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Palm Sunday Series C 2019

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Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion – April 14

What does one do with this day? The Gospel reading is the passion of the Christ according to St. Luke. If you do the long form it is two whole chapters, and they are long chapters. The shorter version is still 53 verses. After all that a sermon seems redundant. After one reads the Passion narrative, what can you really say other than - Amen?

Indeed, it may sound odd to hear it coming from a guy who writes a weekly study called “Sunday’s Sermon,” but of any Sunday in the Church year, this is probably the one where I might skip the sermon.

Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion of Our Lord presents us with an opportunity to ask ourselves just what is the nature of worship. We all encounter a strong internal pressure to conform to our regular practice. We know what Church is supposed to be, and we will be uncomfortable when it looks/feels/acts differently than we are used to.

It is within that impulse to “return to the normal” we might pause to do a little reflection on just what we understand of worship. What makes what we do on Sunday mornings worship? We often ask what is essential and what is not essential? But I think this is the wrong question, as if there were somehow this minimalist threshold which we have to have in order to call it worship and the rest of it doesn’t matter. I frequently see congregations who have reduced the Eucharistic liturgy to a bare recitation of the words of institution. They have the essential, and the rest has been jettisoned in the interest of time, often to make room for some rather dubious enterprises. (Yes, I wonder if we really need to take five minutes sharing the peace with one another and therefore omit large sections of the prayers which God’s people have been speaking for thousands of years!)

It is Jesus who makes worship what it is. Our worship is an encounter with Him. He speaks there, he listens, he forgives, and he welcomes us, and blesses us, and feeds us.

For Palm Sunday that might mean we think radically differently about our sermons. Is the reading of this grand and massive text really an act of the presence of Christ? We will have our role to play, don’t worry. We pick the music which we might sing and meditate upon before and after this action. Is that where I get to affect the “message”? Is that actually my sermon today?

I am not arguing that sermons are not important. I believe that sermons are in fact one of the primary Christ moments of the Christian life. Christ is a preacher of repentance and forgiveness, he is a great and holy teacher and we experience him in the first person through preaching and teaching. Jesus was a preacher and we look like Him when we do that. But it is not the only aspect of the presence of Christ.

How does the question change for us when we understand that the focus of the worship service is not on the message about Jesus but the focus is on Jesus himself? How does it change the way I plan for these things when I perceive that the parishioner encounters Him and not merely a message which is properly about Him?

We might also wonder about what we are doing with the palm fronds here. It says that the people waved them as Jesus rode in. They were likely emulating something that had happened centuries prior when Alexander the Great rode into the cities of Palestine. He seemed unstoppable as the Persian Empire was in full retreat. The cities often offered no resistance to Alexander but opened their gates and the people came streaming out with leafy branches, palm fronds, in their hands. The idea was that this welcomed the new king, it was a way of acknowledging his rule. It also said, of course, that a hand holding a palm frond was not holding a weapon.

When we do this Palm Sunday, we are making a political statement of sorts. We are acknowledging the righteous rule of Jesus.

If you have not ever done this before – I highly recommend the order of the Palm Sunday procession in the Lutheran Service Book Agenda. It is simple, it is practical, and it is well done. You don't need to change it. Just do what it says.

Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, You sent Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, to take upon Himself our flesh and to suffer death upon the cross. Mercifully grant that we may follow the example of His great humility and patience and be made partakers of His resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

“You sent your Son to take upon himself our flesh and to suffer death upon the cross” The language here is very precise and spoken this way for a reason. We are coming to the very act of salvation and a critical misunderstanding of the incarnation will eviscerate this event of its salvific power, at least theologically speaking it will. Of course Jesus died for lots of folks who haven't a clue about these things and loves them despite their lousily formulated theology.

