

Weekend of the Passion (Palm Sunday) 2020
Matthew 21:1-11; Isaiah 50:4-9a; Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 26:14-27:66
April 4-5, 2020
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

When we're lucky, we have a confirmand who's willing to change the message on our front sign to earn service hours. A while ago at this time of year we were so blessed. I was driving home from downtown and, as always, slowed down a little so I could read (and proofread!) the sign. I nearly jumped the curb and drove right over the sidewalk and lawn when I saw that it read, "Weekend of Passion" instead of "Weekend of **the** Passion." Big difference! I could only imagine the neighbors were picturing us leaping over the pews!

Palm Sunday's more formal name is "Sunday of the Passion." As we begin Holy Week our assigned Gospel is always the Passion story, this year according to St. Matthew. As you know from prior years' experience, we move with dizzying speed from "Hosanna to the Son of David!" to "Crucify him!" to "He is risen!" Likewise, between Ash Wednesday and now our world has changed with dizzying speed. There have been so many monumental changes in our lives happening so fast that we can barely keep up.

This is a Holy Week unlike any other we've experienced. But what better time to remember the Passion, literally the *suffering* of our Lord, than in the midst of the suffering caused by this pandemic? When I checked e-mail earlier today, I found a message from one of our church friends who is director of nursing at a nursing home. The population she and her staff serve are among the most vulnerable of all. Yet nursing homes and assisted living facilities are not high on the list of priorities for those who dispense personal protective equipment. She asked if I could put out the word that her staff is in desperate need of homemade masks, so I'm doing that now. But think about all those circles of suffering: the

elderly residents who can't be visited by family and friends, the staff who fear for their patients' well-being, who fear for their own health, and who therefore fear for the health of everyone they go home to. Similar situation with our doctors, nurses, EMT's, police and firefighters, and transit workers. We also remember everyone else who works in an essential job that requires contact with co-workers and clients. There's more than enough worry to go around!

Pastor Mark & I tune into Governor Cuomo's daily press briefing, when we're able. The governor communicates clearly, doesn't sugarcoat anything, has a plan to address the problems and also has a heart. This Saturday he said, "We just have to get through it." **How**, is the question. Some folks will be tempted to numb out while they ride it out. But if we were to give in to that temptation, we wouldn't be any wiser by the end of it, the world wouldn't be any better on our account, and we'd have to be marked absent, AWOL, from whatever job God intends for us to do. If we're not simply going to try to hold our breath and put our head down till it's all over, the letter to the Hebrews has good advice for us:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. (Hebrews 12:1-3, NRSV)

"Consider him... so that you may not grow weary or lose heart." There's certainly no lack of hostility toward Jesus in the Passion story we just read. His enemies are murderously hostile and his friends are traitorous at worst and cowardly at best. The lesson from Philippians we heard reminds us that Jesus:

... emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.... (Philippians 2:7)

That self-emptying was a choice made out of love. It led to and involved betrayal, arrest, trial, scourging, mocking, crucifixion, a self-emptying so spiritually excruciating that Jesus used the last of His earthly breath to quote Psalm 22: *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* (Psalm 22:1a; Matthew 27:46c)

The pandemic has emptied many things, NOT by our choice:

- It's emptied the sanctuary.
- It's emptied the schools.
- It's emptied many offices.
- It's emptied the parking lots of shopping centers.
- It's emptied restaurants, movie theaters, Broadway.
- It's emptied Main Street, Manasquan, and it's partially emptied the Garden State Parkway.
- It is emptying the wallets and bank accounts of those who have been furloughed or downright let go.
- It's emptying homes of loved ones who have needed to be hospitalized and dinner tables of those who are quarantined and eating in their rooms.
- It's emptied funeral homes and gravesides of all but a minion of mourners.
- It's emptying us of what have been our cock-sure certainty about what tomorrow holds.

BUT: it's also emptied our calendars of multiple commitments that may have left us breathless as we ran from one to the next. It's returned some of us to our homes and given us precious time with our loved ones. One of our church friends in marketing spoke of an aspect of her job that's improved: "People are finally answering the phone and e-mail!" Our live-streaming has put us in touch with many people we don't usually see in the sanctuary but who are very much on our hearts.

We have a holy, powerful, God-given choice about what fills the spaces in our lives and hearts that COVID-19 has emptied. If we have more time than usual, what would the Lord like us to do with it? How should we invest this newfound gift of time? If directly serving our neighbor isn't an option, directly communicating with God through prayer

certainly is! Communing with God through nature is another wonderful possibility. Take a walk and marvel at the world blossoming around us. If you're not able to leave the house, open the window and listen to the birds. Let the beauty of creation lead you to praise of the Creator!

We'll reflect more on our Lord's Passion in this week's Lenten e-devotions, and during worship on Thursday and Friday evening. Meanwhile, along the theme of our Lord's self-emptying, here's a verse about how God can fill whatever void within us the virus has created:

If thou could'st empty all thyself of self
Like to a shell dishabited
Then might He find thee on the ocean's shelf
And say - this is not dead -
And fill thee with Himself, instead.

T.E. Brown

Amen.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham