

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"The Excruciating Royal Road"
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Sixth Sunday in Lent
Palm/Passion Sunday

We once again approach Holy Week to remember the last week of our Lord's earthly ministry. It's good to remember what it cost God to have relationship with us. It's good to reflect and meditate on all that Jesus did for us personally nearly two thousand years ago. Now I say nearly 2,000 years ago, and in the late 2020s, it will be exactly 2,000 years since his death, if we consider his birth between 2 and 3 BC and his age at death at 32-33 years of age. Jesus went through a lot for us. On Palm Sunday, we worship him as King, and ask him to save us from the consequences of our sins, character defects and rebellion, saying, "Hosanna!" On this same Sunday, we consider his passion, his suffering on our behalf, lest any of us miss the services this week on Thursday or Friday.

Human pain and suffering continues to be a mystery. We don't know why some people have to go through so much more than others. We do know the human body grows and reaches a peak sometime in the early adulthood, then begins to go down hill, eventually not repairing and replacing cells that make life possible. During the later years of our lives, we experience many aches and pains that were not a part of our younger years. Arthritis, joint problems, stiffness, and major problems can be mitigated somewhat with exercise and stretching. But we know that we cannot escape some level of pain. Whether we get migraines or have pains associated with the stomach, intestines, kidney, bowels, heart, lung, muscles, nerves, bones, pretty much any part of the body you can mention, someone can raise their hand and say, "I've had trouble with that." At least that would be the case in a group this size. I won't be asking you to raise your hand in this regard today.

Pain tells us there is something wrong with our bodies, something is broken, something needs attention. The lack of pain, the lack of a signal of something going wrong within us is a severe problem. One such neurological disease we call leprosy, Hansen's disease, which indeed mainly is an inability to feel pain, and then the loss of limbs due to repeated injuries without knowing there is an injury.

God's gift of pain is a difficult one to receive. But the alternative is worse. It is difficult during this week to imagine the amount of pain Jesus went

through for us, and for us to have a relationship with God. This week is set aside (which is what 'Holy' means, to set something apart to a special usage); this week is aside for us to be reflecting on that pain, that cost that Jesus voluntarily took on himself.

It was a strange last week of Jesus' life. It started on the first day of the week, Sunday, with his fulfilling the prophecy of the king, the Messiah coming into Jerusalem on a donkey, not a horse or stallion, but on a peaceful animal that had not been ridden before. This symbolically meant that the king is returning from battle on a beast of burden, and the battle had been won, not the symbol of riding a charger, a horse that would take you soon back to battle to finish it.

Jesus rides the colt into Jerusalem to fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9: "Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." Some people believe that some of the Gospel writers speak of both a colt and a donkey, two animals, to fulfill the two animals of the Zechariah prophecy. To be clear, Jesus was only riding one even if there were two. The emphasis is on the King bringing peace and victory. It was a prophetic ride for Jesus that disciples both understood and didn't understand. They understood (at least later they did); they understood the Messianic King bringing peace to Israel and the Jewish nation. They did not understand the rest of the week's events to come, because they continued to believe that Jesus would kick out the Romans and re-establish the physical kingdom of God on earth then. Jesus instead was establishing a spiritual kingdom where his followers would not try to rescue him from being tortured to death later in the week, as Jesus later told Pilate. With the Father's blessings and the Holy Spirit's power, he was establishing himself as the sacrificial Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, for all those who would receive it.

Jesus must have experienced pain on that first Palm Sunday. Jesus saw the people receiving him for who he truly was and is, the King Eternal, the fulfillment of the promise to David, the Messianic promise, the hope of Israel, the hope of the world. The pain wasn't in being received for the true person and identity that was his. The pain was in prophetically knowing what was ahead this week. He had already predicted his death, (Mark 8:31-33) and even the mode of his death, where he said he would be "mocked, flogged, and crucified." (Matt. 20: 17-19). Jesus prophetically knew

something of what was coming, although no human being truly knows the full extent of what psychological, emotional and physically being tortured to death is like in advance of the event itself. We have some sense of Jesus' torture in knowing that he would take the sins of the world on himself in the garden of Gethsemane before he was arrested, in his sweating blood. But in his limits as a human, he would mercifully not have known every detail and all the suffering in advance of the suffering. Just as normally we do not know our pain in advance of receiving it.

Yet the Lord knew something of what many in this crowd would do later in the week, these same ones that were waving palms and putting their clothes as a carpet in the dirt streets of the day, welcoming the King. These too would later be yelling, "Crucify, crucify." And there is the excruciating royal road Jesus was riding upon. I use the term "excruciating" which some of us use about our personal pain. It comes from the Latin, "ex" and "crux." "Ex" means "out of," or "completely" in this case. The "crux" is the Latin word for the cross. The cross was the most sinister symbol of torture. So "ex-cruciating" means "completely tortured." It is a way of indicating a superlative of pain, the highest form of pain. Jesus' royal road on that Palm Sunday must have been excruciating. The cross was coming, and he was not turning back. He would spend some time with his friends and followers in the Upper Room in the coming week. He would give his farewells and he would paint a picture of what was happening beyond his death, because they could not believe the death, the torturing to death, let alone what would come following his death. Because everyone stays dead, right?

In the Upper Room, Jesus institutes Holy Communion and so it is right and appropriate to celebrate communion together on the anniversary of the night he instituted it. In past years, we have had the Passover ceder meal, a lamb dinner, recalling the deliverance from Egypt and sin, from death and destruction of the people of Israel, who applied the blood of the lamb to their doorposts. Jesus was now becoming the new lamb, the One who would fulfill our need of relationship with God, protection against death, meaning in the midst of so much confusion and deathly depression.

Jesus invites us this week to count the cost of following him. We acknowledge our need of Him, our broken and rebellious ways. We turn anew to the Lord, in this culture which is more and more ridiculing the path of Christ, and what he accomplished through his death and resurrection. Let us pray.