

THE REFORMED CHURCH OF CANAJOHARIE
CANAJOHARIE, NY



2021

HOLY WEEK DEVOTIONS

March 28, 2021

Palm Sunday

READ: John 12:21-21

As we begin Holy Week we start with Palm Sunday. John tells us that it was an organic spontaneous demonstration. It wasn't planned or set up by the disciples. They didn't understand what the meaning of it all was. The other gospels tell us that Jesus sent a couple of them ahead to make arrangements. John merely tells us he got hold of a donkey to ride. The crowd came out to see the man who had raised Lazarus from the dead. It was what they call a Moment.

After the fact, John ties it to the prophecy of Zechariah. In chapter 9:9 the arrival of God's anointed king happens as he rides into the city on a donkey. Jesus is making a statement and taking that mantle for himself. He is letting the crowd know who he is, if they can hear him.

So who do you think Jesus is for you? Does he enter into your life as the King, your king? Did he enter your life through stories you heard on a hot night in August when you were a child? Has he become your king? Is his entrance confused with hopping bunnies and chicks and presents distributed by a jolly old elf?

If you're not sure, don't lose heart. Jesus' own disciples didn't quite understand the symbolism of the donkey. It was only after his death and resurrection that they understood and made the connection. And that is where we need to start, maybe. When we think of Jesus, we need to think of him first of all as the one whose death and resurrection has given you eternal life, and for that reason, we shout out "Hosanna", God saves.

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, please come into my heart. Enter in as the King of my life. Help me understand what that means as I walk with you through Holy Week. AMEN.

March 29, Monday

The Problem of Judas

READ: John 12:1-8

We're going to step back a day, to think about the fly in the ointment, the necessary evil of the whole event, Judas. I just heard a podcast by John Piper (Ask Pastor John) that answers the question, if Jesus knew that Judas would betray him, why did he call him to follow in the first place? And if it was all in God's plan that Jesus was going to be betrayed, why is Judas in trouble for it?

John tells us that Judas was a thief. The incident with Mary Magdalene is the great reveal of the heart of Judas. He puts on a good show of caring about the poor, but John, who was there, knows that Judas wants the money she spent for himself. As Piper says, the most notorious crime in history was about the love Judas had for money.

Not that Judas is singular. Jesus is singular, the only begotten son of God. In the economy of God it had to happen with Jesus as was planned. The betrayal was the way to get Jesus to the cross where he could suffer and complete the act of salvation for us all through his death. But Judas was still Judas. His greed for the money spent on the ointment was the prefigure of the price he received at the hands of the chief priests to betray Jesus. But remember why this all had to happen in the first place. Jesus had to die to reunite us with God, because we ourselves were like Judas, self-seeking, hypocritical, and sinful. Judas' crime was ordained and used by God. But his heart was still the way it was. Here we get to the rarified air of God's plans and human responsibility. We sin and fall short, and God gathers it into his plans. And yet we are still responsible. We still need a savior.

PRAYER: Father, I don't always understand your plans. I don't understand about your sense of fairness. I wonder about Judas. But I know that I myself have sin in my heart, and I need your grace to live with you. I pray you will help me live in trust and gratitude for the work of Jesus on the cross. AMEN.

Tuesday, March 30

What of the Leaders?

READ: John 12:27-43

The other opponents of Jesus, and the ones who held the day that Friday, were the religious leaders of the people, the Scribes and Pharisees. These were the ones who should know better. They had the scriptures, they studied them constantly. They should have recognized the Messiah when he was among them. His life was a walking fulfillment of scripture. So why didn't they get it, why didn't they see who was among them?

There are a couple of answers that make sense to us, and one ultimate reason that we need to get right from God's mouth, so to speak. The obvious one is that they were jealous of their power and authority and didn't wish to share it with the upstart from Galilee. People in authority grow used to the experience and don't want to share it. The Pharisees and Scribes, being human beings, were no different. Just try to break into the leadership of the DAR or the Fire department, and you may get a flavor of the sensation. There are lots of people who have invested a lot of effort into getting up the ladder of leadership. They don't like to make room for others.

Secondly, it is clear that what they thought the Messiah would be like was not what they saw in Jesus. They saw a conquering freedom fighter. They were looking for freedom from foreign rule, and perfect, cleansed worship of God in the temple. Jesus didn't fit their bill, even though they did know their scriptures. We read what we want into the word, sometimes, and they may have had such a firm view of what it meant to be the Messiah that anyone who deviated would not make the mark for them.

