

John 12:27-33; 37-43

Palm Sunday (Series A)

Lessons for the Day: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Philippians 2:5-11; John 12:20-43

The Reason and the Response: Rejection or Rejoicing?

April 5, 2020

“Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven: “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.”

“Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them.” Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him. Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.” (John 12:27–33, 37–43, ESV)

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

We call it Holy Week. For the people of God, the next seven days are a time to contemplate, remember and take to heart the meaning of the most important events in all of human history. Today we join in praising Jesus our King, joining our voices, even remotely, in singing and shouting our joyful hosannas to the Son of David. Before the week is out, we will go with Jesus to the upper room where He gives to His disciples that blessed Sacrament of His body and blood. We will journey with Him down the way of sorrows, as He goes to the cross upon which He will bear the sins of the entire world, including your sins and my sins. Thankfully, we will also go to the empty tomb, rejoicing to know that the Lord who died so horribly has also risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity.

Perhaps the reality and struggles we face as a result of the COVID pandemic will emphasize the drama and meaning of this holy week for us in a different way. The present circumstances in our world have made it clear that life is fragile. The virus has reminded us that we aren't the masters of our own destiny as we like to believe. Even as we take advantage of social media, the telephone, or Skype; even though we post pictures on our windows to encourage those who do pass by, we are feeling isolated and alone. Yet this does give us some time: time to contemplate what God has done, is doing and will do for His people. Our time of separation from the regular busyness of the world gives us an opportunity to focus on the events of Good Friday, and all this means for us. That separation may detract from the joy of Easter morning, but it does not take away the hope that lies ahead for us because of the glorious truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ that we will celebrate on Easter.

This holy week is different for us. Yet for so many in our world, it is just another week. Yes, it is a different week with the emptiness of our streets, but they aren't going to think of events that make this coming Friday “good”. They may be saddened that Easter is different, but they won't be thinking of the Saviour, who rose to give them life, too.

No matter how different this week may feel, there is a powerful reason for our observance of Holy Week. We remember, with joy and thanksgiving, that Jesus came to give Himself as a sacrifice of redemption for the sins of the whole world. And since the events that we do observe involve every single man, woman and child on the face of the earth, there should be some sort of response to the love of Christ, who does so much for us. That is the question before us today: what is the response? Is it rejoicing or rejection? Do we remember with thanksgiving all that our Saviour has done for us? Do we know the joy of a Lord who gives us hope, even when everything seems so hopeless? Or are we indifferent to the hope that is found in Jesus Christ, and in Him alone?

In every news report on COVID-19, there is one thing that we are hearing over and over: we are at war with this disease. The number of those infected continues to rise. People are dying, and officials are saying that the death toll is going to increase long before it starts to get better. We are in a life and death struggle. That is also true of the events that we remember in this holy week. They were a matter of life and death. They were events that were unavoidable—not in the sense that Jesus was powerless to save Himself, but because He wouldn't save Himself. As He says: *“Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour.”* Jesus had told His disciples many times that He had

to suffer and die—and rise—for the sins of the world. He knew full well on that Palm Sunday what lay before Him. Through the prophet Isaiah, the Suffering Servant, God's promised Messiah, says: ***"I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting."*** (Isaiah 50:6, ESV) The beating, the disgrace and, of course, the cross itself—that is what lies before Jesus as He enters into Jerusalem on that Palm Sunday. Jesus, the all-knowing God of heaven and earth is not surprised by these events. He knows full well what will be. Yet He rides into Jerusalem to wage the battle against Satan and all the powers of darkness. He comes to give His life on the cross for the people He loves so much. He comes to glorify His Father through His humble obedience and through His suffering and death, so that you and me and all the people of this world could be forgiven and free.

That, dear people loved by God, was the focus of Jesus' entire earthly ministry. That is true for all of you who are fearful and uncertain right now in the face of the COVID pandemic. The self-righteous Pharisees criticized and accused Jesus for being ***"a friend of tax collectors and sinners"*** (Matthew 11:19, ESV) and of having anything to do with people they felt were unworthy or who were beneath them. But Jesus tells them: ***"I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."*** (Luke 5:32, ESV) What a blessed thought this is! I don't know about you, but I know that I am not the person I would like to be. I know that I cannot keep all of God's commands perfectly and holy. I sin. I deserve death. By the way, I do know that you are sinners, too, also deserving of that punishment. But how blessed we are in having Jesus as our Saviour. He comes to take away our sin. He comes to wash us and make us holy. He comes to bring us everlasting life.

That is the reason why we have this Holy Week. And this week gives us hope in the face of all things in life and in death. God's plan for our salvation, put in place before the foundations of the world were laid, comes to completion in the events we remember. Jesus comes amid the joyous shouts of hosanna with His eyes set upon the cross of suffering and shame, humbly giving His holy life into death for us and for our salvation.

That is the reason for this week. But what is the response? The hymn writer tells us: *Were the whole realm of nature mine That were a tribute far too small; Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all.* (LSB 425, v. 4) But for far too many, the response to God's love and grace in Jesus Christ is the response of the Pharisees. How sad it is that our text tells us: ***"Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them." Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him. Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God."*** What a terrible judgement people bring on themselves when they won't believe. How sad it is that Jesus comes to draw all people to Himself, to bring life and forgiveness to all, and yet people turn from Him to do their own thing, to find their own way of salvation. It's my life, they say, and I'll do what I want, no matter what God says.

But there is another response, a better response. It is the response of Paul, who said: ***"But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."*** (Galatians 6:14, ESV) YOU and I, who have been blessed as the Holy Spirit calls us through the Gospel, can indeed rejoice with loud hosannas and shouts of joy, as we remember all that our Saviour has done. We are forgiven. We are free. We do have eternal life. All that is ours, not because of anything we have done, but because of the great love of the Saviour who gives Himself for us.

A man who was always talking about Jesus was asked why he did it. He thought for a while without answering. Then the man gathered some small twigs and dry grass from the ground nearby and constructed a circle. He found a caterpillar and placed it in the centre. He then set fire to the twigs and grass. The caterpillar frantically circled around. There was no escape. Finally, as the heat and flames came closer, the caterpillar stretched up toward the sky. The man reached down and extended his finger, lifting the caterpillar to safety. Now he spoke: "That's what Jesus has done. I was lost in trespasses and sin. Jesus extended his hand. He lifted me to safety."

That is what Jesus did for us, too. We are trapped in the terrible power of sin, surrounded by it and unable to free ourselves. In this Holy Week, perhaps more than in any other in our memory, we are feeling the struggles of life and death. Helpless and dying, what can we do, but look up? As we do, there is Jesus: the Saviour who died for us; the Victorious Lord who overcame death and the grave for us. With outstretched arms, marked by nails, He draws us to Himself. He has driven out Satan for us. He has brought us into the light of His life. That is our hope for the present days and for all our days. This is the reason we respond in faith and trust. This is our reason for rejoicing, for the dying and rising Christ is the assurance of our ultimate victory, which nothing we face in this world can ever take away. Amen.