

Palmarum

5 April, Anno Domini 2020

St. John 12:12-19

Pr. Kurt Ulmer

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

What strange and sad times we are living through right now. I debated what to do this Palm Sunday since most of us wouldn't be gathered here today. The joyous little procession of children waving their palms followed by the rest of the congregation singing "All Glory, Laud, and Honor", isn't here. No people to process. Should we have just skipped it? We certainly could have without offending the Divine Majesty. But I think our wearied souls needed to say and sing the Hosannas. I know mine did. The theological darkness of Lent has been compounded by the mental and emotional darkness of this plague. Holy Week lies in front of us with even less music, a bare altar, black vestments, veiled crosses, and a dark sanctuary. Every day our hearts are weighed further and further down as the number of infections and deaths continue to go up and up and the restrictions grow tighter and tighter. And even though we are blessed to be able to continue to hear God's Word over the internet, it's not the same. We want to be together as God's children - embracing one another, laughing together, sharing meals together. May God grant that that day comes soon.

Dear brothers and sisters, this past week the pastors and Elders of faith spent over two hours desperately trying to figure out how to celebrate these very precious days. How do we honor those in authority, do what we can to protect the lives of our vulnerable neighbors, and still shine the bright light of the Gospel into these dark days filled with despair and anxiousness, impatience, fear, and anger? How do we make the immortal medicine of Christ's holy Body and Blood available for those who hunger for it? How do we ensure that we are not keeping people away from Christ and Christ away from people, the one truly essential service, the Divine Service where Christ Himself comes to us in Word and Sacrament, raises us from the dead, and gives us life? Jesus said to Martha "You are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary." (Luke 10:41-42a) We are anxious about a lot of things right now. But still, there is only one thing that is truly necessary.

Jesus. Jesus is necessary. Jesus, righteous and having salvation. Salvation from sin. Salvation from sickness. Salvation from death. Jesus is necessary and today,

brothers and sisters, Jesus comes. As He came to disciples locked in the upper room filled with fear and dread at what lay outside, He comes to you as you fear what lies outside your door, what may be all over your mail, your groceries, or even hanging in the air you breath. Jesus comes humbly and mercifully in the midst of all that to give you peace. He comes, your gracious and saving King, to set you free from fear and dread, to set you free from a death far worse than what COVID 19 can inflict upon you. He comes with healing in His wings to shatter the icy cold grip of eternal death that your sin, your worry, your doubt, your distrust of your heavenly Father have all afflicted upon you.

Today, as you hear His voice locally or as it comes to you over the speakers of your TV or phone or computer as you gather in your home, today Jesus rides in triumphal humility through the gates of your ears to give you His peace, the peace of His cross. You have no need to fear the death of your body because you are a partaker by faith in the life of Christ. You may be sick. You may even be nearing death. It doesn't matter. You are alive and will be forever because your life belongs to the living Christ who will never die. He died once for all and He can never die again. This is the promise of Holy Baptism. You are forgiven all your sins. As the waters of the font poured over you, you were drawn up out of death into life. Where once death had complete rule over you, now the Lord of Life has set you free and you will follow in His triumphal procession right out of the grave into the eternal peace and rest of heaven where the palm branches of victory will never cease to wave.

But that is not simply in your future. That peace and rest and that victory is now because Jesus did die on the cross and He has risen from the dead. Good Friday is a past event. Easter has never ended. It is hidden and veiled under great weakness. In this sinful world the only crown you know is the crown that your Savior wore while He walked this earth - a crown of thorns, a crown of affliction and temptation and sorrow. But there, beneath the humility was your true divine King suffering and dying for you. Worldly eyes can't see it. Only eyes of faith can. Only faith that believes what is heard rather than seen. Only faith that sees under the humiliation and the cross the eternal triumph of life over death. Today your King comes bearing that very peace, pointing you to the font, pointing you to the bread and the wine and saying "Rejoice, shout aloud! In return for you sin and your death, I have given you My righteous, My holiness, My life. I am here, today, in your midst. I will keep you and protect you. The devil will not be able to snatch you from My hands. You have nothing to fear."

So while we are forced to grapple with the bitter struggles of our day, just as our ancestors have before us, there is one reality that remains the same - Jesus is still alive. Death is still defeated. You are still a baptized child of God and nothing in heaven or on earth can take that away from you, wherever you are sitting. You may not be able to be here in the Lord's house, but that does not stop your Lord from coming to you. His Word and His promises are your peace wherever you are hearing them. There may not be palms and processions but that is not what our hope is in. It is in the forgiving and life-giving Word of the Lord which endures forever, the very word that is now riding in humility over the internet into your ears.

May this time when receiving the gracious gifts of our Lord has grown much more cumbersome and difficult, stir up in us all a fervent hunger and longing for these gifts. And yet, may our Hosannas this day be resound in our homes and across the world as we sing the praises of our Savior and King!

May the peace that passes all human understanding guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.