

## **Palm Sunday 2021 B**

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

March 28, 2021

Mark 15:1-39: Philippians 2:5-11

Many of Jesus' disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.  
So Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?'  
Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom can we go?  
You have the words of eternal life.'

Dear Friends:

Welcome to Holy Week. The days of Holy Week are an occasion when non-Christians and lapsed Christians and non-practicing Christians might actually take notice of Christianity and the Church. Christianity gets a lot of negative publicity. Much of it self-inflicted. And with Christmas, the holiday season with its commerce and its tidal wave of festivities, Christianity gets swept up into the wave with Rudolf and Santa Claus, the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade, the winter solstice, ginger bread men, and Auld Lang Syne. Christmas without Christianity is possible because most people think they already know the story.

But Holy Week is weird and different and unfamiliar. I actually enjoy watching the mass media trying to explain it. Christmas is so easy, coming on the solar calendar on December 25. But Easter, on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox, [is] seldom perfectly aligned with Passover, [is] never aligned between the Orthodox East and the Catholic West. The actions of the Church during Holy Week would be unusual, possibly disturbing to outsiders. Palm Sunday, for centuries and centuries, involves palm processions in public. Down the street, around the block. A public testimony of the Christian faith. This pandemic year, we are giving away our large decorative palm fronds to anyone who wants to affix a palm frond to the front door of their apartment, or on the gate or fencepost, or on their mailbox. It's the Holy Week version of a Christmas wreath. But it's not Christmas. A palm frond is a public confession of Christian faith and Christian identity. Holy Week weird. Twenty years ago, Austin, Texas came up with the expression, "Keep Austin Weird." We don't want to be like everybody else. Within three years, Oregon got, "Keep Portland Weird." And soon, "Keep Louisville Weird." And then, "Keep Indianapolis Weird." Holy Week is what keeps Christianity weird, in the best sense. Not like Christmas. Not assimilated, not easily understood, not easily dismissed.

One of the ways Holy Week is weird is our use of the word "passion." "The passion of our Lord Jesus Christ." That's very confusing. What was Jesus so passionate about? Was it garlic? Some people are passionate about garlic. Passion is a Latin word that means ordeal. It's a verb that means that you experience something difficult, you undergo something, you endure. Passion was the Latin past participle form of that. Meaning something that was endured. A terrible illness for example would have been a passion. Suffering the loss of a child would have been a

passion. Being arrested and tortured would have been a passion. An ordeal. And that's what it meant a thousand years ago, when the Church started talking about the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now a few hundred years ago, that's when the idea of an overwhelming emotion, such as rage or grief or zeal, came to be called a passion. Have you ever had an emotion take control of your life? It is an ordeal, an affliction, something to endure. Even good emotions, like love, can be like a possession. And even though in contemporary English we may speak about a passion for garlic or a passion for Mozart or a passion for another human being, we nevertheless usually are speaking of something that has taken over us. Taken control and deprived us of our usual common sense and free will. So passion means something different today. But it's still related to that original sense of an ordeal, a struggle which one endures.

So passion of our Lord Jesus Christ does not specifically refer to his death on the cross. And it does not really refer to his resurrection. It refers to the whole ordeal. Betrayal by Judas and denial by the rest. Religious hypocrisy. Lies. Uncaring bureaucracy. Loss of dignity. Grotesque torture. The whole ordeal. Endured.

What makes Holy Week weird and frankly, what makes the Christian religion weird, is that because the Son of God underwent passion, we are not alone in our passions. We are not alone in our ordeals. We are not alone in our trials. The weirdness of Holy Week is that we accompany Christ in his sorrow, so that we can know him accompanying us in our sorrows. In the great second reading today, Paul says that "*Though Jesus was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself.*" He could have sat on a heavenly throne, but he gave that up, he "emptied himself," in order to be in companionship with suffering humanity. Easter Sunday celebrates a victory. Everybody loves a victory, and hopes to take part in a victory. But Holy Week is about God's presence in suffering. And it's God's presence in suffering that makes victory possible.

The wisest Christians understand that. That is why they take part in Holy Week. Because the wisest Christians are the weirdest Christians. Keep Christianity weird. Amen.