

## **A Study in Contrasts**

March 28, 2021

Sunday of the Passion/Palm Sunday Year B

St. Andrew Lutheran Church

Sermon by Pastor Michelle Kuhlman

You may have heard the term “worship war(s)”. How, you might ask, do the words worship and war go together? Well, in the last few decades, it has described the ongoing debate/disagreement/divisions surrounding contrasting styles of worship: “contemporary” versus “traditional.” To put it mildly, it has to do with change. Of course, there is a certain amount of anguish that comes with the word “change”.

But I’m going to let you in on a little secret this morning. There’s a new kind of worship war happening, and it surrounds this very day, the Sunday of the Passion/Palm Sunday. Can you guess what the disagreement is about? Yes, I’ll bet you can. I can hear many of you now, saying “I remember when it was just Palm Sunday. We did Palm Sunday on Sunday, and the Passion was on Good Friday.” Well, yes. But there was also a time when attendance and participation in worship and church life was a lot more robust than it is today. It used to be that it was a given that people would attend worship on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. But things change. In short, Palm Sunday got a Passion narrative added to it to ensure that people actually heard the story of Jesus’ suffering and death. It’s such a defining part of our understanding of who and whose we are that it should not and cannot be glossed over. I’ve had people say to me “Pastor, I don’t come to Good Friday worship because it’s just so sad and depressing.” Well, it can feel that way, but we have the benefit of knowing the rest of the story, so we understand that the events of Good Friday don’t have the last word. When we follow Christ to the foot of the cross and encounter that deep sorrow, the contrast with the elation of Easter morning makes things all the more joyful.

Like our worship service today, the time we call Holy Week began with the excited shouts of “Hosannah, Hosannah!” Jesus entered into Jerusalem with crowds of people hailing his arrival. As we know, by the end of the week, the crowds would be shouting “Crucify him!” Surrounded by throngs of people at the beginning of the week, Jesus found himself utterly alone, without even his disciples to stand by him by week’s end.

There are so many contrasts to be found in our text today. From the loud and cheering crowds of the triumphal entry to the stark, still quiet of death. From daylight to total darkness. There's a sad irony in the supposed "best of the best" (the chief priests) doing the worst of the worst. The reality of the truth about Jesus' identity plays a central part as what was once not apparent (to everyone) becomes revealed in the confession of the centurion that "Truly this man was God's son!" The suffering servant is also the king. The one who was full of life emptied himself on the cross. Jesus is fully human and fully divine.

We also find ourselves to be full of contrasting parts. We are saints and sinners at the same time. When we hear the story of Palm Sunday and the Passion, we want to think that we wouldn't find ourselves part of that crowd that switched from "Hosannah" to "crucify him!" But I think we know deep down that we very well could. We could be afraid of going up against ruling powers. We could get swept up in mob mentality.

We find contrast in our very hearts, when we know that our faith demands we do justice and love kindness yet we remain silent in the face of unspeakable violence and hatred the we KNOW grieves the heart of God.

Wherever you stand on The Sunday of the Passion/Palm Sunday, my hope is that you can make space to notice all the contrasts of the day, the texts, our words, and what we know about this week we call Holy.

Some ten years ago, Luther Seminary posted a video to their YouTube channel. It "went viral," in church circles, as much as something from a seminary channel can, anyway. Titled "Easter is Coming," the video features text that is displayed on the screen phrase by phrase. Each phrase is narrated as appears on the screen. After all of the phrases have been narrated, the voice asks a question. In response to the question, the narrator reads each of the previous phrases, only this time in reverse order. You'll find it makes for quite a contrast. This is what it says:

Easter is Coming.

But for many of us, this is not the ultimate reality.

There is too much pain and suffering in the world today.

Death has the last word

It would therefore be foolish to say that

The life and death of a first-century Jew named Jesus makes a difference.

Why

Might makes right.

Power is superior to compassion and

Despair is stronger than hope.

So I refuse to believe

A man can come back from the dead

Sometimes the most important facts are the hardest to accept

Resurrection is a false hope.

How can you say

An empty tomb changes everything

Don't you see

"God loves the world"

Is a lie

"Money is God"

And

"The one who dies with the most toys wins"

I will tell you what I tell my children

There is no more to this world than what you can see, hold, and buy

There is no mystery in everyday life, and

There is nothing sacred about ordinary things and people

Many of us simply do not believe that

God can give life to the dead, bring light from darkness, and create something out of nothing

But what if the testimony of the women at the tomb was true?

Then...

God can give life to the dead, bring light from darkness, and create something out of nothing

Many of us simply do not believe that

There is nothing sacred about ordinary things and people

There is no mystery in everyday life, and

There is no more to this world than what you can see, hold, and buy

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There is too much pain and suffering in the world today

But for many of us, this is not the ultimate reality

Easter is coming.

Indeed, dear ones, Easter is coming. But let us not rush there. May we be willing to hear the echoes of the shouting and feel the still silence. May we notice the contrasts, and may their truths make us uncomfortable. Let us journey into this Holy Week with focus and intention.

Amen.