

Palm Sunday Sermon

March 29, 2020

Welcome, everyone to our Palm Sunday celebration at Westover Episcopal in Charles City. What an extraordinary day of innocent beauty it is outside with all the gorgeous flowers blooming and the green buds on bushes and trees bursting forth to welcome spring. And, what a glorious spring it is in Virginia this year. So, it is odd that in the midst of all the beauty of God's creation; the cheerful flowers and camelia bushes that decorate the church yard; the new wheat growing in Archer's field, and the perfect warm weather (not too hot, not too cold)... It is odd that in the midst of all this beauty when there should be joy, so many people are sick or are living in fear of becoming ill. Instead of being outside picnicking or bicycling with their friends, they are behind closed doors. Someone said to me recently that they feel like they had been sent to their room because they had been bad!

On this last Sunday in Lent, I am reminded of all the Lents in which I debated what I should give up to honor this penitential season. What comes to mind today is that previous Lenten seasons now seem lame in comparison to the past three weeks! There are two memes now appearing on websites that say:

“I had planned to give up something this Lent.

But, I hadn't planned to give up this much!”

and

“This is the Lentiest Lent I have ever Lented in my life!”

That pretty much sums things up for me. I didn't have to think of penitential acts this year because of everything going on in the country. Isolation from friends, watching people in our congregation struggle with serious illnesses, and having all the wonderful activities I love so much in April shut down, was more than enough “penitence” for me to absorb.

I find it hard to believe that 40 days have passed since Ash Wednesday when I stood at the rail and invited people to come forward and receive the cross on their foreheads. As I smeared the black ashes on their foreheads, I said the words dating back to the sixth century, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

Quite often people will look up at me and say, “Thank you!”

“Thank you!” I wanted to say. “I just told you that you are going to die one day! Why would you thank me?!”

Maybe they say it because it seems like the appropriate thing to do in church when you are kneeling at the altar rail looking up at the cross and reflecting on your own mortality.

“Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return.”

We just heard the Passion narrative read. We began our service outside the church doors and blessed the palms and then we tried to recreate the excitement and joy of that day when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a colt and the people ran beside him throwing down palm branches to honor him as their king. But, as we follow the events of the week: Jesus’ confrontation on Monday in the temple when he overturns the tables of the money changers; Tuesday when Judas negotiates a deal with the Sanhedrin to betray him for 30 pieces of silver; and Thursday when Jesus shares the Passover meal with his disciples and predicts his death, when he is arrested, Peter’s denial of knowing him to a mere servant girl, his torture; and then Friday the day of his agonizing execution.

Jesus lived in a time of violence and suffering and so do we. If the quarantine has taught me anything it is the premium I place on the company and fellowship of others. But Jesus’ suffering is not without meaning. He dies so that our death will not be permanent. Every terrible thing we have ever done, every betrayal, every hurt we have ever inflicted on others is caught up in his redemption of evil on the cross. Covered in ashes and soot from the lives we lead in a broken world, we can give thanks that we are no longer doomed, but given new life.

A few years ago I was caught on the wrong side of town taking a short cut when I realized that my car was out of gas and not just a little bit out, but out/out! There is the warning light that comes on that tells you how many miles you have left and then the next light that tells you to get to the station and then there’s the final light that says, “THIS IS IT!” I had gone past the final light. I didn’t want to stop, but I knew I had to and I found a gas station. I was just about to start putting gas in my car when a woman who had obviously had a very rough life approached me. She looked angry and I quickly thought about what I had to give her because

surely she was going to ask for money. I realized that I had absolutely no cash, just the Visa card in my hand as I bought gas.

“Oh, no! Now what?” I thought.

“Are you a pastor,” she asked looking at my collar and I said, “Yeeees.”

“I need help,” she said. (Boy, have I heard that before!)

“Yesssss,” I said again reluctantly. “Is there any way that I may be helpful (doubting that there would be).”

“I need to be forgiven, because I have done some terrible things.”

“Yeeeeeeesssssss,” I said even more tentatively.

“I need you to give me a blessing.” And then with tears rolling down her face, she bowed her head and waited. That’s what she wanted. She wanted to be forgiven. She wanted me to pronounce forgiveness so that she could move on with her life. No pretense, no cons, just plain old forgiveness that priests are authorized to pronounce upon the penitent. And, so I placed my hands on her head and made the sign of the cross and asked God to wash away everything she had ever done to hurt anyone or herself.

That is what the cross of Christ means, dear friends. It means we are no longer held captive to death. As St. Paul said in his letter to the Christians in Rome:

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

God’s Love for all of creation is beyond anything we can possibly imagine and it is God’s Love that will carry us through times of seemingly unbearable pain and suffering.

Amen.