

**Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday: Matt 21:1-11; Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Is 50:4-9a; Phil 2:5-11; Matt 26:14-27:54; Psalm 31:9-16**

Today is called the Sunday of the Passion. But why is it called the Sunday of the Passion, I mean, what is this Sunday really all about? Well, we just read about Christ's passion in the Gospel of Matthew, and how the people, the everyday people who had seen Jesus in the streets and all that he had been doing for them were waiving palm branches and shouting "Hosanna," because they were ready to make Jesus their King. Hosanna in Judaism refers to a cry expressing an appeal for divine help. And the religious leaders of the day did not connect the dots that Jesus was divine, but the people to whom they preached had connected the dots. The people knew they were shouting Hosanna at Jesus as an appeal for divine help. The people were so filled with hope having just witnessed Jesus restoring the sight of a man blind from birth and raising Lazarus from the dead that they wanted to make Jesus their King because they were overjoyed with the *hope of divine deliverance* as promised by the prophet Zechariah and other prophets as well. But Zechariah, who wrote 500 years before Jesus was born, specifically predicted the coming Divine and eternal King would ride in on a donkey and establish peace and *through a blood covenant* would save people from being prisoners in a waterless pit. The waterless pit is described by Jesus in the parable of Lazarus who is in a waterless place after death. The people were waiting for Messiah to bring peace on earth and save them from being prisoners for their sins after death. Read Zechariah chapter 9 sometime to better understand *what the people understood* when Jesus was riding in on a donkey. But so the people were filled with *the hope of divine deliverance* when Jesus rode in on the donkey. Deliverance from an oppressive government, an apostate religion, an imperfect justice system with class disparity, and from sickness and even from fear of death because they had just witnessed Jesus resurrecting the dead. And even sin. They were appealing for divine help in light of their sins. Jesus had taught the people he had authority to forgive sins, saying, "That you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins," and then Jesus healed the paralytic man. The everyday people like you and like me, they were so excited to see Jesus because they could see that Jesus was emanating as the Light of the World redeeming all that was broken. But then darkness doubled down to stop this Light. Darkness

escalated in the spiritual realm, tempting Judas to betray Jesus while hardening the religious leaders' hearts and goading the reigning government to wash their hands of him and even causing Jesus' closest followers to run from Jesus and deny him. And so, today we just read of both the darkest and the brightest moments on earth. The abyss that Jesus had to soldier through in order to permeate its depths in order to reach down and redeem the darkness into Light.

But so why did Jesus have to go through all of this? Why did Jesus have to suffer and die and go through with what we call his Passion in order to be our Light? Well, scripture tells us why Jesus had to go through all this in the accounts of two gardens.

According to scripture, humanity began in a garden, and when the first Adam sinned against God in the garden, sin and death entered the world. Darkness began at that point to hinder the Light and the way God intended for creation to be. In the Garden of Eden, fellowship with God became broken. But God at that same moment provided a plan to redeem the brokenness in a promised Seed of the woman. It is *this* Seed of whom we read about today, Jesus Christ, the last Adam, who entered a second garden so that Light might once and for all overcome that darkness. We are told of this in scripture: "The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit." Death was swallowed up by Life in a decision made in the second Garden.

And if you will bear with me, the best way I know to explain why Jesus had to suffer and go through with His Passion is through a prison analogy. Given we all want justice. And when laws are broken people lose their freedom and cannot regain their freedom until their debt to society is paid. According to scripture all of us have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God, and the wages of sin is death. Wait, what? The wages of sin is death? Like any sin? All sin leads to death? Well, that's what scripture tells us. And some may say to me, "But Heather, that sounds so harsh. I came today to hear pleasant things and just waive palm branches in the air and so forth." Yet part of the problem with our country and our world right now is the watering down of the Word. We skip or gloss over or ignore or go even go against the parts of God's Word that are hard to understand or that we don't like. But I did not write the Bible; I am simply standing up here pointing out what it says. And scripture tells us the wages of

