

Palm Sunday

April 14, 2019

*Matthew 21:1-11: **"It's About What God Does ... Fulfills"***

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Today is Palm Sunday. For those of us who have been around the church, there are often a lot of good memories associated with this day. Most importantly, it is considered to be the beginning of the passion of our Lord Jesus. It's going to be a little bit strange for me to begin with the Passover and Maundy Thursday in order to get to the point of Palm Sunday, but I hope you will bear with me.

The celebration of this great feast was a memorial that recalled the deliverance of the people of Israel from their slavery in Egypt. Every year the people were to sacrifice a one-year-old male lamb without blemish. They were to touch the lintel and two doorposts of their homes with the blood of the lamb. Moses says in Exodus 12, "For the Lord will pass through to strike the Egyptians, and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the Lord will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you. You shall observe this rite as a statute for you and for your sons forever."

It was in the context of the Passover that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ instituted the Sacrament of Holy Communion, saying to those present: "This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 26:28)." Jesus is identifying himself as the lamb. Only by the offering of his body and the shedding of his blood are we saved from sin and death.

Now, for the Jew, the day of Passover was the 14th day of the month of Nisan (March/April) - what we call Maundy Thursday. The book of Exodus tells us that on the 10th day of the Jewish month of Nisan (March/April), "every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household ... Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats, and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month ... [and] kill their lambs ..."

So, four days before Maundy Thursday, the Jews were instructed to choose their one-year-old male lamb without blemish to be killed for the Passover meal. For the Jews, each day of the four days that would follow reminded them of 100 years of captivity in Egypt, thereby making a total of 400 years. During the four days, the lamb would become a pet to the family. This served two purposes. First of all, they were able to inspect the chosen sacrifice to make sure that it was truly without blemish and an acceptable sacrifice. Secondly, by treating the lamb as a pet, or a part of the household, this would emphasize the gravity of the penalty for their sins. They would have to take this animal that they had begun to develop feelings for and slaughter it.

Now, here's the payoff. The 10th day of the Jewish month of Nisan, when the Jews would choose their lamb for sacrifice, is the day that we call Palm Sunday. Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem was the day in which the Jews would have chosen their lamb for the Passover sacrifice, and begin the ongoing inspection of the lamb. Our Gospel lesson for this morning records, "and when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, 'Who is this?'" The question is a question of inspection. The initial answer that is given by the crowd is simply, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee." But, this is just the beginning of the inspection of Jesus as "a household pet," so to speak.

For four days, Jesus will be under the scrutiny of Jews and Gentiles alike. The question is a very simple one: Is this a lamb without blemish, an acceptable sacrifice? It really is incredible to look at the gospel accounts and pick out the verdicts that are given in regard to this question. Right from the very start, the crowds in Jerusalem say "Hosanna!" That Hebrew phrase is found in only one place in the Old Testament. It is recorded in Psalm 118:25, where it is a plea for help: "[Lord], save us!" John Piper writes:

But something happened to that phrase, "Hosanna." The meaning changed over the years. In the psalm it was immediately followed by the exclamation [in verse 26 of the same Psalm]: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" The cry for help, "Hosanna," was answered almost before it came out of the psalmist's mouth. And over the centuries the phrase "Hosanna" stopped being a cry for help in the ordinary language of the Jews. Instead it became a shout of hope and exultation. It used to mean, "Save, please!" But gradually, it came to mean, "Salvation! Salvation! Salvation has come!"

On that Palm Sunday long ago, the crowds were basically saying, "Here he is! Here is the Savior! Here is the Passover lamb! Here is salvation!" John the Baptist knew this truth all the way back at the time of the Baptism of Jesus, when he announced: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29)!" He knew that Jesus was the unblemished lamb who was living an unblemished life for us in order to take upon himself every one of our blemishes. There is more.

As I already said, for four days many would have had the opportunity to inspect the one who entered into Jerusalem on the day when the Passover lamb was selected. Pontius Pilate will give the verdict, "I find no guilt in this man (Luke 23:4)." A thief next to Jesus will say, "this man has done nothing wrong (Luke 23:41)." And when Jesus breathes his last, the Roman centurion will say, after seeing the whole spectacle, "Certainly this man was innocent (Luke 23:47)!" And the crowds at the crucifixion will walk away from the death of Jesus, returning to their homes "beating their breasts," which is an act of repentance confirming that what had taken place was the crucifixion of an innocent man - a man without blemish.

What does it mean for us that Jesus was the lamb without blemish? Well, the first thing we need to understand is that we are not without blemish. Through the commandments, God tells us which works are pleasing in his sight and which are not. Love is the fulfillment of the law. That means that the commandments are all about what should be our loving relationship with God and our neighbor. The problem is that the commandments cut us to the heart by showing that we do not and are unable to keep them because we are so in love with ourselves. The wages of sin is death.

The law is good. We feel guilty because we break the law. So, we discover that we are not good. We are truly sheep that have gone astray - blemished through and through. But now there is one who is of our human nature without blemish. More than that, he is the very Son of God, equal with the Father. He is not only able to keep the commandments but, since he is the eternal one, when he keeps the commandments, it brings a value to his work that is able to reach us forever and change our status before God. Because Jesus is without blemish and takes our blemishes, we are declared to be without blemish. One day we will be recreated to be without blemish.

There is another thing. We must not forget that Jesus is also the lamb who was sacrificed on the cross to pay for our sins. Not only did Christ take our blemishes and claim them as his own, but he also took to himself the slaughter that we deserve for breaking the law and ruining our relationship with God and one another. He endured death and hell. When I was a kid I can remembering trying to imagine what it would be like to slaughter a lamb, drain it of its blood, and then burn it to ash. It was rather disturbing until I understood that this is what our sins bring when they disconnect us from true and forever love. Jesus gives himself and embraces not only our blemishes, but what our blemishes bring. The slaughter that we see on the cross is the slaughter that we deserve. What a relief it is to know that Jesus became one of us to be our substitute. Not only that, but he is the Son of God which makes his substitution for us a substitution that frees us forever.

Palm Sunday was the day in which the Passover lamb was selected. How appropriate then that Jesus would ride into Jerusalem on that very day. He truly is the lamb without blemish who takes away the sin of the world. As we can see, it really is all about what God does. He fulfills! Indeed! Jesus is our Passover from death and hell to life and heaven! Again our text: "And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, "Who is this?" He is the lamb without blemish! As Peter writes in his first epistle (1:17b-19): "... conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot."

Amen.

Pr. Brock Abbott