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John 12:12-19
Palm Sunday
April 5, 2020

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

Our text, And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, “Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Last Sunday, as Jesus told his disciples he was going to Judea to reveal the glory of God in the raising of Lazarus, the disciples’ thoughts were on, and concern was for, Jesus’ safety: “Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and do you go there *again?*” And, as Jesus insisted he was determined to go, Thomas spoke on behalf of the Twelve (the tone is open for interpretation, but I tend to think he said it with a sarcastic sigh), “Let us go with him, that we might die with him.”

What would the disciples have thought or feared if they knew the result of Jesus riding into Jerusalem?

Perhaps, in this unique situation in which we find ourselves, in which we’re told that even being within arm’s reach of each other is dangerous, in which true love is to keep our distance from one another... perhaps we suddenly can appreciate a bit more what it means that Jesus entered Jerusalem in his own flesh and blood. We can appreciate that Jesus – knowing that the mass of humanity that

flooded Jerusalem in that Passover week meant danger and certain death for him – went anyway.

No one would say to you right now, “You *must* risk your life for the sake of your brothers! Without pay, without benefit, without thanksgiving, without appreciation, without any line of defense or help or aid, you *must* risk your life for the sake of your brothers!” No one would say that – even to healthcare workers – in this situation. But that’s exactly what God said to the Christ whom He had sent into a situation with a far more dangerous, more eternal enemy, with an eternal mortality and 100% mortality rate... And, actually, God said more to His sent Messiah, “You *must give* your life for the sake of your brothers!” But actually, he said even more! – “You must give your life for the sake of your *enemies*.” Isn’t that the awesome will of the Father, as St Paul comments upon it when the apostle writes, “One will scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one might die, but God shows His love in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

So, for us sinners, Jesus enters Jerusalem that he might go to the cross, the altar of God, and lay down his life for his enemies. And, as he does, as he rides in on the colt, the foal of a donkey, for all to see... he (if you will) puts ‘flesh and bone’ on God’s promise of a coming Messiah.

That’s no small point – God had promised a Messiah for so long, for centuries, millenia. The promise had been so long hoped for

and thought of that people started to think of it as an idea, mental image... an impression or notion of salvation. Sometimes, we can make the same mistake as those who now live 2000 years removed from Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem... we can think of Jesus and our salvation in Him as an idea, a mental image... something that perhaps didn't even have to happen (more like a salvific *story*) as long as we think about that story with faith, think about the image with appreciation.

We forget the importance of Jesus actually going to the cross when we ask things like, "Why did Jesus have to die? Why couldn't God just forgive us, just declare us 'saved', just wipe away the sin?" Notice, how we've subtly just made *salvation* an **idea**, a mere 'thinking' that God does while sitting in the heavens.

But **sin** isn't just an idea; sin isn't just a 'notion' or something that is thought about. Sin is not a *virtual* reality; sin is a 'flesh and blood' reality, isn't it? It transgresses and offends God. It hurts our neighbor – whether it's thought, word, or deed, whether it's original sin or actual sin, sin is a "tangible" reality.

And standing opposed to that very real, tangible sin is a very real, tangible holy God; that holy God is just, righteous, and – as such – cannot merely pretend sin doesn't exist or choose to ignore it or give it 'virtual' forgiveness or virtually send a Messiah. Sin needs to be dealt with, it needs to be paid for; payment is needed; retribution is needed. How did the psalmist say it in this week's daily devotional

psalm, Psalm 18: “Then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked” – why do those things truly, actually happen? – “because he was angry.” And, because God’s anger is very real and not merely an image or idea of an angry God, and because his very real anger is over very real Sin, that means an actual “flesh-and-blood” atoning sacrifice is needed. Our sacrificial Lamb says to the Holy God, “A body You have prepared for me, and I have come to do Your will.”

Ours is no “virtual” Savior, no mere *idea* or *thought* of salvation, no yoga-zen-meditation that seeks imagined harmony. Jesus came into history and rode into Jerusalem to very tangibly and truly lay down his life and shed his blood and, thereby, very truly and actually and definitively appease the righteous and holy God’s wrath and anger, so that it is not merely a notion or an idea – but a certain truth sealed by flesh and blood – that, as St Paul says, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Condemnation isn’t just a vacuous and inconsequential idea; it’s an eternity of guilt before the burning-hot anger of the holy God. And, that means the promise that there is now no condemnation in Christ Jesus, no condemnation in our very physical, tangible sacrificial Lamb which the holy God himself provided, is also a flesh-and-blood reality with very true and eternal benefit.

And that eternal benefit is then something that is poured out and delivered very truly and actually and in the flesh-and-bone

reality of life. The benefits of salvation, the gifts of salvation, are no mere ideas or notions. The benefits of salvation are not “virtual,” they are yours not by your thinking about them or envisioning some heavenly impression or mental image. In other words, salvation and forgiveness is not something that exists in your own heart and mind and your own pious thinking; if it was, Jesus rode into Jerusalem for no reason... *if* he rode in at all! Maybe he just rode into Jerusalem in your own imagination! But, there he rode in – John reports, as do Matthew, Mark, and Luke – there he rode in, with the crowds so enamored with his very tangible raising of Lazarus (not some virtual reality or optical illusion), and with the Jewish leaders truly fearful and envious of his popularity.