What is at stake here? It is all in that verb “took our flesh upon himself.” He did not “become” as if the immutable God could become something, he is pure “being” to sound scholastic. Nor did he simply “appear” like some Gnostic Jesus who bears divine wisdom and knowledge but cannot really die. He did not set aside his divine nature and become something other than what he was before. If he did that, then it would have really been just a man on that cross, not our God. This is a rather narrow passage way through which this prayer must walk. Jesus is both God and man, he remains fully God, hence this act has cosmic significance; it forgives the sins of the whole world. He is true man, thus he really can suffer and die, experiencing a real death, real pain, genuine anguish.

If you lose either side of that God and Man equation you really lose the very forgiveness of sins. If this being on the cross is not a man, he cannot really die our death. If he is only a man and not God, it is just another creature dying on that cross and we cannot say that his death has cosmic relevance. The formulation which is agreed upon is that the second person of the Trinity, the Logos, took up to himself the nature of a human being, fully human, yet without setting aside his divine nature. How exactly that worked is a mystery which I won't even try to explain. You might

get an idea of how this would work if you imagined being fully human and fully a squirrel, at the same time.

The prayer then directs our attention to the very human virtues which the incarnate Christ displays, patience and humility in the face of his suffering. Being united to him in sacrament and Word and Spirit, we are imbued with his character and virtues.

But then, being made one with him in his patient and humble suffering and death, we are also one with him in the glorious resurrection. Not because we somehow earned that through our suffering, but because being united to him we are united to him.

Processional Gospel John 12:12-19

¹²The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" ¹⁴And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written,

¹⁵ "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!"

¹⁶ His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him. ¹⁷ The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. ¹⁸The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign. ¹⁹So the Pharisees said to one another, "You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him."

What's preachable in here?

- 1. The real Messiah has come, and he has not looked like we expected him to look. The Pharisees who imagined that he was a political revolutionary were wrong about him. But we should not be too hard on them. After all, everyone at the time was wrong about Jesus, even his own disciples. Are we the Pharisees who stand on the sidelines looking for someone who fits our mold? Are we ready for the Jesus who does come to us? The Jesus who helps folks under the bridge may not fit my middle class value set. Would we join the crowds on Friday morning in the square outside of Pilate's palace calling for this strange man's death? Would his kingdom and its demands upon us have been just too dangerous for us as well? Tyler Wiggs-Stevenson suggests that we often want a tame or domesticated Jesus whom we can keep on a leash. I highly recommend his book: "The World is Not Ours To Save." He suggest that we have imagined that God is a pet, but we find to our consternation that the real Jesus is not on the other end of that leash. It appears that the enemies of Jesus and the donkey are the only ones who really get Jesus right. The enemies note that the whole world has gone after him and the donkey simply submits to his command.*

2. *The Real Messiah has come, and we are among the crowds out there waving our palm fronds welcoming a Messiah we completely misunderstand. Did any of them have an idea that the real messiah would end up on a cross by Friday at 9 AM? Do any of us have an idea of whom we welcome when we sing the Sanctus on Sundays? Do we come to Sunday not expecting cross, but a theology of glory? Do we imagine that Jesus will do his work among us by taking away all our suffering or do we expect him to give meaning and intensity to our suffering?*
3. *Jesus in the world. Jesus uses the expectations and political machinations of the world which is around him. He deliberately chooses this moment because Jerusalem is filled with people. This same Jesus is still at work today. He called Nebuchadnezzar his servant to work judgment on the people of God; he brought in Cyrus to restore what Nebuchadnezzar had done. Neither one was a believer. He will use the Romans to kill him and work the very salvation of the world. In the midst of these ancient corrupt realms there was Daniel running the show, and Nehemiah who was the cup bearer to the Persian king. Jesus is still using the things of this world – the broken institutions, structures, and society to work his good. We cannot back off this world and say it is not spiritual enough. Quietism and withdrawing from the world misses what Jesus is doing in this reading and today. This sermon questions what sort of a God we worship. We expect him to ride into a corrupt situation and fix it. But Jesus doesn't fix it, he gets chewed up by the very corrupt regime of the Roman Empire and its pathetic little Jewish client state.*
4. *Fear not, your King is coming! The prophet and John, and others in their tellings of this event, are trying to tell us something about Jesus that takes away fear. The Pharisees are terrified, the Romans fear for their power, but to us comes a message of fear not. We don't have to worry about the demons that Jesus fought against in this week. The biggest questions are answered for us because Jesus has ridden into Jerusalem that day long ago and on a cross answered them for us. This is a good sermon to prepare people for Holy Week observances.*
5. *Hear and Believe – the crowds are out there greeting Jesus because they have heard and believed a message. The Pharisees are discomfited because people believe. And the resurrection of Lazarus is pre-figurative of Jesus' own resurrection. Is John saying something about us who have heard and believed? Does Lazarus' resurrection foretell Jesus? Does Jerusalem and the cross make this resurrection which Lazarus enjoyed something that is universal, that the crowds experience as well?*
6. *After he was glorified, they understood. John's use of term glorify really focuses the reader not on the ascension or the resurrection or the things we might normally associate with glory. John focuses the attention of the reader on the crucifixion of Jesus. At several points in the Gospel he says that Jesus will be glorified in the cross. It is only on the other side of the crucifixion that they and we get to see the real meaning of what it means to call Jesus a king. He wears a crown of thorns.*

