

St. Matthew 21:1-9

Dear Friends in Christ,

It's all so very familiar and traditional. Palm Sunday. Palm branches. And the sermon hymn, "Ride On, Ride On in Majesty". It's the second verse that seizes the moment and carries us into eternal life: "Ride on, ride on in majesty! In lowly pomp ride on to die. O Christ, Thy triumphs now begin O'er captive death and conquered sin."

"Ride on to die." I'd guess the theme for this Palm Sunday seems a little strange. However, an understanding of what was happening that moment of Christ's entrance into Jerusalem says otherwise. It's the journey that must be made . . .

FOR A DYING CHURCH

I. We Are a Dying Church.

We are a dying church. We are. I know, some will say, "Yes, we're shrinking." Indeed. The church throughout this country is shrinking, dying. I'm telling you, dear friends, I can't get away from what Jesus said about the last part of the last days. I can't ignore it and neither should you: "you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake...many will fall away...many false prophets will arise and lead many astray...because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold." (Matt. 24, portions of verses 9-12) You really didn't think we would come up with some sort of stopgap program, did you? Well, we could, but it would have to be at the expense of faithfulness to the Word.

A dying church isn't bad. If we believe the Scripture is the Word of God, then we can rejoice in the truth of what Jesus said in the text I just read to you from St. Matthew's Gospel. If what Jesus said doesn't happen then Jesus is either in error or a liar. We rejoice in the truth of His Word and His admonition:

"And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world...Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (Lk. 21:25-28)

Got it?? "distress of nations...people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world...". Look around you? Does it look familiar? Does it feel familiar: *distress, perplexity, foreboding*?

But we have to hold on to what Jesus says to His people: "...when these things begin to take place, straighten up..." Don't slouch in frustration, disappointment and fear - or, again, *distress, perplexity, foreboding* - unless, of course, you've invested too much of you with this world. And then, the admonition: "straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

II. Because We Are Dying.

But, of course, the most pressing reality is your impending dying and death - and mine. Here are the words that changed everything: "...of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of you shall surely die." (Gen. 2:17) What explosive words: "you shall surely die.". Plans, hopes, dreams will be shattered. They will be - they are - if we've invested too much of us with this world.

Think of it: the breaking of one simple commandment altered everything. Adam and Eve were removed from the Presence of God's perfect love. Who could even imagine what they thought that first night - the darkness that introduced them to a troubled, conflicting, dying world? What did they think when the first bodily pains and struggles of life hit?

Then comes the first obituary of humanity starting with Adam - Genesis 5. Ten generations are listed, and at the end of most summary statements the words "he died." Most of the world and church people are extremely conflicted and ready to argue against the clear Word of God: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Rom. 3:23) The *positive thinkers' agenda* cannot and will not tolerate Scripture, "All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." (Ps. 14:3, Rom. 3:12)

The reality of the depth of God's hatred for human sin **is not unclear**. It's rationalized and ignored - even by church people. The psalmist declares, "I said in my alarm, 'All mankind are liars.'" (Ps. 116:11) Moses declares, "You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence." (Ps. 90:8) Paul declares, "The wages of sin is death..." (Rom. 6:23a) Every funeral, every time we drive by a cemetery, every time you and I travel with a loved one or friend through the final moments of life remind us - scream at us - about the negative and sadness of death, regardless of how positive one might be.

Many of you are familiar with the now departed Romanian Lutheran Pastor, Richard Wurmbrand, who spent fourteen years in Communist prisons during the years of Communist Russian Dictator, Joseph Stalin. He wrote:

We all have to die. The decision does not depend on us. If nothing follows (after death), the most beautiful life is nothing more than a banquet offered to a condemned man before his execution. He gets dainties and then is hanged. He may live in an ideal society, but eventually he will rot, forgotten forever by everyone [And I would add, forgotten forever by God though existing forever in hell!]. (Richard Wurmbrand, "The Answer to the Atheist's Handbook," Living Sacrifice Book Company, Bartlesville, OK, 1975, p. 150.)

III. Ride On to Die.

And so, our text - the importance of Palm Sunday, Passion Sunday - Christ's entrance into Jerusalem to the cheer of the crowds. We're told:

"This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying, 'Say to the daughter of Zion. "Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden."'"

"The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them. Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!'" (vv. 6-9)

Hosanna! - "Save, we beseech you!" Did they understand? Not really. Most were looking for a King who would establish an earthly kingdom. The Word of Jesus, the Word made flesh, wasn't heard: "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mk. 10:45) Think of it: "a ransom." And "ransom" defined: "A sum of money or other payment demanded or paid for the release of a prisoner." - Oxford Dictionary. He would pay the price for our release from hell.

This is where sin takes every human. Imprisoned by dying and death and hell. That's it! And we're incapable of meeting God's demands. Remember? Remember what Scriptures teach? "For by works of the law (doing what God demands; keeping His law perfectly) no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin." (Rom. 3:20) - "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Rom 3:23).

But listen carefully. The Word of God teaches, “(we) are justified by his grace (His undeserved love) as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (He redeemed us; paid what was demanded for our ransom), whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood (Propitiation is what God demanded to appease or gain His favor), to be received by faith.” (Rom 2:24,25) You know the verse, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Eph. 2:8-9)

And so, we go back to the beginning and the reference to our sermon hymn, “Ride On, Ride On in Majesty” and these words of the second stanza: “In lowly pomp ride on to die. O Christ Thy triumphs now begin O’er captive death and conquered sin.” And the last words of the last stanza read, “Bow Thy meek head to mortal pain (for our sin), Then take, O God, Thy pow’r and reign.” You see? “...take, O God, Thy pow’r and reign” moves everything beyond the helplessness of the grave to the reality and victory of eternal life!

We can get as hyped up as we want about the “whatever” this world offers - the “whatever” our dreams and hopes and plans of this world might be and mean to us. But the “whatever” is nothing - nothing - compared to what we have been given in Christ.

Wurmbrand hit the nail on the head with full force when he said, “If nothing follows, the most beautiful life is nothing more than a banquet offered to a condemned man before his execution.” Well... you’re going to die. I’m going to die. We’re all going to die. We are a dying church. But in Christ we clearly see beyond the grave - we see unending life; to be enveloped in the joy, peace and love of God! With tears of joy we thank Him for making the journey.

Amen.

Pastor Bill Abbott

PALM SUNDAY

March 25, 2018

St. Matthew 21:1-9:

***“For Journey That Must Be Made:
For a Dying Church”***

I. We Are a Dying Church.

II. Because We Are Dying.

III. Ride On to Die.

*Pilgrim Lutheran Church
2155 North Oakland Avenue
Decatur, Illinois 62526*