sin is death. And though we try, none of us can avoid falling short of the glory of God, because even calling someone a fool is sin according to Christ Jesus, and so we *fool ourselves* if we believe we can be good enough to abide with a Holy God. And with the wages of sin being death, a person sentenced to death can never become undeserving of death. They are at the mercy of the judge. And other prisoners cannot free a person sentenced to death, because they like the guilty person are also imprisoned for their own lawbreaking as deserving of death. Only a person outside the prison can free a prisoner. It is Jesus' sinlessness that gives him the right to free us by standing in for us. This is why we are given the account of Barabbas today whom we are told was a notorious prisoner. Barabbas was on death row. Literally. But because of Jesus, Barabbas is released, and Jesus stands in for him. This is what Jesus did for each one of us. It is not happenstance that we are told in the Gospel about Barabbas. Jesus stands in for each one of us just as he did for Barabbas, and we are freed. This is the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. There are other scriptures that explain this doctrine to us, such as Peter explaining, "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God," (1 Peter 3:18) and the prophecy from Isaiah written 700 years before the crucifixion: "he was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed." Jesus is our innocent Passover Lamb, unblemished, who was slain that the penalty of death could pass over or be removed from us. It is no coincidence that Jesus ate the Passover with his disciples and was then arrested. Just as the Passover lamb in Egypt caused the angel of death to Passover and free the Israelites from slavery, Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and makes us free. Jesus himself tells us this in the Gospel of John saying: "Truly, truly, I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. A slave is not a permanent member of the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

Our innocent Lord is able to free us because he is the only one outside the prison of sin and death. But also, Jesus alone has a right to judge us, because Jesus has jurisdiction. A judge who does not have jurisdiction cannot rule a not-guilty verdict for people over whom he has no authority. Eighty-eight times in scripture, Jesus calls himself the Son of Man. We call Jesus the Son of God and

he is, but Jesus emphasizes himself as the Son of Man, because it is his humanity that gives him the jurisdiction to judge us and grant us life. Jesus tells us this saying: “For as the Father has life in Himself, so also He has granted the Son to have life in Himself. And He has given Him authority to execute judgement, because He is the Son of Man.” That’s John 5:26 and 27. If Jesus had remained only God, he would not have jurisdiction to come again to judge the living and the dead. It would not be equitable to judge us as only God. It would be an imbalanced scale for a perfect and Holy and All Powerful and Infinite God to stand in judgment of imperfect and fallible, finite people. But Jesus *has the right* to judge us as the Son of Man and the Seed of the Woman. This was the importance of the Incarnation. “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way just as we are, yet without sin.” That’s Hebrews chapter 4 verse 15. And again, today in our reading from Philippians: “Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God...emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness and being found in human form...became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” Jesus took on the form of a slave we are told. Becoming like one of us. Jesus alone has the right to be our judge because he lived as one of us...and Jesus alone has the right to be our Savior because he alone lived as one of us yet without sin. And Jesus says to us: “Whoever hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life and will not come under judgment. Indeed, he has crossed over from death to life.” Jesus paid for us to cross from death to life. Jesus redeemed our darkness. And he did this not only on the cross, but in the Garden: Redeeming the original decision to go against God’s will in an earlier garden. From the Garden of Eden to the Garden of Gethsemane. From “*not thy will*” to “*thy will alone at any cost,*” came Christ’s *passionate* prayer in the Garden.

*Passion* means “a powerful emotion.” Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane was overwrought with powerful emotion for the brokenness of the entire world. And this is an understatement. The English language does not have a word powerful enough to describe that moment in the Garden. The way Jesus articulates the power of the emotion in the Garden of Gethsemane is that *he did not want to go through it alone*. And so, he asks his Disciples to keep watch with him because, as Jesus next says to them: “My soul is overwhelmed with

sorrow to the point of death.” Jesus’ soul was so overwhelmed with sorrow that it was literally killing him. The power of the emotion of the sorrow alone was killing him, and he hadn’t even been beaten and tortured and crucified yet. We are given the detail from the Gospel of Luke that in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus began to sweat blood. He was so filled with sorrow over the darkness in the world and how many people have turned away from God or decided that they don’t need God and how many of us have called one another fools and hurt one another and gone to war against one another and fought over the planet he gifted us and betrayed one another and been jealous of one another, raping and pillaging and killing one another now even in our schools...all the while going after false gods by worshipping *money and fame and lust and comfort over salvation and service and discipline and passion*. And Jesus was so filled with recognition of *the price* he would have to pay in order to redeem all that was broken that he literally sweated blood. And he begged, “Father if this be possible, take this cup from me.” But God so loved the world, *that he gave* his only begotten son *for us*. Because of the love our Heavenly Father has for *every single one of us* past, present, and future, and because of *the obedience* of Christ...Jesus, after sweating literal drops of blood in the Garden, got up and died for us. *This* is what we are remembering when we waive our palm branches in the air and then read of the Garden of Gethsemane and the death on the cross in an effort *to have an inkling* of what Christ’s Passion was all about. Christ’s Passion was about *us*. Christ’s passion was about *us* given Christ’s passion was *necessitated because of us*; and yet, Christ’s passion was also for *us* as *one of us*, because *God loves us*. And God will not leave his creation broken. Jesus Christ is mending us and defending us and delivering us and will come again with us to the place he has prepared for us. And whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. *Amen*.