But John tells us that there is another reason. He quotes the passages from Isaiah to tell us that it was in the plan of God that they would not believe. The first is from Isaiah 53, the introduction to the song of the suffering servant. The second is from the commission of Isaiah in chapter 6, where God tells Isaiah to go tell the people the word, but that they would not believe or accept. Imagine that kind of job, to succeed by failing. Speak, but they will not listen. But they will then have no excuse, because they will have been told.

It was in the plans of God that the leaders would not believe in Jesus, and that they would send him to his death. And then the will of God would be done. Like with Judas, we are seeing that people can choose against God and find that his plan is furthered by their sin. This is because God is who he is. Once again we are faced with the idea that the providence of God is such that even bad threads can be woven into the loom of his will.

PRAYER: Father, your will is not always understandable for us. We are left with trust, trust that your will for the world is good, not by our standard, but your own. Help us to walk in the faith that your will is for our best, and for the salvation of the world. Help me not to judge those who do not believe, but give thanks that you have called me to Jesus. AMEN.

March 31, 2021

Servant Leadership

READ: John 13:1-17

Every year around this time a professor at Seminary would get us in a circle and have us take off our socks and shoes and wash each other's feet. The bowl would go around the circle, each person washing the person next in line with the same water, the same soap, the same towel. Are you grossed out? What was the point? Simply that we learn to see ourselves as Jesus saw himself during this week. As a servant. Not as a king on the way to be crowned, not as a great teacher to be honored, but as a servant. This is what he does for his disciples, and it is what he wants them to do for each other, and for others, no matter how dirty their feet.

Interestingly, you can make the case that this should be the third sacrament of the Protestant church. Jesus tells us to do it, just like Communion and Baptism. In fact, since pride is the besetting sin of the human race, we may need it as much as the other two. There is something humbling about bending the knee in front of another, and washing their feet. While we can take pride in about anything, it would be strange to see someone take pride in how humble they are. It's kind of an oxymoron. But we humans are capable of such things, there is no doubt.

Now, the main way that Jesus was a servant for us is the way we invites us to be servants one of another, to give of ourselves for each other. Jesus went all the way in doing this, all the way to the cross. But we can also give of ourselves, to die a bit for each other, so that the other may live. In fact, the closer we get to giving ourselves away, the closer we get to the mind of Christ. As we washed each other's feet, as the bowl went around the circle, we tasted a little bit about what this was about. It was practice for a servant life.

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, I can be so proud. I forget that following you means being a servant like you were. I am going to need strength, your strength, to do it. Help me be brave enough to bow down to the level that you took for yourself. Quench my pride, I pray. AMEN.

April 1, 2021

Maundy Thursday

READ: Luke 22:7-32

Remember what it was like when the whole family got together to eat, you know, before COVID? It is one of the great things about being back here where I came from, especially since my brother and his wife have moved back here as well. It's interesting, though, how easily we fall back into the roles and habits that we filled when we were all kids together. I was the grub who would say and do something rude just to get a reaction. My brother would try to keep the peace, the twins would have little twin games and side jokes. My older sister would yell at someone for something. And we all get together after forty years and we fall right back into those roles, those stations. It can be like a meal was not shared until I said something inappropriate, my older sister would yell at someone, my brother would try to be the voice of reason, and the twins look at each other significantly and smile. And our children sometimes take on the roles of our parents, making sure that when it is time for someone to calm down, or not have a drink, it happens.

When Jesus had the last supper with his disciples, they all had a role to play as well, something that was characteristic for each one of them. For Peter it was checks he would write with his mouth that he couldn't cash with his actions. Jesus knows this about Peter, and he loves Peter. So he warns him that he was about to write a big check that was going to bounce way up in the air. Characteristically, Peter denies it and writes the check. "I'm never going to abandon you". Well, Jesus knows this whole family he has traveling with him, especially Peter. And he tells him how it will be. And he also forgives him before it happens and tells him that when it is all over Peter will be restored. That's grace. To forgive before the sin happens, to know someone's weakness and resolve to love him through it. Of course, that's a small example of what Jesus did for all of us. He knows our sin before we are born, and resolved to restore us even before it happened. It sounds like God.