7. *The Whole World is Going After Him! It is interesting that the Pharisees get this right about Jesus. They are wrong about him but their words are unintentionally prophetic. The crowds don't understand him but they acclaim him as king. They are wrong about him in many respects but their words are true. Their understanding of Christ is off the mark, but their words are spot-on correct. Jesus is the King. The whole world is going after him. Paul says that every knee shall bow and every tongue confess (Philippians 2) which is the Epistle reading for this day. This might make a very neat tie-in for the reading.*

If you have sufficient attendance at your Good Friday observances, you might want to simply make this Palm Sunday, in which case, this would serve as your Gospel lesson and likely as your sermon text. Remember that the relatively recent addition of the passion reading to the Palm Sunday service was in response to the reality that most folks are not attending Good Friday and hence not experiencing the Christ on the cross and only experiencing the Christ of Easter morning. This has cheapened and diminished Easter until it has largely become a matter of new clothes, Easter bunnies and egg hunts. This is an attempt to remember that Easter is a celebration of Jesus resurrection from his death on a cross.

Here we see Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. This is a loaded image and text which tells us much about Jesus. He is totally in control of this situation, he has also planned for this. He has arranged for this donkey to be available for him. What is more, we see Jesus the master of the public relations message.

At the feast of Passover, the city of Jerusalem in the late second temple period was a maelstrom of nationalistic and religious fervor. Paul Maier estimates the city swelled to five times its usual population, from 50,000 to nearly a quarter of a million people. The Romans were no fools, they knew that if the irascible Jews were going to revolt, that revolt would likely begin during Passover when the city was filled with religious types all looking for a Messiah. Thus Pilate had scraped together every legionary he could find so he could sit on this boiling pot.

It is also important that normally Pilate hated Jerusalem, he thought it a smelly and dirty place filled with religious zealots whom he did not understand. He was a pure politician in an impossible situation. The Jews were largely considered ungovernable, and the Romans did not understand them nor did they want to. You might simply consider the poor Marine or Army soldier who found himself watching a procession of Shia Moslems self-flagellating on their way to some holy site in Iraq and you would likely get an idea of what the Romans thought of the Jews.

Jesus rides over the Mount of Olives on a donkey. This is a masterful piece of public relations, even a sort of theatrical event. Inside the Jewish tradition the Mount of Olives has become ground zero for the arrival of the messiah. This is why if you go there today the hill is covered with tombs, and it was at the time of Jesus too. It was thought that the Messiah would arrive on the Mount of Olives and the resurrection of the dead would begin right there. Thus, it was prime real estate for burials. It is rather interesting that this extra-biblical Jewish idea was actually

right. Jesus was surely buried in a newly cut tomb in the cemetery complex which is on the Mount of Olives. The resurrection of the dead did indeed begin right there.

