

Mark 11:1-11, Mark 14:1-15:47
Palm and Passion Sunday, March 28, 2021
Synod Sermons
Pastor Karen Boda

Please pray with me. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I'm Pastor Karen Boda, one of the Assistants to the Bishop, and I bring you greetings on this Palm and Passion Sunday from Bishop Kevin Strickland and all of our Southeastern Synod staff.

It's both Palm and Passion Sunday and we have two very different texts, Mark 11 and Mark 14. One leads into Jerusalem. One leads out. I'll be honest, today is one of the Sundays where I feel disjointed and conflicted. We welcome Jesus into Jerusalem in a triumphal procession, spreading leafy branches across the road and shouting Hosanna. But we'll leave worship in silence. We shout "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" and then we shout "Crucify him." After Jesus rides into Jerusalem, the very first thing he does is to enter the Temple. When he is crucified, the curtain of the Temple is torn.

My favorite children's sermon on this day is to take a palm branch. Straight and sure. Sort of like a long road. But as the children watch, I take the palm branch and folding it just right, I turn it into a cross for Jesus' crucifixion. This road into Jerusalem for Jesus leads straight to the cross.

The disciples know where this road leads to. He's told them. Jesus told the disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be rejected, and then killed. But Peter rebuked him. Again he told the twelve that he'll be handed over, condemned to death, mocked, spit on, flogged, and killed. They know. So Jesus rides into Jerusalem, knowing that the road leads directly to the cross.

Brian K. Blount does a masterful job of relating this experience of Jesus entering into Jerusalem to a 1995 movie starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn. In the movie, Penn plays a character on death row in one of our U.S. Penitentiaries. As Penn waits for his death, he begins to lose more and more of his humanity, until finally the day comes when he will take the short, slow walk from his cell to the place of his execution. Another in the prison has given a name to this walk. As Blount says "Since his end was already foreordained, since it was now only a matter of timing, even though he walked and breathed, his life had for all intents and purposes, come to an end."¹ He was a dead man walking.

Jesus made his entry into Jerusalem. Though still walking and breathing, he knew his life was coming to an end. His fate was preordained. He too was a dead man walking. Or was he?

¹ Brian K. Blount and Gary W. Charles. *Preaching Mark in Two Voices* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2002), 204.

To really understand our two texts today, we've got to understand what happens between them. Mark is the least verbose of the gospel writers so we should pay attention to those two chapters that stand between the palm and the passion texts. These two chapters are all about the Temple.

The Temple is *the* place where both the religious and secular leadership reside. But it's more than that. It's a visible symbol of God's presence and assures the people that God is with them. The Temple is where God is.

It's also where God's teachings come alive. A place to learn. To care for others. A place to learn how to live together. Although still physically standing, although still a grand sight to be seen, Jesus knew that the Temple was already dead. After Jesus enters into Jerusalem, he walks into the Temple, looks around, and then leaves. The next day he curses a fig tree which has been unable to bear fruit. Jesus enters the Temple and throws over the tables of the money changers. The Temple is to be a place of prayer for all nations, but now his father's Temple is a den of robbers – a clear rejection of Jesus and his teaching. Again in the Temple, Jesus has dialogue with the chief priests and scribes who question his authority to perform healings. Jesus tells the parable of the wicked tenants who reject the owner of the vineyard. He is questioned as to whether there is a resurrection, and which commandment is the first of all. Jesus then foretells about the destruction of the Temple. He says "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."² The Temple is a dead man walking.

In the end, the curtain of the Temple is torn in two. The Temple is no longer the place where God is. The clear message is that we don't control where we meet God, for God is now amongst us. With us in this new age. Heaven and earth are now together in Jesus Christ.

As Blount says, Sean Penn's character in the movie was on a short walk to the death chamber. He was a dead man walking. Even as Jesus hangs on the cross, his death becomes the way to life. He's dying into life. Life for us.

As we move now into the holiest of weeks, we can look back and see that Lent has been a time for us to examine ourselves, our lives, and our relationship with God. Are **we dead** but still walking? Are we separated from God, distant from others, walking through life alone, on our own? What in our lives needs to die to bring us back to life? How can we choose to follow Jesus back onto the path of life? All of this examination is not meant for us to wallow in guilt and grief for the things that we've done and the things which we've left undone.

In our baptismal liturgy, we proclaim that God frees us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of Jesus. By water and the Word, we are washed and raised to new life, joined with all the others who have been baptized, and given the gift of the Holy Spirit to nurture us and help us sustain our faith.

St. Paul tells us that if we have been united with Jesus in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.³

² Mark 13:1-2

³ Romans 6:5

Luther continues and says that our baptism isn't just a once and done. Each day we are again drowned – we die - in the waters of baptism, washed clean of all our sins, and then rise daily again into new life with Christ. This happens every single day - for all of our life!

When I take my shower every morning, I try and reflect on that imagery of being washed yet again in the waters of baptism and joined with Christ. I think about everything that has frightened me this week. All my worries. The things which I regret or all the things which have filled me with guilt. The things I meant to do but never did. I ask forgiveness and all the sins go right on down that drain. Gone. Forgiven. Released.

I am then free to begin again, joined with Christ, joined with each of you, for yet another day. We are not, and will never be, dead men walking, but through his death and resurrection, we are alive in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.