

Sermon for Palm Sunday

Sermon Text: Hebrews 12:2

Looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Today, as we celebrate Palm Sunday, we also begin Holy Week, the week of the suffering and death of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Thereby one thing should be more important than anything else: that we think of Him, take to heart His path of suffering, follow Him in devotion.

We can't follow Him with our feet like the disciples, who went with Him up to Jerusalem. But our souls should belong to the Lord Jesus. We want to focus our thoughts on His path to Golgotha. Our hearts may go along to the garden of Gethsemane, to the palace of the High Priest Caiaphas, and to the seat of the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, and then – to the cross, to the bloody, shameful cross!

That should be much more important to us today and in the coming days than the thousand impressions and experiences that otherwise clutter and occupy our minds. It is just as if every morning upon waking up someone stood behind us to prompt us: "Use the day, of course also for the tasks that are given you, but perhaps there is also something new and beautiful to experience, that will broaden and enrich your own life."

We want to say no to that at the beginning of Holy Week. Rather our hearts should now be led and governed completely by One person: by Jesus Christ and His path to the cross! We want to spiritually go with Him. "Let us look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith."

How often, how long? Again and again, so long as I live. Until I myself die and must take my leave of the earth. Until all the trouble and burdens of this earthly life come to an end through Christ and His cross, nevertheless, a goal is set: to Him! I will die but not be left in oblivion or be forgotten. I will not merely be spoils of the cemetery, my name becoming increasingly pale writing in the yellowing files. I depart to Jesus who died for me and rose again and will give me everlasting life.

He can give me and all believers eternal life because He gave up His kingly power and glory for us sinners who deserved eternal death. The King lowered Himself for the slaves. The Lord endured what the servants owed. Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem: that was still somehow kingly, albeit an unusual sort of kingly. What king rides on a donkey? Jesus did it to fulfill the words of the prophet (Zechariah 9:9b): Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." Jesus didn't want to be a king like the powerful ones of this world. Thank goodness! Otherwise, we would have no Savior.

And yet there were still visible signs of His royal majesty on Palm Sunday: the disciples and with them a hopeful crowd rejoiced. "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, who is King of Israel!"

But Jesus knew what awaited Him. Handcuffs, as we would say today, with which one leads criminals away. And in the end, the cross.

Eastern kings were led up to a stepped throne at their coronation. And there they were led up to a high and exalted seat over the crowd. Instead of royal seat of ivory or precious metals, Jesus chose the shameful and cursed wood of the cross. Nailed there to suffer and die, He was indeed lifted up as the cross was raised. He looked down at His enemies and His few remaining friends. But what sort of throne was this! What kind of exaltation!

And what kind of royal crown! This braid of sharp thorns, which distorted the head of the King of Kings into “a sacred Head, now wounded, with grief and shame weighed down.”

The entire royal reign of Jesus in this world: pure suffering! But none of it happened against His will. It was not the power of fate or the superiority of His enemies. It was the will of the Father and it was the obedience of the Son. “Father, Your will be done.”

Jesus certainly could have had “the joy set before Him, but He endured the cross, despising the shame.” Jesus could have prevented the traitor Judas from betraying Him. Jesus would have only had to avoid the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before Good Friday and chosen another place to spend the night. They would have searched for Him and not found Him. Yes, even at His capture, Jesus could have given the sword-wielding Peter free rein. Or He could have even asked the Father Himself to send Him the host of Holy Angels, the strong heroes of God, to help.

Golgotha wouldn't have happened if Jesus had wanted otherwise. And yet on Golgotha, the scoffers had no idea how thin the wall was between their supposed victorious scorn and mockery and the possibilities of Almighty God. “Is He the king of Israel? Let Him come down from the cross. Then we will believe Him.” What they challenged, God could have certainly done. But God doesn't want the forced faith of proof addicts, and God's Son didn't want to gloat over sinners, but rather die for sinners. He could have certainly had joy. But He endured the cross and despised the shame.

But in the midst of suffering and death, Jesus still remained the everlasting King, the Ruler of Glory. Through suffering and death, He won the victory over all the powers of evil for us poor people, that we should become heirs of a hope beyond death and the grave. The events of Good Friday already foreshadow Easter: the crown of thorns yields to a crown of life. Through God's actions and through the obedience of the Son, the great humiliation becomes the highest exaltation. “He is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Lord of glory and death – how does that fit together? It doesn't go together at all; they are incompatible opposites. But God Himself has made the unthinkable possible in His Son and fulfilled everything in Him and through Him: the Lord of glory was crucified, the King of glory fell to His death.

Why? To give us, who were alienated from God, an eternal home, the Son descended into the deepest depths. He gave everything so that a shroud, coffin, and cemetery wouldn't have to be our final destination. We should live with God into eternity! That's why the Lord of glory died – out of great love!

But this love was and is stronger than the power of death. The Lord of glory truly died. He let death beat and strike Him down, and yet He broke through death and conquered death. “Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over Him.” (Romans 6:9) On the contrary, He rules over death. He brings life to the world! “Because He is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

However it is not yet Easter, but Lent. It is time to understand that with my sins, “as countless as the sands” (LSB 453 v. 4), I helped build the cross of the Holy Son of God. It is time to confess and be sad, sad about myself and all the many mistakes of my life. Yet when I mourn before the cross of God’s Son, it is not mourning that has the seed of death in it. It’s nothing but the seed of life.

With all my evil, with all the misery and woe that I cause and have to get through, I don’t end up in the cruel pit of mere mortality. The cross on Golgotha makes my grave a resting chamber. But rest will be replaced by awakening. “I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD.” (Psalm 118:17) Jesus’ silence in the grave makes my death and decay a prelude to the resurrection of the dead. His sitting at the right hand of the throne of God makes my disappearance and passing away into an eternal permission to stay with God in the land of the living.

Wisdom and comfort only for old people? O no, you young ones. God willing, you will all get older and become old and will have to question guilt and the meaning and purpose of life. If you want to have comfort and hope that outlast the present day, there is only this one clue:

Look to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ and become silent in the middle of the loud bustle.

Look to His resurrection from the dead, surrender yourself to the King of life and your life will flow into a life that doesn’t pass away.

All life that passes over a life in Jesus Christ ends in eternal death. Life that is lived in faith in Jesus Christ flows into life with God. Because “He is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” He is our King and Lord, founder and perfecter of faith. Our Savior in suffering and death, our life and salvation giver into eternity. Amen.