Jesus' decision to ride a donkey is also significant, and this is biblical. Moses had warned the Israelites about a king in Deuteronomy 17 who would have horses and enslave them. Thus the kings of Judah often rode donkeys. The Romans, of course, did not bother to understand this, they saw another crazy Jewish guy on a donkey and wondered what all the fuss was about. The Jews on the other hand went berserk when Jesus did this. He was riding a donkey, just like David. What is more the prophet Zephaniah whom John quotes as do the other Gospel writers also saw a day when the anointed Son of David (Messiah) would ride a donkey.

Thus the pilgrims who have seen Jesus miracles are all expecting him to usher in the kingdom. The Pharisees seem to still be reserving judgment, but they are clearly worried about this. The priests and Sadducees who are resident in Jerusalem are not happy. The Romans are clueless. It is exactly the political situation, fraught with tensions and problems, in which Jesus will have the opportunity to teach for a few more days in the temple courts but by Friday they will hang him on a cross, just as the Passover lambs are being slaughtered.

This is a picture of Jesus the master tactician, the man who is in control of this complex and wild city. The plan is all coming together. It will turn out like no one expects, with him rising from a death by crucifixion, defeating the Roman imperial machine, Jewish zealotry, and even the grave itself.

We wave our palm fronds on this day and welcome him to our worship services as well. It is Christ we encounter there, you see. He is really there. This is why we remember the words of these crowds every time we sing the Sanctus before the Sacrament of the altar. You might profitably preach this sermon simply as an expansion on that little liturgical song which begins with Isaiah's call vision and concludes with this acclamation of praise on Palm Sunday. Every time we come to this rail, kneel and receive this sacrament, we are here again. We are rejoicing in the coming of Christ into this moment, this corner of his kingdom, my life, my heart, my mind, me.

Deuteronomy 32:36-39

³⁶For the LORD will vindicate his people
and have compassion on his servants,
when he sees that their power is gone
and there is none remaining, bond or free.
³⁷Then he will say, 'Where are their gods,
the rock in which they took refuge,
³⁸who ate the fat of their sacrifices
and drank the wine of their drink offering?
Let them rise up and help you;
let them be your protection!

³⁹"See now that I, even I, am he,
and there is no god beside me;
I kill and I make alive;
I wound and I heal;
and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.

Is that last phrase law or gospel? Why? Do we read this in light of Romans 8, where nothing can separate us from the love of God, we are in his hands. Or do we read it as Moses seems to be singing about here and the earlier verses seem to suggest, that once God has his grip on you, there is no one to help you at that point?

What does it mean to suggest that we might preach that line both ways? Can we only see the gospel side of this equation in the light of Christ.

These words come from the Song of Moses which he sings at the end of Deuteronomy. He has just given his final instructions, he is about to climb mount Nebo and see the Promised Land and die. This song goes on for a very long 40+ verses. The words right before are a classic bit in which Moses tells them that they will surely screw this whole thing up after he is gone, but he tells them to post these commandments somewhere where they can see them so perhaps they will repent and God will restore them.

Here in the song he recounts how that will work. The people will rebel but God will be faithful to the covenant. He will take them away from their land, reduce them to nothing, and then restore them to the place from which they had been driven, when they cry out to the Lord.

Except we are reading this on Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday. This is not only about the people of Israel, it is also about the nation reduced to one, it is about Jesus. God kills and makes alive, when he is weak, God will see his plight and restore him. When there is none remaining, bond or free, when their strength is gone, God will restore them.

And of course, that is exactly what he has done to us when he restores Jesus. When we were weak and impotent before the power of death and sin and devil, God intervened for us, placing himself in harm's way, restoring us when all seemed lost.

Psalm 118:19-29 or Psalm 31:9-16

¹⁹ Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the LORD.

²⁰ This is the gate of the LORD;
the righteous shall enter through it.

²¹ I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.

²² The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone.

