

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Unexpected Royal Action"
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March 16, 2008
(Palm/Passion Sunday)

The last week of Jesus' life has changed human history and continues to influence the culture and the Church we serve. The Gospel writers chose to devote the largest part of their accounts of Jesus' life to the last week of his earthly ministry. The two Presbyterian congregations in St. John's celebrate everyday except Saturday of this week, in line with what the Gospel writers chose to tell us. These celebrations are unique and I hope you can make as many of them as possible.

Most churches celebrate Good Friday, some Maundy Thursday, but few of our denomination celebrate Monday to Wednesday. I am pleased that we have chosen to make the time and effort to combine our congregations for the Monday to Thursday services at 7, 6:30 for the Thursday night Seder Supper and Holy Communion, all this year at the Kirk. Our Good Friday worship takes place at 11 a.m.

Now I say this during the Sermon time, not because you weren't listening to the announcements, but so that you'll know how highly I value these events, by faith, since I've never taken part in them before here in St. John's. Weather may be a challenge, I don't know. But here's a brief re-cap of the events of the last week of Jesus' life:

Palm Sunday, thus called because of the people waving the palms and worshipping the Messiah, the Promised One, the answer to the promise made to King David, that there would be someone on his throne forever, and the Triumphal Entry is a snapshot of people corporately understanding or at least participating in acknowledging Jesus Christ as the King. All four gospel writers record something of this event which took place in the early Spring of 30 A.D. (Matthew 21: 1-11; Mark 11:1-10; Luke 19:29-44; John 12: 12-19). For centuries the Christian Church has celebrated Palm Sunday, singing Hosannas, meaning "O Lord, Save us" in many languages.

You may not know that there is a movement afoot to cancel Palm Sunday. It's not a nefarious thing, but simply a practical one, as the authors of the Common Lectionary, or rather Revised Common Lectionary, would tell us. The simple reality is that not many people go to church in between Sundays.

Fewer and fewer are. So if you're planning on taking part this week, God bless you. So if people do not attend church in between Sundays, they will miss all the worship and teaching related to what Jesus said to his friends the last week of his life. They will also miss the Cross. For the leaders of the Church who want to make sure that the Cross is not missed, they suggested a new theme for the Sunday before Easter. That theme is Passion Sunday.

“Passion” is used in the sense of the Latin word for suffering. They recommend we read Scriptures in line with the crucifixion and sacrifice of Jesus over and against the Triumphal Entry Scriptures. I understand where they are coming from. I agree that people attending church on Sunday should not miss the cross. So I've presented today a hybrid of the Palm and Passion Sunday Scriptures and I'm speaking to you now about how important it is take in what the cross is all about. Jesus did not go from his reception as King on Palm Sunday, directly to the Resurrection and Victory of Easter Sunday. He went through the suffering, humiliation, and ultimate cost of the Friday. He calls us to the same. He calls us to once again count the cost of following him and claiming to be His followers.

So we worship the King today. But the actions of His Royal Highness are unexpected. On Holy Monday, he curses a fig tree (Matt. 21:18-19; Mark 11:12 – 14), symbolic of the importance of action in the life of the faithful, not just words. And he clears the temple (Matt. 21: 12-13; Mark 11:15-18), reminding us of several things, one of which is that we must not treat the ministry of the Church as just another business. Another thing to learn from the Lord's cleansing is the importance and priority of prayer as the Lord's business. Are we giving prayer the priority needed for the Lord's business?

On Holy Tuesday, Jesus' authority is questioned by the chief priests and elders (Matt. 21:23-27; Mark 11:27-33; Luke 20:1-8). Rather than defending himself, he asks them where John the Baptizer's authority came from, which they were unwilling politically to commit to a position for or against. This reminds us that we are constantly challenged to take a position for or against the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ in our lives and in our community. Also on Tuesday, Jesus is anointed by Mary of Bethany (Matt. 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; John 12:2-11) which calls us to costly devotion, and risking the disdain of those around us, in choosing to devote ourselves to Jesus.

On Holy Wednesday, the plot against Jesus is revealed (Matt. 26:14-16; Mark 14:10-11; Luke 22:3-6). Of course, this plot has been brewing and has already been revealed in several ways by the Lord. But now the urgency and the reality of this assassination plan, a plan to have the King tortured to death finally is understood by the followers of Jesus, even if they don't comprehend it.

By Thursday, Jesus wants to comfort his disciples. They know he is going to die and he wants to leave his final instructions and wishes with them. John devotes five chapters of his gospel to this evening (John 13-17). Jesus institutes Holy Communion at the Last Supper (Matt. 26:17-29; Mark 14:12-25; Luke 22:7-20; John 13: 1-38). These are some of the most intimate passages of Scripture relating to how Jesus felt about his friends. If you choose to do nothing else this week, read John 13 – 17, and on Friday, read any of the accounts of the Crucifixion. This will give you a good sense of what this Holy Week is all about. The teaching and preaching this week will be from this material.

Good Friday involves the arrest, the so-called trial (Matt. 26:47 – 27:26; Mark 14:43 – 15:15; Luke 22:47 – 23:25; John 18:2 – 19:16) and the abuse and execution of the Lord (Matt. 27:27-56; Mark 15:16-41; Luke 23:50-56; John 17-30) as well as the burial of Jesus in Joseph's tomb (Matt. 27:57-66; Mark 15:42-47; Luke 23:50-56; John 19:31-42). If you've not done it, or would like to make it a part of this week's Holy Week devotions, may I suggest you follow these Scriptures, which I have put here in detail on my sermon notes, which are available to you at www.stdavids.nf.ca/sermons or you can simply ask me and I'd photocopy today's message for you, if you don't have access to a computer. I'm sure you know that all my messages that I have given here since I arrived last July are available to you at our web cite and also one audio version, which I believe John has chosen "Strength in Weakness" from October 28, 2007.

These are simply ways for you to make this coming week Holy in your lives. Jesus wants to show you the full extent of his love. This week does it like no other. Take advantage of his unexpected love letters to you. Take advantage of the great cost that he spent this week on you.

Tomorrow I'll be speaking on how what Jesus has done creates a new level of friendship, not only between us and Him, but also between each of us. Tuesday Dave will be speaking on the sacrifice of our Lord.

I hope you'll be able to take in what God has for you this week.

I believe the instructions Jesus left for his disciples to untie the colt or the donkey was symbolic of His wanting us to give a prominent place to Him in our lives. He wanted to be lifted up in the midst of the people as was appropriate for that day. Later he would be lifted up in another way. On that Palm Sunday, he could've gotten the animal himself. He chose to let his followers serve Him in faith and trust. He does the same today. Make sure this week is a week that you trust Him to supply the instructions for giving Jesus Christ prominence in your life, your family's life and the life of your community.

Let us pray.