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Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday
March 24, 2024
Text: John 12:12 – 19 & Mark 15:1 – 47
Title: The End of the Beginning

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. I'd like for you to take a moment, if you will, and think over the years of your life thinking mainly of those moments that you are really proud of. Most of us have them. For some of us it may be something special at work, like completing a difficult project on time. Maybe it's one of those milestone days, like getting your first real job or getting married. For that matter, you could be proud of someone you love reaching one of their goals or milestones, like a child graduating from high school or having your first grandchild.

Now pride isn't always seen as a good thing. It's one of the so-called "seven deadly sins" that our Roman Catholic friends talk about. It can lead us into all sorts of trouble, and cause us to do some really stupid things. More people and relationships have been hurt in the name of pride than anyone can ever really imagine. It's one of those double-edged swords that can either be a very good thing or a very bad thing.

In the case of today's first Gospel reading, I'd say that good or bad depended on who you're looking at. Jesus is entering His city after three years of ministry. The pilgrims who are there for the Passover feast hear that He is on His way, and they rush to greet Him. The word has spread throughout all of Jerusalem that the Messiah is coming, and crowds of people who have heard about Him raising Lazarus from the dead go to the gates to see this remarkable man.

Jesus had to be proud of this reception with a perfect kind of pride, and of all people, the Son of God had every right to be full of pride. Here He was being acknowledged as the King that He really is, and Zechariah's prophecy from years ago was finally being fulfilled. The

praises and honors that they shouted to Him must have brought Him great pride and joy, as well as the knowledge that His purpose in this world was about to be fulfilled.

Then there were the disciples who were traveling with Him. They had gotten His donkey, which was considered an animal for royalty in times of peace, and were now leading Jesus into Jerusalem. You can sense their anticipation. They were convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, and they had been following Him throughout His entire three year ministry. “Now, this is more like it! Our time following Jesus all over Galilee is finally going to pay off! Finally, the time has come for Him to take over and restore the kingdom of Israel!” You can almost see their backs get straighter and their chests puff out at all of the attention. This was their rabbi, and they were His closest friends and students. What a moment of pride for them!

There are many things in life that work two ways depending on the way that they are used. Pride can be one of them. Pride in yourself and your accomplishments is okay to a point, but it can lead you to rely too much on yourself and to forget that the Lord blesses you with all good things and even gives you the abilities to accomplish what you do. The things that you can be proud of are put into your life by God, and He asks only that you thank and acknowledge Him for those blessings. With that acknowledgement pride is no longer a self-centered sin, but a means to glorify the Lord. It’s part of what Paul means when he mentions boasting in the Lord.

Anger is something else that can be used in different ways. After Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday He goes to the temple, and He is infuriated by what He sees there. They have turned the courtyard of the Temple into a marketplace that is used for selling animals, changing money, and cheating people. An area that is meant for prayer, devotion, and worship is now a place of business and corruption. In His anger Jesus makes a whip, and chases the merchants out

of the Temple turning over all of their tables. He uses His anger to glorify His Father and shows a zealous and righteous rage against those who are letting sin defile His Father's house.

At the same time, the Pharisees and rulers of the Jews use their anger and pride in a different way. They are there on Palm Sunday too, and they watch as the crowds welcome and praise Jesus. Their response is one of anger, concern, and fear as they see that "...the world has gone after him." They are losing their power, and this Galilean is ruining their business in the temple. In their anger, they decide that He has to go. Their anger leads them to serve sin, and by the end of the week they have disposed of this upstart Messiah from Nazareth by making sure that He is executed on a trumped up charge of treason.

Anger leads us to do some pretty dreadful things. Parents may abuse their children because of their anger. Spouses may attack each other during an argument and say some very hurtful things because they are angry with each other. The relationship between a brother and a sister may be destroyed because their anger towards one another consumes them. Anger is one of the devil's favorite tools in attacking people.

Today's celebration of Palm Sunday is also a case of one thing being looked at in two different ways. It marks the end of three years of teaching and miracles by Jesus. He has spent His ministry healing the sick, teaching about the kingdom of heaven and forgiving sins, and now His time has come to bring it all to a close. He is the only one who knows that this triumphant entry into Jerusalem is the beginning of the end. That's why today is also known as Passion Sunday because it's the beginning of Our Lord's Passion. As He rides into the city He is the only one who knows for a fact that by Friday He will be hanging on a cross and lying dead in a tomb.

This is the beginning of the end of the life of Christ, but it is also the end of the beginning of something even greater. Because the three year ministry of Jesus was only His beginning. It

was a three year prologue to the sole purpose of His entire life, to be handed over to the chief priests and the Pharisees, and to be crucified at their hands.

Without this week's Passion, nothing else in the life of Jesus would really matter as much. His birth to the Virgin Mary would still be a miracle, but it would be nothing more than another act of God in world history. Without His Passion, He would be exactly what many today think that He was, a good moral teacher. If Christ does not suffer and die on the cross, then there is no resurrection, and salvation is nothing more than a dream.

But because of His Passion, salvation became a certainty for all people who have faith in Him as God's own Son. With His entry into Jerusalem, the Son of God ended the prologue of His earthly ministry and He began His Passion. And that set into motion the events that would save all humanity from sin, death and the power of the devil. His sacrifice on the cross and His resurrection ended His earthly life here, but it began His eternal reign in heaven. The Passion was the end of His earthly ministry and the beginning of the world's salvation.

On Thursday night we will gather back here to celebrate the beginning of the Lord's Supper. Through this Sacrament the Lord Jesus has sustained His church for almost 2000 years, and He has given His true body and blood continuously every time it is celebrated. He uses it to strengthen your faith and to deliver His gifts of healing and grace to you. It is the means by which He chooses to come to you.

On Friday night we will continue our celebration of the Lord's Passion by remembering once again His crucifixion and death. Good Friday has been celebrated by Christians throughout the history of the church. It reminds us exactly what Jesus Christ had to endure in order to save us from our sins. Without the events of this day, salvation would never have been achieved because the Lord's Word would not have been fulfilled, but through His one sacrifice for all

people for all time, the Lord's Word was fulfilled and your sins are paid for, completely. That is why that Friday is called "good."

Finally, the Lord's Passion ends with His victorious resurrection from the tomb. With it He defeated death, and broke the power of the grave. It can no longer hold those who are bound to Him, and eternal life is assured because He rose first. With His victory over sin, death and the power of the devil, our life begins when we are made His through Baptism. It's the end of our old life as a prisoner to sin, and the beginning of our new life in Christ, the everlasting life that will begin again when He returns to end this world and begin the new creation. May that day begin soon. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.
