

## A More Important Question

Today is the last Sunday in the season of Lent. As the last Sunday, it also marks the entry into our remembering of the last week of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. It has traditionally been given a special designation called Palm Sunday as the scripture narrative about Jesus entering Jerusalem is read. Each day within this week known as Holy Week is also given a special designation as we follow through reading scriptures the events leading up to that day where the “new thing” God promised was going to come are remembered. Thursday is called Mandy Thursday for the “new mandate” or commandment Jesus gave to those he loved and with whom he shared a final meal before his arrest. Friday is known as either Good Friday or Black Friday as we truly remember what the cross means and view it through the lens of the crucifix, where the body of Jesus suffered and died and still can be seen. As time has passed, today’s designation has been changed because the willingness of God’s people to come and honor those last days has waned. Today now has what seems to be a schizophrenic designation. It now is called Palm/Passion Sunday and presents two paths for our worship services with two sets of scriptures. The one describes what most texts call Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem; the other longer text picks up the narrative of the arrest, trial, conviction and crucifixion of Jesus. Without remember the events of what is called the Passion story, we omit consideration of the true suffering which Jesus endured on that Roman tool of oppression and intimidation. While in seminary I went with the former dean, Dr. Thomas Currie on what was termed a Reformation Tour. We visited the places where the events of the Reformation took place. While there Dr. Currie mused that perhaps the Protestants of the time were too quick to abandon the crucifix as a symbol...The cross represents the accomplishment of Jesus’ mission but allows the symbol to become beautiful jewelry where no sign of the suffering; the cost of that obedience to God’s redemptive plan is seen. In much the same way our worship services go from the story presented as a triumph to the empty tomb which is the triumph realized. This year we are viewing the narrative through Luke’s gospel not the more familiar and popular image found in Matthew. Perhaps as the passage was read this morning, despite our singing of

*Hosanna, Loud Hosanna*, you might have noticed the absence of any mentions of waving palms or children singing. The words Hosanna are also missing. The irony of the narrative is always the difference in our understanding of what is being said in the accounts which do use that word. Hosanna, if properly translated represents those present pleading for rescue; they are asking to be saved. Within Luke’s narrative those present are a large crowd of disciples—a large group who are coming to Jerusalem with Jesus to celebrate Passover. Luke tells us they are joyfully celebrating, but it is because of all the “deeds of power” they have seen Jesus perform. Having seen this, they expect Jesus to fulfill their expectation of rescuing them from Roman occupation. Jesus is indeed the one coming in the name of the Lord to rescue them, but God’s plan of redemption is not about Roman occupation, but about a salvation plan much greater. Most of the time in our desire to see this as a celebration we focus on Matthew’s narrative and fail to note that Jesus’ entry is through a small gate near the Temple which comes down from the Mount of Olives. Major events with waving victory palms entered at a different point. Because Pilate was also coming to Jerusalem for the Passover, that gate would have

