**Philippians 2:5-11 April 5, 2020 (Palm/Passion Sunday)**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text for this morning comes from our Epistle lesson, Philippians 2 here re-reading these words. “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Probably the most puzzling thing that has come out of these weeks of quarantine and lockdown is the idea that the collective morale of society can be raised simply by turning back the clock and observing Christmas traditions in the middle of March and now into the beginning of April. Now I understand that hanging the Christmas lights, listening to Christmas music, making Christmas cookies, and even decorating other aspects of your house are all happy memories and can help brighten your mood. If you personally are observing any of these traditions during this time of solitude and isolation, I am not here to chastise you or to say that what you’re doing is a sin. If you perhaps have left your Christmas decorations up until Easter, well, that’s a different story. I didn’t really believe it was happening all that much until I was driving to get some gas, and hit the seek button my radio, only to find a station that was playing Christmas music. I noticed when I flipped through the channels on the television that we suddenly had the Hallmark channels and they were all playing Christmas movies as well. Suddenly I got to thinking about the similarities between the two holidays, as we’re entering Holy Week which leads up to Easter.

Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. Easter is the celebration of his resurrection from the dead. Both have seasons of preparation: Advent for Christmas, Lent for Easter. Like anything else we have foods and traditions associated with each holiday, and even specific traditions that can vary family by family. Both celebrations were always observed with the eating of ham in my family growing up. A thread that holds both holidays together is Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday is traditionally found in the lectionary as the readings for the first Sunday in Advent. It is the first reading of the new church year, and the start of the Advent preparations. Palm Sunday also is observed at the beginning of Holy Week, which means it comes at the very end of the Lent season. If you were to look at the Church Year Palm Sunday almost becomes the bread with Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Transfiguration and Lent, in the middle. We start with it, and now we’ve come to it again right as we are getting to the high point of the church year and the festival season of the church.

But what a difference four months can be. Worries about Covid-19 were growing a bit back in December but could any of us have predicted that it would have completely changed our lives like it has today? Suddenly the word “Hosanna” which means “save us now” take on new meaning, when we’re seeing reports and news of infections and death every single day.

Things can seem so hopeless, like the world when Jesus was first born. A world that was yearning and looking for a Savior. Christmas is the celebration that the Messiah had been born, there was a sense of anticipation and excitement. Now the rightful kingdom would be established. Palm Sunday, as Jesus rides triumphantly into Jerusalem was the realization of that hope. The people were excited and celebrating. They hailed him as a king with their cloaks and with palms. Things were finally going to go right in their lives. Which leads us to the other half of our observances for today, that this is Palm Sunday but also understood as Passion Sunday. In the bulletin you will find the entirety of the Passion narrative from Matthew 26 and 27. You’ve heard sections of the Passion throughout the selected readings for our Midweek Lent services, which focus on how the Lord’s Prayer connects to the Lord’s Passion. If you are able, please read the entirety of the Passion in one sitting, to feel the weight of what happens after the entry, after the palms and the cloaks, after the loud hosannas and the praise. Holy Week starts with joyful anticipation, but by the end of it there is only sadness. Jesus has been killed in the most brutal and painful way you could possibly imagine. It’s why Paul puts emphasis on the way he dies in our Epistle lesson, “He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, **even death on a cross**.”

I struggle with the idea of putting up Christmas lights, singing Christmas music, and observing Christmas in March and April to feel better, because there is no pay off. Christmas is still 8 months away. The joy of seeing the lights, and singing the songs, and eating the cookies, and preparing the presents, and all the other traditions of those frantic weeks before Christmas is the joy of when the day finally comes. But a buildup without a payoff, leaves a very hollow feeling inside. That’s how our lives can be, when we’re focused only on the good, the parts we like, the sections that don’t make us feel down, or guilty, or bad. To take the joy of Christmas, and move to the joy of Palm Sunday, and then to the joy of Easter, and ignore all of the events of Jesus life in between. Holy Week is the last path up the mountain in our journey of Lent, but Lent is a journey to a cross. To a place of suffering, that is necessary, and that Jesus willfully suffers, for you and your sin.

This year is unique, and hopefully there aren’t many other years like it when it comes to our Holy Week services and Holy Week observance. But the temptation is to simply take Holy Week off this year, to perhaps buy a pack of Easter candy at the store, and enjoy the Easter celebration in your own way, but skip and ignore the upper room, the pain in the garden, the blackness of Good Friday, and the slamming of the tomb. To do so would be to rob Holy Week of its proper place, and to discount the journey. It would mean that you don’t see the whole picture, and that would only be a disservice to you and to your faith. Christ’s humiliation, from his conception, to his birth, to his life, to his ministry, to his entrance, to his institution of the Lord’s Supper, to his arrest, to his pain, to his crucifixion, to his death, to his burial, is all about you. It’s a humbling of himself for you and your sin, to pay the price of your wrongs, your mistakes, your willful rebellion. To pick and choose the parts you like of the story is to make your own happiness greater than our Lord’s sacrifice.

It’s time to journey, together even though we are apart. With our brothers and sisters in Christ all around the world. It’s time. Holy Week is here. Jesus rides into Jerusalem with shouts of joy. He rides on, as we sing in hymn 441, “in lowly pomp, ride on to die.” But know that although the journey may be different this year, and the temptation may be to sit it out, we are not simply observing traditions without a payoff, we have the greatest pay off to our Lent journey imaginable. Because the tomb is empty, no matter what happens in the world. No matter what happens in our lives. The tomb is empty, the victory is won. The cross stands as the place of payment, but he doesn’t remain on it, and he doesn’t remain in pain. We don’t just follow through traditions for the sake of Spring, or because it’s a certain time of year, it isn’t a shallow observance just for fun and silly games with eggs and candy. It is a concrete celebration of an event that happened that is everything to us in our lives as Christians. It is the bedrock and foundation of our faith in the life we have in Jesus’ name, and in His ministry, his death, and his resurrection. Hear the crowds chanting and singing “hosanna”. Be in the upper room, and the garden. Stand at the foot of the cross, and hear the tomb slam, and come to the tomb to see the place where he lay. That’s the journey, and this year you are blessed to do it in a unique and different way. But don’t let it diminish your joy or take away from the work of Jesus Christ. He loves you, was born for you, lived for you, suffered for you, died for you, and rose for you. Nothing can change that, nothing can cancel that, and nothing can take that away.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.