- ²³This is the LORD's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.
- ²⁴This is the day that the LORD has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
- ²⁵Save us, we pray, O LORD!
O LORD, we pray, give us success!
- ²⁶Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!
We bless you from the house of the LORD.
- ²⁷The LORD is God,
and he has made his light to shine upon us.
Bind the festal sacrifice with cords,
up to the horns of the altar!
- ²⁸You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God; I will extol you.
- ²⁹Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever!

Philippians 2:5-11

⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

We have spent a great deal of time in the book of Philippians in Lent, which is a little odd since this letter is essentially an essay on the nature of Christian joy, not exactly your typical Lenten theme. However, it makes tremendous sense in that Paul's joy was a joy which no trouble or affliction could take away, his joy was the joy of the resurrection lived out in a very Lenten world.

The key to Paul's joy was a radically redefined human being, a human life with Jesus in the middle of it. That means I am not in the center of my life. For Paul that was a position he described as humility. It is essential to remember that Paul is not really exhorting his congregation to attain to some humility or to be something they were not. He was describing something which was simply true and he was using the humility word as that description. Jesus is humble in that he serves the whole of humanity. His humility is not to be found in his self-deprecation. His humility is found in the fact that on the cross he serves the whole of humanity. He lowers self in service. Jesus' mind, ours in Christ, that mind has come to take its place in us.

Philippians 1:6 is important to remember here. He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion on the day of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The difference is significant. If I make myself humble, in a perverse sense, I now have something to boast about, thus destroying my humility! The humility of which Paul speaks is a humility which is created by the act of God. God has placed us into this humble position, this reality in which we are not the center but are in an orbit around the true sun, that is Jesus. He completes this good work which He has initiated in our lives. We are not there, but God will bring us there.

Here in this passage we get the mechanism for this. Paul encountered this Jesus on a road to Damascus when he was sure that he had things pretty well under control in his relationship with God. That was all turned upside down and this very Jesus whom he persecuted became the center of his world. Likewise this same Jesus has encountered us in His Word and in this Sacrament, and now our world is also re-oriented toward Christ.

His profound act of humility in the passion, crucifixion, death and burial which we hear this day is the very act which transforms us and this world for us. He has been given the name above every name, the highest of places, by his Father for his self-sacrifice on the behalf of the whole world. That mind which went on that journey now occupies us, that Spirit whom he has poured out empowers us, that human Jesus defines us. This is not some act of my will, as I grit my teeth and squint my eyes in some vain attempt to make myself “humbler than thou.” This is God defining who I am: a sinner for whom the Son of God has died.

This little section of Philippians is a hymn, a song which the first century Christians were singing. Paul quotes it because it was familiar to the folks in Philippi. This is interesting because they were singing songs about the nature of Christ and the path he took in our salvation. He went from heaven’s throne to a grave, back up to heaven’s throne.

Paul uses the hymn however as part of an exhortation to let this mind of Christ dwell in them, to be the sort of people whom this Jesus has changed and defined. The preacher who reads the entire account of Jesus’ passion, death, and burial may well find exactly what he needs here. Paul has summed it up and described for us what this does to the human being who has encountered this Jesus. It leaves us humble. It leaves us looking a little like the one who went on this great journey, perhaps son-burned is the way to think about it in a pun. Now I am one of those who confess this Jesus to be my Lord, I have been made into one of those creatures for whom he has died.

Luke 22:1-23:56 (abbreviated option: Luke 23:1-56) I have not printed this out for us here, I have, however, given you a copy of this with suggested hymn verses inserted which I would contend is another form of a sermon.

Sermon Ideas *I have written two sorts of sermon ideas today. The first one is for the congregation that will not celebrate the passion reading today, but will reserve that for Friday.*

This sermon will focus on the Palm Sunday reading. The second sermon will focus on the Epistle reading and will be predicated upon the congregation hearing the passion narrative. Because of the length of this reading, the sermon is envisioned to be much shorter.

1. Hosanna in the Highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! (The Palm Sunday Sermon – That the hearer would believe and rejoice that this same Jesus who once rode into Jerusalem to suffer and die for the sins of the whole world hears our acclamations of Hosanna as he comes into this place to bring us the fruits of that cross.)

