

Palm Sunday – 2024
Zechariah 9:9-12
Philippians 2:5-11
John 12:12-19

On a scale of 1-10, what is the level of pain that you are feeling? You're familiar with the question, yes? I've never liked the question. Keep in mind that I'm paranoid. When a medical professional asks me the question I sometimes think that what they're really trying to determine is how big of a wimp that I am. How does Suzie's pain threshold stack up against Jennifer's? Pain is not objective, like blood pressure. A blood pressure monitor spits out numbers that can be compared, one person to another. If a person in the ER says that their pain is at a ten does that mean if their arm got stuck in a farm combine right then and it was severed from their body that their pain level wouldn't increase? Since I don't want to be thought of as a wimp, I probably understate my pain level. Well, I'm done with all that. My new answer is going to be this: "I'm not being crucified but it hurts."

The world is going to hear quite a lot about crucifixion in the next week or so. It is brutal. It is astonishingly brutal. Crucifixion was intended as a shocking display of inhuman punishment to serve as a visceral reminder to the citizenry not to get out of line. You know the phrase "writhing in pain?" Writhing; it is what the human body does as a reaction to intense suffering. Escape; the body is trying to escape the suffering by writhing. It is reflexive; twisting and squirming in an attempt to change the scenario. Your Creator allowed Himself to be crucified. The One who brought life out of lifelessness, the eternal and omnipotent, benevolent Creator of heaven and earth willed that He should be crucified to save you from your sins. The Son of God, the fully human Son of God, was nailed to a cross and He writhed in pain. He would not escape. He gave Himself up to the spikes. He gave His fully divine life into the hands of brutal men and a brutal torment and a brutal death. A cross was the scenario that God chose for Himself in order to save you from death and hell. An assault of evil, a fusion with sin, and a physical suffering that creates pure panic to the human body – the pain of all that is unknowable. No scale can account for the pain that the Lord Christ endured; for you.

What did the pilgrims to Jerusalem want? What did they see in Jesus? They shouted "Hosanna." They shouted "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." They shouted "Hosanna to the Son of David." All of this was scriptural acclamation. All of this was well-deserved by the Messianic King. But what were those who were shouting expecting? They had heard of the miracles. Some had *seen* the miracles. Many, no doubt, had heard Jesus preach. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19). Grace flowed from Christ's mouth. Holiness flowed from His person. Healing and truth and life itself emanated from Him and the pilgrims in Jerusalem shouted "Hosanna." What did those in Jerusalem want? What were they expecting?

Perhaps some thought that they were getting an earthly governor. Perhaps some thought that the Messiah would get Rome off their back, that Israel would rise to the national heights, and that

there would be a chicken in every pot and two cars in every garage. Good government is a blessing but the world is in need of something way more than good government. “Hosanna” means save. The people were shouting to the One who *could* save. Save us! Hosanna in the highest. To be sure, this Messianic Champion is a deliverer of the highest order. Selfishness; save us dear Lord. Pride; save us O Christ. Lust and greed and loneliness and all the intractable diseases of the heart; deliver us, O Jesus. What do you want? Do you long to be holy? Do you want to be loved? Are you in search of permanence, peace, contentment, hope, truth, someone to trust, someone you can rely on in every circumstance?

Here’s one of our foremost problems: people don’t like one another. It isn’t just the Crips and the Bloods, the Hatfields and the McCoys, the Montagues and the Capulets, the Jets and the Sharks. All of that dramatic feud stuff is just a symptom. Our selfish nature is unyielding. Our pride is Everest-like. One thing Alise tells me when I am down, stewing over my failures, she says, “if you only knew how little, how infrequently anyone thinks of you, you wouldn’t worry.” Why is that? “Because we are always thinking only of ourselves.” She calls herself a realist. Our problems are super-deep, bone-deep. Death is bone-deep. Did the Israelites know? Did they know what Jesus had come to do? Their sacrificial system told them. Yom Kippur told them. Transferring sins from the people to an innocent substitute; transferring sins to the scapegoat and then banishing the unfortunate creature, casting it out, forcing it to carry their sins into the desolate wilderness. Did the Israelites see this coming? Jesus had told them: “Do not think that I’ve come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17).

Hosanna; who is saying “Hosanna” today? Government, government, government – it’s all people are interested in today. We’re addicted to it; wall to wall coverage of the government. Fentanyl’s demonic lure, sickening murder rates in Chicago, child sex rings, religious charlatanism, homelessness run amok – humanity is losing its purpose, its self-awareness, its drive for virtue. Meaninglessness, nihilism, hedonism – the soul of man is bankrupt. How is government going to fix the soul of man? Jesus is a king. Jesus brings a kingdom. But what, pray tell, is His throne? Crowned and enthroned; where does Jesus manifest His glory? Thorns and a cross; Jesus is a sacrificial king. That’s the instrument that changes humanity – a cross. “Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes; Shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies. Heav’n’s morning breaks, and earth’s van shadows flee; In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me” (Abide with Me, st. 6).

The Son of God was made man to change us at our core. The Son of God died to change us at our core. The Son of God rose again to change us at our core. Sanctified; He shares His life with us that we might be changed, made holy, sanctified. His virtue was unleashed in His death and resurrection. You’ve been baptized into Jesus’ death and resurrection. The old has gone; behold the new has come. That’s what God is telling us through St. Paul in Philippians. We’ve been united to Christ. That encouragement, that reality leads us to adopt His ways, His manner, His perspective, and His love. The Messianic King is a servant therefore you are a servant. He humbled Himself under God’s almighty hand therefore you do the same. God exalted Jesus. God will exalt us. Believe it.

Obedience is our way; obedience in every situation, across all scenarios, in every hour and in every tribulation. We may fail, we *will* fail, but obedience is our calling. Christ's cross is our cross and we are determined to pick it up and follow Him. We've been changed. God has called us out of darkness and into His marvelous light. We've been changed. And we will be changed again. Transformed; a new flesh; a new body; incorruptible, glorious, and immortal. Death has been transformed. Jesus transformed it for us. Death has no sting. The sacrifice of Christ on the cross took the sting out of death.

That brutal instrument of torture and shame is our salvation. Hosanna; Jesus entered Jerusalem to be the divine convergence between man's brutality and God's grace. Christ crucified is the deliberate resolution between man's carnal thirst for death and God's loving gift of forgiveness, life, and holiness. You now receive the bounty of that triumph in His body and blood. Love, grace, and mercy are alive in you because Christ is alive in you. There is nothing more wonderful. There is nothing more inspiring. The church knows the beauty of it and spreads the word far and wide. "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest."