to the story and see how that all happened...and you can participate in it with the awe-inspiring reality that "this happened for me." And one day, you may find yourself at that point

where, with the apostle Paul, "every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Philippians 2:11a).

Making this confession real is a big part of what we're doing here today...

What will you remember of this day? Hopefully, the story of what Jesus accomplished for you will hit home in a particularly profound way. Sure, it takes skills of reasoning and comprehension to absorb the historical events of Jesus at Calvary's cross, but it takes faith to know that these events had (and still have) any bearing on your eternal destiny and on how you live your life in the meantime. I'm here to remind you that they do...and today, I hope you remember that!

Amen.