The law of this sermon is really focusing on the fact that the events of Holy Week and the Passion of our Lord Jesus seem like they are so distant from us. We wave our palm fronds and sing our songs, but what does Jesus have to do with a world of iPhones, computers, hi-tech wars, and the problems I face today. He did not need health insurance nor did he seem to be terribly concerned about his 401k or the price of gasoline. Jesus seems to be in another world, not this world.

But our worship services, on a regular basis, make a contrary assertion, and that assertion is found right in this Gospel reading. The very same Jesus who rode into that ancient city of Jerusalem also rides into our lives and our hearts and minds right here. He is not absent from us but present, intruding upon our world and its concerns as he takes up his place in our flesh through the sacrament of the altar, through the fellowship of the believers whom he has gathered here, through the Word which we hear, through waters of this baptism by which we were admitted to this fellowship.

Here we partake of the body he broke on the cross and the blood which he shed there. It was body he broke and blood he shed because he cares deeply for this moment in his creation, for his people of this time and place. While the incarnation happened long ago, it is not a done thing. Jesus has come to us today. And so with the folks of ancient Jerusalem we sing the same words: Hosanna – blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

That is why the song we might often sing before we partake of the Sacrament is the very song the pilgrims sang when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on that donkey. Today he rides in on humble means of a meal, a chalice and a plate which can hardly contain the Lord of heaven and earth and yet by his gracious presence do exactly that.

And he does not stay in this building, but uniting himself with us, he walks out that door bodily with us, and through us would enter this world of ipods and cell phones, still feeding the hungry and befriending the lonely, but with words of comfort for the lonely of nursing homes and forgiveness for every sinner, no matter how creatively they have arrived in that condition.

Jesus still rides in.

Should we sing “Ride On, Ride On in Majesty”?

2. They did not understand these things but donkey did (Palm Sunday Sermon – That the Holy Spirit would so lead and guide the hearer that he/she looks to Jesus and sees his/her eternal king.)

This sermon would build on the first two ideas we developed under the Processional Gospel. We should not assume that we understand Jesus. The religious types of Jesus day clearly got him wrong. The crowds seem to have thought he would be a revolutionary. The disciples even are noted for not understanding. It would seem that the only one who really got Jesus was the donkey who humbly carried him into Jerusalem. He simply obeyed his master.

What sort of a Jesus do we expect? Do we expect a Jesus who will pat us on the head for being Lutheran and rain down condemnation on the non-denominational church down the street, or at least not as much praise for them as for the purity of the Lutherans? Do we expect a Jesus who comes graciously to us? That can be hard to take.

The world looks at Jesus and struggles with him as well. They look at world around us and wonder what sort of a king is He? How can war, famine, and disease still ravage us so? He doesn't seem to be the king they were looking for. But these are not just the questions which the world asks. We ask them as well.

The good news in this sermon might be that Jesus died for all the people who did not understand. Jesus prayed for the men who pounded the nails into his hands and feet. He is not judging us on our understanding. But he also loves understanding. The Disciples found that their hearts and minds were opened to seeing Jesus differently. He also has led us to see him today as the one who really is our king of another sort. The world is following after him as the Pharisees notice. He really is our king whose rule we welcome and whose peace we proclaim. He is the one who has revolutionized our lives, cast down the tyrants of sin, death, and devil, and leads us to feasting and joy. It is not what the world then expected nor is it the sort of story that we would have planned and written. But it is much better than those expectations and all our plans. Jesus has come. They did not understand, but he came anyway. Jesus has come, and he bestows on us his kingdom and crown. We, like those disciples on the other side of the cross, get to see him now.

3. “They heard the story of Lazarus” (That the Spirit of God would empower the hearer to entrust him/herself to Resurrection which Christ brings to all through his own death and resurrection.)

This sermon would have the hearer believe that this Jesus who rides into Jerusalem comes to answer our most profound questions and fears. He comes to contend with death. It was the question of the first century which brought the crowds out to see Jesus and welcome him as a king that day. They had heard about what Jesus had done with Lazarus and it excited them.