seen a larger crowd using victory palms as they welcomed the Roman legion and Pilate. Considering that we can understand why some Pharisees in the crowd would have wanted to subdue the crowd with Jesus; have wanted their celebration of Jesus' power silenced. Jesus responded to their request for him to order his disciples to stop voicing their belief in Jesus' power by answering, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." From where we stand, over 2000 years later, we can see that Jesus' disciples would not be silenced...in the long run, but the rest of the week would not go as if Jesus was their powerful Messiah anointed by God for their salvation. We can only see that after the tomb is discovered to be empty. That is why our scripture from the Hebrew Scriptures is one of the three passages called the "suffering servant." Christians have long viewed these passages as descriptions of Christ's passion, of his surrendering the use of the power he possessed as God's son to remain obedient to God's plan for redemption of all those who would repent and believe. In the view of Rome, in their encounter with this Jesus they had won. But God had an alternative in place which made the events of that Friday, not the last word on who was truly powerful and in control. God's alternative plan was executed and it made the execution done by Rome irrelevant. But often as we walk our own paths of faith in this broken world, we cry out using the word Hosanna in its original sense of a plea for rescue. At other times as we view the brokenness of our world, we just don't understand why our God, the God of love and mercy allows the brokenness to seem to prevail. In fact, in times of crisis whether personal or in the face of world events we often lift up the question: "Why?" Why does God who is all powerful allow these things? For many who struggle with doubt, this is at the center of their distress. Historically, those who do not believe will use these events that we remember during the lead up to Easter morning's great revelation will express their reasons for doubt by saying "Why does God who is all powerful allow these events to unfold?" Many faithful Christians throughout the church's long history have struggled to understand this; many and various have been the answers posed. These answers are described as "theories of atonement." Each theory will emphasize one part of the Biblical witness or another, these attempts to address this why question about Jesus' death in one of three ways. One describes Christ's death as a substitution for our own. One proposes Christ's death as satisfying God's requirement for holiness; another postulates Christ's death paid the penalty for sin, or perhaps Christ's life and obedience set the model for what our behavior should be. The final "theory" is that Christ's resurrection demonstrated the victory of Christ over death and evil. While each of these theories highlights some aspect of the truth of our Lord's death, none of them ultimately satisfies. Each of them has found voice in the hymns we sing; yet our questions persist. It may be of some comfort that the gospel records show those who witnessed the events did not understand Jesus' words about what was to come, or misinterpreted him, or finally, just rejected his predictions as simply too awful to believe. After all they had witnessed his power to heal and restore, to walk on water, to feed the multitudes. So when what they could not imagine to be true happened, when Jesus is handed over, judged and crucified, the disciples are left reeling, also probably asking "Why?" When we read Jesus' words about what is to happen we find that although Jesus predicted what would occur three times...so it should not have been so unexpected to them...yet despite the detail he gave about the what, Jesus himself never addressed the why. Yet Jesus does address another important aspect of these events. An aspect which might be more important because in our narrative...at the outset of the

description in Luke of the passion, we are told “when the hour came,” he took his place at table with his disciples to share one last meal with them. And at that last meal, he took bread, gave thanks and broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given...for you.” Those words are so important and fundamental to what happens. The why is not given, but his body is...for you. Those last two words, “For you.” For those disciples who sat at table with him, including as it is recorded, Judas who hands him over to the authorities, Peter who will in a few hours deny knowing him, and all the rest who will desert him. And if it was for them, then it was also for us! And knowing this makes all the difference in understanding what the full meaning of his death because though Jesus did not explain the why, he leaves no doubt as to its significance for you and for me. This is perhaps why we need to pause awhile at this point in the narrative. For beyond and above all our confusion and questions, in those two words we hear the shocking, unimaginable, and utterly unexpected news that everything Christ suffers—all the humiliation and shame, all the defeat and agony—he suffers for us, that we might have life and light and hope in his name! As we walk through the record of that night and following day, scripture makes it abundantly clear—even painfully clear—that Jesus gives himself over to death willingly. As Luke describes near the end of the Passion account, “The Jesus, crying out in a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.’ Having said this, he breathed his last.” Jesus remained in control. Jesus’ life is not ripped away as in some horrible accident, nor is it torn from him in some senseless tragedy. Rather, he commends his Spirit to the Father, giving his life of his own accord. We do not understand the necessity, but Christ did as was stated by the resurrected Christ to two disciples when he walked with them on the road to Emmaus: “Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” Our hearts like theirs burn with the knowledge that Jesus gave himself, fully and freely, for us and all the world, because that is why he came: to declare the Lord’s favor to all.

For us, the hard part of the Passion story may be that we may never fully be able to answer that persistent and perplexing question of why our Sovereign God choose this path to redeem the world. But we can easily answer another, perhaps more important question, “for whom?” Why is this a more important question? Because, when pressed we most often cannot explain love...the love we receive from friends and family...or the love we give to others. Yet knowing we love and are loved makes all the difference in our lives. So it is also with the mystery of Christ’s passion and death. Although we can surely never fully comprehend the “why” of God’s unfathomable commitment to us, when we see the form of Christ on the cross we can never doubt God’s profound love for us. Perhaps we can get some clue from a phrase that was often omitted from the Apostles’ Creed by some Christians...the phrase that affirms our belief that Christ descended into hell...that those three days there were part of the mission...and how that demonstrates how God always fulfills the promise to be with us always. Our Lord has experienced and gone everywhere for us...and goes there with us always. Seeing Christ on the cross shows us that God’s tangible and tenacious promise to be always and forever for us is eternally true. In Christ’s obedience we have our answer to the more important question we need to guide us. Thanks be to God.