In fact, *there's* a great example of how salvation is not a matter of thoughts or ideas and is a matter of God's will played out in historical truth: by the people's own thoughts and expectations, they had built up in their own minds and notions that Jesus was an earthly king who would save them from their oppressor, so that – when that idea proved not to be tangibly true – they turned on him in a few days and freed the murderer, Barabbas, instead. Their *imaginations* of salvation had led to nothing.

But God had willed not the heartfelt imaginations of an earthly king, but a flesh-and-blood Messiah for the flesh-and-blood world. And any thoughts of a kingly throne are corrected and

brought into 20/20 vision as the Messiah takes to his cross, that wooden altar prepared by God Most High himself.

And through it all, the disciples don't understand, as our text says, "His disciples did not understand these things at first," ... you can't say that of ideas or notions made up in your own mind. They didn't understand it because this salvation and all the details God had planned regarding it were outside of them, bigger than them, not "in" their head, but "over" their head. So that, it's the tangible facts of how it all plays out as God had prophesied that finally teaches them, as the text says, "but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him."

Now, why do I put so much emphasis on the flesh-and-blood truth of Jesus riding into Jerusalem? Why put so much emphasis on the flesh-and-bone Messiah given in history and once crucified for our salvation?

It's because just as tangible and "flesh-and-blood outside of your head" true is your salvation, equally tangible and flesh-and-blood outside of your head" true are the benefits of your salvation. What Jesus rode into Jerusalem to acquire for you, what He died on the cross to achieve for you... all of that He now tangibly and truly *gives* to you. You see, not just your salvation, but equally the distribution of your salvation is no mere idea or virtual reality. And

that's something that in these suddenly desperate times we must still confess and rejoice in.

As we all shelter in place, many in our society who do not understand the Scriptures or the flesh-and-bone Messiah of the world think that religion is a matter of your head, that it can be virtually practiced because – after all – Christianity is just you thinking about and having feelings of faith about the past ... that, who cares if you cannot gather, because you can still *think about* Jesus; you can still be virtually served, that you can have the virtual reality of the communion of saints... and why does society think this, if not because so many *Christians* think that religion is a matter that originates in the heart, that faith wells up from inside of you and that - if you think on Jesus lovingly enough - you choose him into your heart, make him your own, and – by the passion of your faith – you become a Christian... and that can be done by livestreaming Joel Osteen just as easily as gathering before a wooden altar.

But it's not the passion of *your faith* that makes you a Christian; it's the passion of *the Christ*. And it's that passion accomplished in history because he, in flesh-and-blood resolutely rode into Jerusalem – unafraid of and undeterred by the dangers that society told him were all around him. And, it's the fruit of that Christ's passion is now – in equal truth and tangible, “outside of you” reality that is now delivered to you as the Lord cares for his flock through very earthy means: the audible teaching of, preaching of,

and reading of His Holy Word (thanks be to God for epistles and recordings and audio for *that* reason!)... but also the pouring of water, attached to that word, over the head of the sinner, the feeding and strengthening of that sinner with true bread and wine under which is the mystery (not virtual reality, but divine mystery) of Christ's very body and blood.

Friends, you must never let the world tell you your faith is in your head, Holy Week is in your head, or Good Friday or Easter is something merely worth "virtually worshipping." You must never let the world tell you that your faith is something that need not be practiced... because, Christ promises, the practice of the faith is not you going through useless rote exercises and traditions that can be put away for months on end. To record a sermon and let you watch it or listen to it certainly *is* beneficial, just as Paul's letters to the churches were beneficial, but they do not replace or properly substitute for the services of God or the practice of the Faith. For, **the practice of the faith** is the life-saving and life-sustaining Physician's practice, the divine Doctor's practice, by which Jesus Christ forgives you, cares for you, feeds you, and strengthens you: "It is not the healthy who need a physician, but the sick. I have come not to save the righteous, but sinners." And, save He has. As we have prayed in the Litany these past two weeks, we've prayed regarding a Savior not virtually in our head, but rather tangibly in history: "By the mystery of Your holy incarnation; by Your holy nativity; By Your

baptism, fasting, and temptation; by Your agony and bloody sweat; by Your cross and passion; by Your precious death and burial; By Your glorious resurrection and ascension; and by the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter”... indeed, that Comforter who, coming from outside of you, serves you and comforts you with divine mysteries that do then dwell richly in you and keep you in that one true faith – in both good times and bad times, peaceful times and troubling times.

Indeed, the faithful in Italy have started to realize this, the importance and urgency of God’s “outside of you” work for you; they no longer want to depend upon their own thinking and memory of God’s promises or even of hearing it in their isolation, but – even in the dire situation Italy still knows – the faithful have started to demand that their priests and clergy open the doors of the churches and offer the Sacraments. *They* realize that the Lord who is Lord over life and death serves His people even in the face and threat of death, even when death abounds, even when He must ride resolutely through the city gates to do divinely appointed work for you – so that you need not settle for a virtual Savior and virtual Comforter... nor do you need share any sarcasm of Thomas, thinking Christ will lead you to your demise; for yes, you may go with him and die with them, but then you will also rise with him. So then, even in these days of deep distress, you may share the joy of hearing anew that that prophetic word was once fulfilled for you and is still this day

God's promise for His Church: "Fear not, daughter of Zion, your king comes to you!"

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

Rev. Mark C. Bestul
Calvary Lutheran Church
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