The meager promises of supplements and medications today loosen our wallets to the tune of millions, even billions of dollars every year in this country, and that is just to

extend this pitiable life by a short while. We buy gym memberships and exercise and do all sorts of things. I am not saying this is bad. Exercise and healthy diet can be very good to do.

Behind all this is really the same question – death. It drove the people of Jerusalem to welcome this Jesus. We know how this will play out. The Pharisees who are afraid will rile up the crowds. They will haul Jesus before the governor, they will hang him on a cross come Friday. Jesus will die.

All my supplements and medications, my exercise and diet will fail. I will die. Life will slip through my fingers. I cannot stop it. If I thought there was an answer to this question coming over the next hill I would be out there with palm fronds and throwing my cloak down on the road in front of that guy too. We all would.

Today, as we come to Holy Week, we cast our vision forward toward its paschal conclusion, Easter. Jesus is that answer still. The folks who welcomed him those many years ago probably did not understand that his solution went through cross, tomb, death and grave. But like the disciples who were befuddled, in his glory, we can connect the dots and see. This Jesus who raised Lazarus has come to raise us all!

Jesus is the cause of life! Come to the rest of this week and watch life itself unfold before our eyes. It is not what we expect. It is no magic procedure, we don't control it, we don't manipulate it, nor is there any regimen of spiritual exercises which will accomplish this. It will take the Son of God shedding blood, a victim on the cross, who will die and rise again to break the power of death.

4. Obedient unto death, even death on a cross (The Passion Sunday Sermon – that the hearer would be humbled by the gracious act of God, perceiving self and whole world through the lens of Christ's sacrifice for all.)

The law of this sermon is simply that we can and often do live as though none of this has happened. The Gospel is that Christ has confronted us once more with his passion, death, and resurrection this spring, and in so doing has reoriented our entire lives.

This is one of those times when the Law and Gospel are perhaps best spoken with one word, much as Jesus confronted and comforted Pharisees and tax collectors with the parable of the prodigal a few weeks ago. Jesus blows all of our old self-centered preconceptions right out of the water today. How shallow they appear. God, at whose word this world and universe sprang into being has walked Calvary's bitter hill, he has suffered shameful death, lain cold in a tomb that he might redeem us. In so doing he has redefined our whole lives. We are not our own. He has changed everything. We are his. Our lives and this whole world are defined by his mission of self-sacrifice and humble service.

For the person whose life has not fully lived that mind of Christ, and that includes all, this will be a cruel blow, a crushing truth. We are out of step with God.

But the crush and the care are all bound together here. Notice the last verse of the OT lesson. For Christ did not humble himself for the ones who got it right. Who could be a better witness of that than Paul himself. He had been persecuting the people of God, in his own words completely missing the point of Jesus. But now, transformed by an encounter with this Jesus, his life revolves around Christ. That same Jesus is here today to reorder our maladjusted lives as well. He who began a good work in us continues to bring that good work to the completion which all will see on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ does not simply tell us to get ourselves in proper shape. He leaps into that center of our lives, dies our death. By taking that place, we are cast from the center of our lives, pushed into an orbit around him, our whole lives are reshaped, now like him we are the servants.

5. He Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried (That the Spirit of God would present these creedal words anew to the hearers, inspiring both awe and love for God.

Alternate title if you are using the Nicene Creed – “Who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven...”

Based on the Epistle lesson, this sermon might simply be an exposition of the second article of the Apostle’s Creed, especially the line “Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried.”

Paul was quoting a familiar song to the folks in Philippi. Perhaps we want to quote the familiar words of the creed to our parishioners in the same vein. We often rush right over these words, but this might the occasion to slow down and think about them this year. Here the law might be that we have so often read/memorized/spoken those words that we have lost just what they mean.

Christ comes today to give meaning and meat to those words which are on our lips and in our hearts and minds. Our lives are defined by what we say. Creation itself is different because the Lord of Creation has suffered within it.