

Palm/Passion Sunday B, April 5, 2009
Church of the Reformation—Lutheran, Affton, MO
Text: Mark 14 and 15

From Palms to Passion

From palms to passion, from shouts of “Hosanna” to cries of “Crucify Him!”—this Sunday has it all. Beginning with an impromptu parade, this day ends with a cross. There is good reason to call this day Palm Sunday—for palm branches are part of our Lord’s Passion, though not the only thing. After all, the world is not saved by a palm tree but by the tree of the cross and the passion of our Lord who hung on it. Thus today is also known as Passion Sunday, a day to give us the big picture of it all, the big picture of God’s love for us, the big picture of the Passion of our Lord to save you and me from our sin, to rescue us from death. Today we see again the fulfillment of our Lord’s mission. That is why He **“was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.”**

The choir summarized this day as they sang the Verse: **“And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross”** (Phil. 2:8). This verse points to the meaning of Passion Sunday: to suffer.

The Gospel reading today was a lengthy one, and for good reason, for God’s holy war against our sin and death and the Law that condemns us is no little border skirmish. It is war, planned from all eternity. The Son is the warrior, chosen to do battle with the darkness and conquer by dying. No wonder each of the Gospels spends more time on these seven days of Jesus’ ministry than they do the rest of His three years.

At the impromptu parade into Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday, some probably thought that God finally would vindicate His people by liberating them from Roman rule and establishing the kingdom of heaven on earth. They view this all as a victorious king coming home from battle. *God* views Palm Sunday as the King heading *toward* battle, into holy war with sin, death, and devil.

So supporting the big picture are a bunch of little pictures. At Bethany a woman anoints Jesus with the costliest gift she has, a jar of scented oil, worth a year's salary. Her devotion raises eyebrows and criticism. The money could have gone to feed the poor; but worship is never practical (at least in our terms), and it is always priceless. This woman's preparation for Jesus' death and burial is an act of devotion never to be forgotten. Another deed would never be forgotten is the betrayal of Jesus by Judas. The Lord permits it, all for your sake, all to save you.

Christ celebrates the Passover one last time with His Israel, His Twelve disciples. He gives what had never been given before at a Passover table—His body, the broken bread; and His blood, the cup of wine **“poured out for many”**—including you. You see, Jesus gives the very same Body and Blood to you here today for your forgiveness, for your life, for your salvation. This is His passion to save you.

Jesus and His disciples go to the garden of Gethsemane. There, heavy with sorrow, burdened by our sins, Jesus falls to the ground praying for another way to deal with it all. But there is no other way. Jesus is the chosen Lamb, the unblemished Sacrifice, as Isaiah (53:6) foretold, **“The LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”** As He had taught His disciples to pray, so Jesus prayed:

“Thy will be done.” The will of His Father is that He should drink the bitter cup and die for the world. This is His passion to save you.

In the garden, Jesus is betrayed with a kiss and arrested by an armed crowd. He is tried by the religious high court: **“Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?”** Jesus answers plainly, **“I am.”** The verdict: “He is a blasphemer and deserves to die.” God in the flesh is always blasphemy to human religions, which always try to keep God in His heaven and far from our lives. Jesus endures the verdict. It is His passion to save us.

Jesus is brought before Pilate, the King of kings before a minor Roman governor. Political correctness as rampant then as now, Pilate tries to compromise; he offers the crowd a murderer, Barabbas, or Jesus. The people voice their verdict. Barabbas goes free; Jesus goes to His death. The guilty one gets off, the Innocent One dies. Jesus becomes our sin and we become His righteousness. This too is His passion to save us.

The soldiers take charge of our Lord, crowning Him with thorns, dressing Him in purple, spitting on Him, beating Him, mocking Him as the **“King of the Jews!”** He endures it all; He is the Savior of the world, for the world cannot save itself.

Last week we heard Jesus call His disciples to take up their crosses and follow Him. But when He is arrested, all of them cut and run, leaving only a stranger to take up His cross, Simon from Cyrene, who is grabbed and forced to carry cross of our Lord. At 9:00 in the morning, the third hour, at Golgotha, the Place of a Skull, they crucified Him. On His right and on His left are not

James and John, the sons of Zebedee whom we heard last week wanted to sit at His right and left in glory. Rather two thieves hang there with Him as He dies. This is His passion to save you.

When Jesus died, the curtain of the temple is ripped from top to bottom, just as the heavens were ripped open at His Baptism and the voice proclaimed: **“You are My beloved Son, with You I am well pleased.”** Now heaven stands open to you through the doorway of the cross-shaped wood stained with the blood of the Lamb.

Mark’s starts his Gospel with this verse: **“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”** Yet in Mark’s Gospel, no human being ever calls Jesus the **“Son of God”** until our Lord dies and a Roman centurion confesses, **“Truly this man was the Son of God.”** This is part of the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the big picture of Passion Sunday. Greater depth and detail will come on Thursday as we rejoice in the upper room and the Supper of Jesus’ body and blood for our salvation. Greater depth and detail will come on Friday as we see the cross and the Crucified One who dies for forgiveness. Greater depth and detail will come on Saturday as we remember His rest in the tomb and our Baptism into His death. And greater depth and detail will come on next Sunday as we run to the open, empty tomb and the glory of Jesus’ resurrection.

All of this is the passion of our Lord Jesus, His passion for our salvation. All of it is the good news for us, for all that we need to stand before God on the day of judgment is passion of Jesus—His suffering, death, burial, and His resurrection. Your Baptism declares it; His Supper confirms it. He is passionate to save you.

No wonder the wonder of Samuel Crossman, who wrote:

Here might I stay and sing,

No story so divine!

Never was love, dear King,

Never was grief like Thine.

This is my Friend,

In whose sweet praise

I all my days

Could gladly spend! (*LSB* 430:7)

Henry V. Gerike