

Palm Sunday, March 16, 2008. Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ.
Matthew 21:1-11, Psalm 31, Isaiah 50:4-9a, Philippians 2:5-11, Matt. 26:14-27:66.

“Riches for Deserters – What a Story!”

It is said that when God was trying to decide who would be God’s chosen people, God interviewed various nations. He started with the Greeks, who said that if they were chosen, they would build magnificent temples and statues to honor God. Then the Romans declared they would build a tremendous empire and system of roads, bridges, and aqueducts to honor God and serve God’s people. When God asked the Hebrew people what they would do if they were made God’s chosen people, they promised to tell the stories of God’s mighty acts to their children and grandchildren to all generations. ☺ We are the beneficiary of those stories.

Stories are for telling. And retelling. And hearing again and again. We have just heard a magnificent, tragic, dramatic, familiar, beloved and beautiful story. It’s God’s story and it’s our story.

It’s a story of incredible changes. A story of riches to rags, Palm Sunday riches to Good Friday rags. Palm Sunday pomp to Good Friday torture. Palm Sunday praise to Good Friday profanity against Jesus, our dear brother and Lord.

Our hearts are touched by this suffering. We are disturbed that everyone seems to desert Jesus. The disciples desert Jesus first by sleeping when he begged them to watch and pray with him. Judas deserts by betraying Jesus and suffers such remorse that he kills himself. Peter deserts by denying that he knows Jesus and suffers such remorse that he weeps bitterly. The crowds who cried Hosanna and cheered for Jesus on Sunday desert him on Friday by letting themselves be manipulated by religious politicians -- themselves deserters -- to cry, “Crucify him, Crucify Him!” Most of Jesus’ disciples then desert Jesus at the cross, leaving only a few women weeping and watching from a shadowy and gloomy distance.

We discover -- when we think about it -- that we are among the deserters. Who among us has never fallen asleep when needed, betrayed a friend, denied a relationship, fallen prey to mob pressure and done or said things we regretted later? Who among us would not rather do things our way than God’s way? Who among us would like to deny the brokenness in ourselves and in our world? Who among us would rather look away or run away than watch suffering or seek to alleviate it?

But, as God so often does, God turns things in our favor. Jesus feels deserted by God himself: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Such anguish. Anguish unto death. But in this anguish, Jesus is saving the deserters.

Jesus takes the shame, the blame, the sin and the death that belonged to us, that we rightfully have earned. And carries them all alone to death, hell and back.

Palm Sunday is the day when false hopes and illusions are shouted at the top of the crowd’s voices. The mobs that cried “Hosanna” hoped for a Messiah who would overthrow the Roman yoke; we would like a Jesus who takes over the world, destroys our enemies, offers prestige, pomp and glory – or at least peace, security and plenty. Some false prophets do promise these things to the faithful. “Be a Christian, give us a lot of money, and find immediate prosperity and success!” “Have enough faith and you will experience miracles.” False hopes and illusions.

On Good Friday these false hopes and expectations are destroyed. Jesus himself dies, carrying those false hopes as dead weight on his shoulders.

And – as we all know and dare to remember on this roller-coaster day of cheers to jeers – Easter will be the day when new life is given – not a life of prestige and glory, but an authentic life patterned after Jesus himself!

But first: Thursday we will receive spoken absolution of our sins. We will kneel in our hearts with Pastor Mary when she washes the feet of deserters. We will kneel in our hearts with outstretched hands to receive the bread and wine shared in Jesus’ last supper with Judas, Peter and the other deserting disciples. Friday we will walk along with Jesus, following from the shadows, moving to the darkness of the tomb. Saturday we will enter that tomb again. Dark ... but empty.

We walk with Jesus this Holy Week; we live into this magnificent, tragic, glorious story even as our brother and Lord takes us under his wing and promises that he is indeed “the Resurrection and the Life.”

So today’s story is not a story of riches to rags, but rags to riches. The riches of the cross.

But rather than get ahead of ourselves, let us walk with Jesus who looks us squarely in the eye and bids us follow him confidently in the coming days through life and through death. In that walk we receive from the Lord himself the gracious word of forgiveness and peace that allows us without fear or regret to accept life – and even death – just the way they come to us from the hand of our Father in

Heaven. This is God's great story and, by God's grace and our Baptisms, it is also given to us to be our story as well. May we tell this story of salvation from generation to generation forever. For Jesus' sake. Amen.