

Epworth Chapel on the Green
March 20, 2016
Palm/Passion Sunday
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 52:13-53:12
Psalm 22:1-11
Philippians 2:5-11
Luke 22:39-23:49

Every year at this time as this day approaches, I find myself struggling a bit, feeling a sense of *dis-ease*, but unable to put a finger specifically on why I feel the way I do.

It is Palm/Passion Sunday. It is one of the most significant days of the year. One of the things that makes it so, I think, is that it is a day that exposes us to such tremendous, gut-wrenching *irony*. It confronts us with what Peter Gomes called “the conflict of mood, the vacillation of the will, the confusion of sentiments.” The crowd that yells “Hosanna” one minute and “Crucify him” the next is the *same* crowd. Steadfast disciples become, within a matter of minutes, deserters and deniers.

The irony of this day is palpable. It is made even more so by virtue of the fact that we read and participate in the entire passion narrative, the only day in the year in which we do so. As we are drawn into the story, we come to discover with author Donald Miller *that coming to terms with our depravity is the hardest principle within Christian spirituality for us to face*. Miller observes: “The

problem is not out there; the problem is the needy beast of a thing that lives in my chest.” [Blue Like Jazz, 20]

The temptation before us in this situation is to turn this day into a kind of “Let’s have a parade” event, to remove the passion component and turn this day into a kind of festive dress rehearsal for Easter.

But alas, we cannot do this. And, perhaps we should not *want* to. For the irony that characterizes this day may have something to show us and teach us.

When you think about it, the irony that marks this day is an accurate and honest reflection of the way life really *is*. We inhabit a “Good Friday” kind of world. We live in a world where innocent people suffer. Suicide bombers kill civilians. Young soldiers die. Babies come home from the hospital with heart defects. Tests come back positive. Relationships sour and die. Children are kidnapped and murdered.

All you have to do is turn on your evening news for five minutes, and you will find yourself exclaiming, “My God, what kind of world are we living in?”

The answer is: *A Good Friday world.*

As Christians, we are Easter people. We know that Easter is coming. *But not without Good Friday.* Not before we encounter a person named Jesus, who enters into our life and shares our experience. Not before we encounter a Jesus

who laughs and rejoices, weeps and cries like we do. Not before we encounter a Jesus who feels pain and suffers like we do.

Peter Gomes, former pastor of the Memorial Church at Harvard University, reminds us what this day signifies when he says:

On this day, we are reminded that Jesus did not die in order to spare us the indignities of a wounded creation. He died that we might see those wounds as our own. He died that we might live, fully and hopefully, not in some fantastic never-never land, but in some ambiguous reality of the here and now. *[Sermons: Wisdom for Daily Living]*

As our Lord enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, something profoundly true is happening. Something tragic, and yet way beyond tragedy. Something terrible and awesome and beautiful beyond description is happening.

What we witness here is love becoming vulnerable. What we see here is love exposing itself to heartbreak. What we witness here is God giving God's own heart to the world, to you and to me, to every one of us.

On many calendars, this next week will appear no different than any other week. But this week should be different for us. Whatever else you do this week, find a way to take some time to think and to reflect. Find some time to ponder the image of the One who emptied himself, took the form of a servant, and became obedient to the point of death.

As we come to the Lord's Table, the shadow of the Cross looms over us. Let us not attempt to avoid it or run from it. Rather, let us embrace it. For it is the

“Good Friday” kind of world that is healed and raised to life, not some fairy tale world. And it is in our “Good Friday” kind of lives where his grace finds us and does its best work. And by his Cross and by his grace, Good Friday *must* yield to Sunday. Thanks be to God.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.