

Palm/Passion Sunday, March 16, 2008

Church of the Reformation—Lutheran, Affton, MO

Text: Matthew 26:1—27:66

Passion

Today is the Sunday with an identity crisis. Is it Palm Sunday or is it the Sunday of the Passion, or is it both? It is both and it is the first day of the Week of the Passion, Holy Week. It is a day of changes, swifter in the making than ones that have occupied our newspaper headlines or our political worlds. Today, in a matter of minutes we have gone from the joy of Palm Sunday to the rejection of Good Friday. We would rather have the Hosannas-and-palms parade into Jerusalem than the procession of sorrow behind a dragging cross to a hill outside of Jerusalem.

When Jesus comes to Jerusalem, that first Palm Sunday, he stands power and prestige on their heads. The people give Him a hero's welcome; Jesus responds with tears (Luke 19:41ff). The people wave palm fronds, shout and sing "Hosanna"; Jesus goes into the temple and creates a cleansing havoc. The people see this parade as fulfillment of the Bible stories they have heard from countless prophets—a new kingdom with no Rome; Jesus sees it all as the fulfillment of the Bible stories, but especially the darker stories, the strange ones, the songs of lament.

This day, this week is what Jesus has had in mind all along. It has been the point of each of His prophecies: **"See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and He will be raised on the third day"** (Matthew 20:18-19).

So maybe the Church has it right when it calls this Sunday, not so much Palm Sunday, but rather the Sunday of the Passion. Passion and passionate have become synonymous in our culture—words to describe a relationship or a one-night stand; words to denote strong feeling and

emotion, as in a stirring, passionate speaker; words that are now part of every job description and requirement (Do you have a passion for the people?). For others passion is only the name of a religious movie.

On this day, the Sunday of the Passion, the Church has much more in mind for this word *passion*; a word that comes to us from the Latin word meaning to suffer, to endure suffering and pain. Thus this is the Sunday of the Passion, for we have heard how Jesus the Christ suffered and died. And that is one of the great themes of this day: that our God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of all creation and the God of all the details of your life and mine—that God is the God who cries as He did at the death of Lazarus, He suffers, and dies. Far from the blood and gore that Hollywood paints the scene, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ our Lord is real with blood, nails, thorns, whip lashes, and pain.

Jesus, true God and true Man, cries, suffers and dies, like we do. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us; as one of us He knows what it is to suffer and to die. Our suffering of pain, disease, broken relationships, and more—that suffering is taken up into Christ's suffering at the hands of Pontius Pilate and his soldiers.

Yet today, this Passion Sunday, this Passion Week, is more than simply being about a God who suffers. It really is more about how this God, who suffers and dies, is a God who loves His children so much that He is willing to die on behalf of His children, on our behalf.

When you heard the Passion reading from Matthew, how many times did you hear the name “Jesus”? Each time we hear His name we are brought back to the beginning of Matthew's Gospel and the angel's announcement to Joseph: “**She [Mary] will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins**” (Matthew 1:21). Our sin, our hearts turned to stone, our lives of failure and futility, are the aim of Christ's passion, His suffering, death, and resurrection. In His compassion, Christ forgives our sin; He creates in us new hearts; and He gives our past-tense lives not only a future tense but also a present tense.

That first Palm Sunday was the first day of the Week of the Passion, the week in which the Son of Man was delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, the week when they condemned Him to death and delivered Him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. And He was raised on the third day. And all this Christ did for you—just as His body is broken for you and His blood is poured out are for you and the forgiveness of your sin. That's what we have heard from Matthew's account of Christ's Passion. That's what we will hear all this week, on Holy Thursday and Good Friday, and on Easter. It really is too good to miss.

For you see, Christ's Passion finds its source in His compassion, His suffering *with* us, and more importantly His suffering *for* us. *That* changes the perspective of this day and this week. And it changes *us*.