

Homily/Introduction to Palm Sunday-Passion Sunday
April 14th 2019, St. John's Lutheran Church, Summit, New Jersey

Every year when this Sunday rolls around I ask Pastor Blake and Donna, “Are we going to sing ‘The Palms’” this year? It’s become a bit of an inside joke because every year when I was a child at Janes UMC the choir would begin Palm Sunday singing this anthem. Truth be told, having been a Lutheran for more of my life than I was a Methodist, I much prefer “All Glory Laud and Honor”, so it’s unlikely that we will sing the “Palms” here at St. John’s. But if any of you know it or have a hankering to hear it, you can find decent versions of it on YouTube.

Every year on this day, we begin with excitement and expectation. The crowd that gathered more than 2000 years ago throwing their palm branches and garments in the road, were longing for a Messiah. They were yearning for a conquering hero who would save them from Roman oppression and usher in God’s kingdom when there would be peace and freedom for them, and for all of creation. Many in the crowd hailed Jesus as that very Messiah.

Yet even as we begin this holiest of weeks with excitement, we end it with execution. We move from the celebration of the conquering hero to the crucifixion of Jesus as a common criminal. Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday is a day filled with tension and extremes. We sing our own “Hosannas” just like that very first crowd did. Then, as we listen to the Passion of our Lord, we get more and more disheartened because we know the end of the story signals the death of Jesus. And it’s not a peaceful death either; it’s an excruciating death. The word “excruciating” comes from the same word root as “crucifixion” because it captures the agony that Jesus went through as he was nailed to and suspended from/on the cross.

But this day and this week are also amazing reminders that the story of Jesus is also a story *about* us and *for* us. Our Lord's Passion is a story about a God who is so passionately in love with us human beings that God became one of us. It's a story about a God who identifies with us in all of the beautiful and horrible things that we experience in this life.

It reminds us of a God who goes to weddings and cries at the death of a friend; about a God who feels compassion for the homeless and hungry masses while his disciples want to send them away; about a God who heals outcasts and touches untouchables; about a God who cares for widows and orphans and people with dementia and other diseases; about a God who welcomes children and whose heart is broken even now when little Latinx children are separated from their families at our southern border or turned away from entering this country as asylum seekers.

This is a powerful drama that we are entering into this week. But before we walk with our Lord as he enters into his Passion, it is also important that we remember the injustice and violence that our Christian interpretation of his passion has often meant for our Jewish brothers and sisters.

There's no question that anti-Semitism is on the rise in our country and around the world. In recent months and weeks, hate groups whose anti-semitic acts sometimes stem from their reading of Christian texts, have targeted our Jewish kinfolk. Whether it's the massacre at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh or swastikas scrawled on school lavatories in our Summit and Westfield schools, such acts of violence or intended harm have our Jewish siblings living in fear.

But increasingly, thanks be to God, the Christian church around the world is coming to grips with how much our reading and reliving of the Passion of Christ has led to the horrible oppression of Jewish people over the last two thousand + years. So let's be very clear --- our Jewish brothers and

sisters did not kill Jesus. Crucifixion was a state-sanctioned punishment used to terrorize people so they would stay in line and continue to accept Roman rule. It was the death penalty of its day.

We can't just pretend like these complicated texts don't exist. But when we read them we need to remember that to blame Jesus' death on any one person or group is wrong. The truth is that there is plenty of blame to go around in our Passion narratives, because they highlight the complicity of so many people --- Pilate, the Jewish religious elites, the crowd and Jesus' disciples too.

As we listen to the Passion, sisters and brothers, let us do so remembering that we too are the guilty, wanting to wear the crown of life without bearing the cross of suffering. Jesus is going to Jerusalem this week, and he's going there to die. He's going there to take on all the sin and brokenness of the world so we might have new and abundant life, here and in the hereafter. Let us follow him to Calvary so we might be die with him to sin and death, and be raised with him to resurrected life. Amen.

Pastor Gladys G. Moore