 Tazewell Presbyterian Church

& Black’s Chapel

CHRIST AND CORONAVIRUS

April 5, 2020, Passion Sunday/Palm Sunday

Matthew 21:1-9; Matthew 27:27-31; Philippians 2:5-8

Rev. Dr. David E. Gilbert

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*O God, as we journey through Holy Week, through the final days and events of Jesus life, give us keen eyes and ears and hearts to take it all in. Help us to claim again the enduring relevance of Christ’s passion, his suffering and death, for our lives. By your Spirit blow these ancient readings across the sands of time. . . . to us . . . this day. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.*

Usually in the weeks before Easter, cable TV channels offer up some “Jesus specials.” These special programs on the life of Jesus vary in quality and integrity. Some evidence faith; others skepticism. A few years ago CNN had a rather nice series every Sunday night at 9 they called “Finding Jesus.” I haven’t seen any such program announcements this year. . . on CNN or anywhere else. The networks right now of course are absorbed with the coronavirus pandemic. There isn’t much else. We are fixed/ transfixed quite naturally on the crisis. All kinds of information come barreling over the air waves: the latest total coronavirus cases; and the death numbers by sum total and daily total. Then there are images and snapshots and testimonials of what it’s like on the front line ---- for nurses, and doctors, and EMTs. There are comments too from state governors struggling to get ventilators and other urgently needed items. And so much more.

So much has changed. And we’re reeling. And we’re grieving. There is a giant underlying collective grief over what we have lost: for what we enjoyed and took for granted just weeks ago. And with that collective grief an accompanying collective anxiety and uncertainty about what lies ahead. I don’t know what lies ahead. I wish I did. I hope we will pull out of this thing and come out on the other side, chastened but alive, sobered but strengthened. In the mean-time however we’re in for a whole lot of hurt, a whole lot of suffering.

How does this week that we call “Holy Week” bear upon what we’re now facing? Today is not just Palm Sunday; it’s also Passion Sunday. The Palm Sunday part recalls Jesus’ joyful entrance into Jerusalem. We normally/typically celebrate that with the children. You love it, I love it ---the boys and girls led around the sanctuary parade-fashion, ---some waving their palm fronds high. And there’s usually one (usually a boy) who thinks his is a sword and is bopping one of the others on the head with a palm, just because. The Palm Sunday part of today was unfolded in the first of the passages I read from the Gospel of Matthew. The Passion Sunday part of today remembers the last days of Jesus’ life – His arrest and trial, His torture, and finally His death on the cross. The Passion Sunday part was narrated in the second reading from Matthew. It was also poetically remembered in those verses from Philippians that formed the last of our three Scripture readings.

I think we generally prefer the first part of this Sunday over the second. It’s more agreeable to remember the crowd that shouted “hosanna” than the crowd that shouted “crucify.” But (as I’m sure you’ve heard many times) you just can’t come to the light of Easter morning without passing through the darkness of the cross. The story is incomplete without the whole story. And equally to the point, Good Friday and Easter is the whole story of how human life goes. We need to hear all of it, not only because it’s the whole truth about Jesus Christ. We need to hear the whole story because it’s the whole truth about life in this wounded and wonderful, brutal and beautiful world we live in --- certainly life as it is now, of what we’re going through now.

So what does Christianity have to offer in the midst of hardships and heartache?” It offers three responses to the brokenness of life. They are not exactly tidy answers, but they are powerful responses. The three central responses of the Christian faith to suffering are actually framed by the three central events of this coming week – Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter. This morning I’m going to take them in an out-of-order sequence, and name them as: the Maundy Thursday answer, the Easter answer, and the Good Friday answer.

The first answer, the Maundy Thursday answer, is embodied in the support of community, the community of the church, the church that forms as Jesus’ followers sit together around that table in the Upper Room and share a meal and the community that sits together around the Lord’s Table today, even as we must this morning do virtually, physically apart from each other. This first Christian response to suffering is the consolation that comes from being part of a Christian community, of people who walk alongside us as we journey through grief, offering not pieties, but tenderness and grace, encouragement and empathy, and when necessary, practical help. One can, of course, obviously find terrifically supportive friends outside the Christian community. But a healthy Christian community will have about it extravagant love, compassion and self-giving. I see it in our community, Tazewell Presbyterian Church and Black’s Presbyterian Chapel. I see it in our Outreach Luncheons. I see it in our Table Talk book discussions. I see it in Adventure Time as Pat and Pam share the love of Christ with our young children in Bible stories and song. I see it in email prayer requests shaed. I see it in the love and visits and phone calls during a serious illness. That’s the Maundy Thursday answer – the communion of the loving community.

The second response, out of sequence of course, is the Easter response, what we might call the “eternal inheritance” --- that the last word is not death, but in a way beyond imagining, the last word is life, life eternal. This is the Easter promise that the hard road is not the end of the road. But no more of that now; that’s for next Sunday.

The third response is the one that’s connected to this day, especially to its Passion Sunday edge. This is the day we begin to look toward the cross, toward the suffering and death of Christ and what it means for us when we are pressed hard by life. The Old Testament book of Isaiah describes the messiah as a “’man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.’ We’re told, ‘by his wounds we are healed.’ For we of Christian faith,” God is a God of wounds… There is some solace in knowing that while at times life is not easy for us, it was also hard for God.

This last response to suffering, whether it be illness or loss, depression or fear or deadly pandemic, is the trust that God is with us at every step of the hardest journeys. That’s the promise embodied in the Passion story. Christ’s Passion – His suffering – is the enactment of the promise that God is with us *in and through it all*. By the cross, God declares in a way deeper than any words: "There is no pain that you may bear that I have not borne; there is no darkness that can overtake you that I have not seen; there is no fear that might grip you that I have not known. All that might come to you, I have passed through. And when you come to it, you can trust that I am with you. I have been there."

None of this explains away suffering; it’s simply the sign of the ages that we’re not alone. God is with us, through it all. Elie Wiesel in his book, *Night,* recounts his experiences as a teenage boy imprisoned in a concentration camp during the Second World War. The Wiesel family were Jewish and I believe that all of them except Elie were killed in the holocaust. In the memoir Elie tells of a time when a twenty or so men were lined up in row by the guards and made to watch an execution. The one to be executed was a boy, not much younger than Elie himself. The boy stood on a platform slightly above where Elie and the others stood. Then the guards put a noose around the boy’s neck and shoved him off the platform in front of their eyes. The boy swung from the gallows. From somewhere down the line a voice could be heard, a plaintive question choked in sorrow, “Where is God?” And Elie heard a soft answer from someone behind him, “He is hanging on the gallows.” Our Lord Jesus Christ hung on the gallows, suffered for us and with us.

So back to the news footage: the COVID-19 totals, the fear of those with the disease, and the fear of those on the front line, and the anguish of those separated from loved ones, and of those who have lost loved ones. Where is Christ in this crisis?

The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ tells us:

Christ is right there in the suffering,

right there in the pain of the world that He loves,

the world that He loved to death.

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*