PRAYER: Lord God, I thank you that you have forgiven us already, even before we a sin is on our heart, you have forgiven it through what Jesus did on the cross. Thank you for that grace, that love. Help me accept the weakness of myself and my family and friends, and help me forgive before it happens. AMEN.

Friday, April 2, 2021
READ: John 19:23-37

The Cross

Years ago I went and saw “The Passion of the Christ” with a colleague. I have to confess that it got so bloody, so gory, that I hid my eyes for a time. It was awful. And yet it was probably one of the more accurate portrayals out there. Say what you want about the Romans, they knew what the purpose of crucifixion was, to inflict the most pain and humiliation and terror in the victim and in the bystanders. Jesus was an example to all who might claim to be a king in place of Caesar. It didn’t matter whether he thought that way or not. He was a useful tool to warn all the Jews that this is what revolt and rebellion gets you.

When I look through the accounts of the crucifixion in the gospels, I find that none of the writers want to come right out and describe the event. They say, “when Jesus was crucified..” or “as he was crucified..”. They don’t tell us that the nail was hammered in. It was like the writer also is looking at the horror through his fingers, like my friend and I in the theater. I get it. It’s awful to think of. I don’t have to look, too, do I?

But I wonder if there is something more in it for us. The truth of the Gospel is that the sin of humankind is sever enough that someone has to die to pay for it, someone special, who, in his singular death can take on himself the death of all who deserve it, that is everyone who has lived. But we say, “I can’t be that bad.” Or, “But isn’t there good in all of us, if we just were educated or advantaged enough to grow into it?” To which the cross says, “Sorry. It is only through this death, this terrible, painful death that we can’t even bear to watch that you can live with God. Only this can pay the price for your sin, your rebellion against God”. Ouch.

PRAYER: Dear Jesus, thank you for doing for me what I could not do for myself. I thank you for paying the price for my rebellion against God, for my desire to rule in place of God, to be the center of my world no matter what it does to others. Thank you for your work on the cross. Help me live in gratitude, not in guilt, and give you the glory. AMEN.

Saturday, April 3, 2021

In The Meantime....

READ: John 19:38-41

Years ago, Teresa and I went on a trip down to Eureka Springs Arkansas, one of the most bipolar cities in America. The downtown was funky and filled with hippies and alternative lifestyles. It was like Provincetown south. The beltway around the outside of town was a right-wing evangelical paradise. I would have loved to sit in on the town council meetings. We split our time between the two, as the mood struck us.

There was a Passion Play on the beltway. It was a daily reenactment of the passion of the Christ. And I could tell that it was staged by a Baptist group. While the Bible is filled with places where we don't get the full story, because it wants us to think, the passion play filled in whatever nooks that seemed to need some doctrinal putty. And so it was that when Jesus had been taken down from the cross and placed in the tomb there was a beat, and then a light flashed behind the rock blocking the tomb, and a strong, powerful voice, presumably Jesus, declared, "I have defeated you Satan! I have broken your power! I have freed the prisoners!" Or words to that effect. Check your Bible. It's not there. But what did happen on that Saturday long ago? There is one reference in I Peter 3:19 which refers to Jesus going and preaching to the spirits in prison who sinned in the days of Noah. Some believe that this refers to what happened on the Saturday before Easter. A good rule of thumb when teaching the Bible is that it helps to have more than one reference if you are trying to establish a teaching. So it is possible, but it isn't something to hang your doctrinal hat on.

The best way to think about this is that Jesus was truly dead for the short time before his crucifixion and resurrection. In so doing he went through what we will go through someday, in all likelihood, a momentary extinction that reminds us that we are not divine or immortal, but creations of God. We live, if we do, because he wills it. And in Jesus Christ, he has said yes to our life. On the day before the Resurrection, that is the comfort I have for you. Whatever happens when we die, we are in the hands of the Lord.

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, you died for me, in truth and in reality. I don't deserve your tears, but I thank you. Help me die to myself and trust that as you live, I can live in you. AMEN.

Sunday, April 4, 2021

He is Risen

READ: John 20: 1-18

There is not much for me to add. Rejoice, be glad, give thanks. Jesus has won the victory over sin and death! He is alive. Hallelujah!

Praise God from whom all blessings flow!

Praise him all creatures here below!

Praise him above ye heavenly hosts!

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!

Amen and Amen!