

A PERSONAL PALM SUNDAY

I have been in the ministry for some 42 years. And you would think that by now Preaching a Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday sermon, would be a breeze?

But the truth is I am anxious. In fact, I have found that as I get older I find I am anxious a lot. Even doing things I have done most of my life. Like, preaching on Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday.

And while I was anxiously trying to come up with this sermon. I happened to read a column written by a good friend of mine, by the name of Karoline Lewis, a pastor, author, and professor of homiletics at Luther Seminary. The column is called, "Working Preacher." And she suggested, that when it comes to preaching on the Passion of our Lord this year, we need to make it personal.

And so, I went back and reread the Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday Gospels. In fact, **the whole Passion story according** to Matthew.

This time in the midst of my own anxiety and this Lenten Season like no other we have ever known. And the paragraph that spoke to me was this one in the verses just prior to our gospel this morning:

*³⁶Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray."³⁷He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be **grieved and agitated**. ³⁸Then he said to them, "I am **deeply grieved, even to death**; remain here, and stay awake with me."³⁹And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "**My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.**"*

And it hit me, that Jesus too was anxious. **Just like me.** And so, I went and read the passion story again, and I realized that even though Jesus was anxious His life was not ruled by his fear and anxiety. But instead **by faith and compassion.** In fact, that is what makes Jesus' story **so amazing, so divine.** Not just starting with Palm Sunday, but all the way back to the Annunciation which we celebrated just a little over a week ago.

Almost every paragraph of Matthew's Gospel is filled with fear and anxiety.

Mary is found to be with child from the Holy Spirit and Joseph being a righteous man doesn't want to expose her to public disgrace and plans to dismiss her quietly. Until an angel of the Lord appears in a dream. **Will Joseph marry her and adopt her unborn son as his own?**

Then Herod orders all the children in and around Bethlehem, under the age of two to be killed. And Joseph in another dream is warned to flee into Egypt.

Will the infant Jesus survive?

Fast forward and Jesus is baptized by John and God says, "*This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*" And you think OK, now Jesus knows he's the Son of God, He doesn't have to worry any more. But Matthew says, "**Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.**"

As far as I can see, there was never a time in Jesus life when he wasn't in danger. From governors and kings, from Sadducees and Pharisees, even from his own disciples.

“Is it I Lord?” But here’s the thing, Jesus may have been anxious, even fearful. And, yes, he was often tempted, **“Get behind me Satan.”** But he never let those fears overpower him.

Jesus was not **ruled** by his fears. Jesus was ruled by his faith in his Father God And his love for all of God’s people on earth.

As his arrest, trial, and crucifixion approached, **Jesus was “grieved, even unto death.”** Yet he prayed, **“My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; Yet not what I want but what you want.”**

And later even stronger, **“My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, Your will be done.”**

What made Jesus so beloved by his disciples? **And** by the crowds who cried out, **“Hosanna to the Son of Davi?”** And by us this morning who add our own shouts of praise, **“Hosanna in the highest!”**

Is that here at last, was one who was not ruled by fear and anxiety, or intimidated by power, or threatened by rejection, or humiliation. But one instead, who despite his fears refused to stop loving, to stop caring, to stop giving of himself.

One who though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, Being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – Even death on a cross.

It’s OK to be anxious! These are anxious times. And sometimes we are called upon to do anxiety provoking things.

But I think Jesus this morning would remind us. Of the words of psalm 31,

***For I have heard the whispering of the crowd, Fear is all around;
They put their heads together against me; they plot to take my life.
But as for me, I have trusted in you, O Lord.
I have said, “You are my God,”***

When we were baptized God said to us, just like he did to Jesus at his baptism,

“You are my son, my daughter, with you I am well pleased!”

But that does not mean we won’t face temptations. Nor will it protect us from the coronavirus, or keep us from all harm. But, what it does mean is, that like Jesus, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, we can resist temptation, overcome evil with good, risk our lives for the sake of others, suffer pain and humiliation. And even face death, confident that ultimately good triumphs over evil, and that sin and death and even the devil have already been defeated!

And that with God, all things are possible with Christ who strengthens us.

These are indeed anxious times, but all around us I see signs of hope. And the assurance that Holy Spirit is alive and well and in our midst. In fact, I invite you to join me this morning in shouting Hosannas.

Hosanna to doctors and nurses, orderlies and lab technicians!
Hosanna to police officers and grocery clerks and cart sanitizers!
Hosanna to scientists and social workers and nursing home caregivers!
Hosanna to national, state and local leaders
Doing their best to get us through these difficult days.
Hosanna to all of those staying home, washing their hands,
And social distancing.

After reading and rereading the passion story, after hearing all the stories of these heroic deeds being done by faithful people trusting in their Father God.

I confess I am still anxious.

But I am also hopeful, and even more confident that God is with us. And that we will get through this.

I once heard the evangelist Tony Campolo preach a sermon about the events of Good Friday and the Crucifixion. And after telling all the terrible things that happened that day. He would shout, **“It’s Friday, but Sundays a comin’!”**

Well right now in Charleston, In America, in the whole world,
“It’s Friday! But Sunday’s a comin’!”

Because, God loves you!
And so do I.
Amen.

Pastor Steve Cooper