

**A Sermon by the Reverend John S. McDuffie**  
**The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday**  
**April 5, 2020**

Isaiah 50:4-9a  
Psalm 31:9-16  
Philippians 2:5-11  
Matthew 21:1-11  
Matthew 26:14-27:66

This is always for me the strangest of Sundays in the Church year. I have warm childhood memories from the 1950's of sunny April mornings on Palm Sunday, in the Presbyterian Church of my youth. It was a celebration of Christian triumphalism: King Jesus was coming to town, and it was a nice day for everybody to dress up!

However, our lectionary framers have combined Jesus' ceremonial entry into Jerusalem with his subsequent passion and death. Within minutes, we go from glad "Hosannas", to "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

In churches where I have served, we have customarily read the Passion narrative with parts taken by various people in the congregation. For me this has always served as a vehicle with which to invite people into considering the question, "Where do you find yourself in the story?" Have you ever been like Peter, promising to remain faithful, and then running away in the time of trial? Might you identify with the staid religious establishment, the high priest and scribes quick to condemn Jesus as being out of bounds in his faith and practice, and thereby dangerous? Could you be with the political power brokers like Pilate, seeing Jesus as a threat to societal norms and the political order? Might you be an innocent passer-by, like Simon of Cyrene; or could you be one of the women, watching and weeping? Or, God forbid, might you be like Judas, letting down your best friend in some deadly way?

Having said all that, however, perhaps it is best in these trying days that we simply focus on Jesus himself. This is not the portrait of Jesus that we will see on Good Friday in the Gospel of John, as he serenely presides over the judgement of humanity from his lonely wooden tower. This Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew dies in extraordinary suffering, in dereliction, crying out "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" I invite us to draw near and gaze upon him.

Years ago, in the middle year of my seminary education, I sat in the Virginia Seminary library on a cloudy, gloomy March afternoon. It was a time of great difficulty for me. The stress of giving up a former career, moving my family to a new location, forcing my wife who had been a happy stay-at-home Mom into joining the workforce, living through the death of my father in the previous year, and being uncertain about whether I would ever pass muster and actually graduate and be ordained, had all caught up with me. I felt despair about who I was and what I was doing. I looked up from the chair where I was seated and saw something that I hadn't noticed before—on a display board was a reproduction of a painting of the crucifixion of Christ, but it was quite unlike any I had ever seen. I walked over and gazed upon it. Jesus was clearly in abject agony--

his arms were distended, and his body was covered with terrible sores. His face conveyed suffering as I had not seen depicted elsewhere. I stared at the painting for several minutes, and then took my belongings and went home. I was alone in our apartment at that time of the day, and I sat in our bedroom—the image of Christ in the painting would not leave me, and at last I simply broke down and began weeping, but as I did so, I felt Jesus right next to me. I remember saying out loud, “You know more than anyone else exactly how I feel!” Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen, as the old spiritual goes—“Nobody knows, but Jesus.”

I don’t have that painting to show you this morning, but I ask you to go find it on the internet and gaze upon it today. Some of you may already recognize that I’m talking about the painting by Matthias Grunewald, which is part of a triptych painted in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century for the Monastery of St. Anthony in Isenheim, in Alsace. It is now on display in a museum in Alsace. The monastery specialized in hospital work, and the monks were noted for their treatment of plague sufferers, as well as those suffering from skin diseases. As horrific as this depiction of the crucifixion is, it was intended to show patients that Jesus understood and shared their afflictions.

It took me sometime in my spiritual development to realize that suffering is not where Jesus intends for us to always remain in our lives!—that’s what the resurrection is really all about—that is, moving forward in hope. But for now, on this Passion Sunday, we might just stay here with Jesus at his death, and know that he is with us in this scary moment in our history. I wept years ago on that cold March afternoon while I was in my seminary studies; and I don’t know about you, but as I watch the evening news right now, I find myself weeping again, most every night: for those who are dying alone, separated from their loved ones; for those who have already given their lives in trying to help others; for those in our allied health professions who are at risk and exhausted on the front lines of confronting the pandemic; and for those who are out of work, and wondering how they’ll pay the bills. And, sadly, we’re told that it’s going to continue to get worse before it gets better.

Let us invite Jesus Christ to look at all of this with us right now, even as he invites us to gaze upon him. He is the one who, taking the form of a servant, emptied himself, even unto death on a cross. God’s love has been poured out in the world, in Christ’s suffering and death, and this is indeed the central mystery of our faith. There is no triumphant King Jesus today, going from success to success; instead, I’m reminded of some of the wonderful words from the poem “Love’s Endeavor, Love’s Expense”, by the English priest W.H. Vanstone:

*Drained is love in making full,  
Bound in setting others free,  
Poor in making many rich,  
Weak in giving power to be.*

*Therefore he who shows us God  
Helpless hangs upon a tree;  
And the nails and crown of thorns  
Tell of what God’s love must be.  
Here is God: no monarch he,  
Throned in easy state to reign;*

*Here is God, whose arms of love  
Aching, spent, the world sustain.*

Good Friday is coming, as we begin Holy Week; but, in the fullness of time, Sunday's on its way. Amen.