

Palm Sunday
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I have always loved Palm Sunday, ever since I was a child, because it is a day of celebration, a day where we get to glorify our Lord even in his humble entry into Jerusalem on a donkey. We sing praises and shout Hosanna! And since we live in Easter time, and know that next week is the celebration of the risen Christ. We can jump from one high point to another. But the passion changes all that, because the meaning of passion here means to suffer, to endure suffering and pain.

We are the only religion in the world whose God gets hurt, whose God gets stabbed, who writhes in pain on the cross, who gets whipped, who has five wounds on his body, and who shouts in pain in the midst of his suffering on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me and to let me suffer like that? What other religion is there where a cross becomes a throne? Jesus' suffering was not imaginary, it was not make believe, it was not fake. The nails were long and real. The thorns were sharp. The suffering, the beating, the dying, it was brutal. The cross tells us that.

For some people, their image of God is "Our Father who art in heaven" and that is where Jesus lives, safely up there in heaven, where there is no pain, no divorce, no cancer, no accidents, no bullets, no wars, no pandemic viruses. In our minds God is like we are: we move away from our violent neighborhoods on earth and we move to the suburbs, just like God has moved to the suburb in the sky. That is where God lives, up there, up where it is safe, up there, removed from it all.

But after hearing the passion story we know that not to be the case, in fact, it is just the opposite. Our God left the safety and sanity of heaven and came down to this violent neighborhood called Earth. God became a real human being, and therefore suffered and died, like the rest of us do. That's what passion Sunday is all about. It's about our God who suffers and cries and dies.

Whenever one of God's children is hurt on this earth, God himself is hurt. With Christ as head of the body, when any part of the body of Christ is hurt, Jesus Christ is hurt. Any time someone is hurting, God also experiences that pain. And just as real as our pain is, God's pain is real too.

Perhaps the best way to try to explain this is with a story, a personal story. I remember when my daughter Julia was only two years old and she became violently ill. What I thought was her first experience with a stomach flu, her mother recognized as something much worse. A trip to the emergency room eventually led to emergency abdominal surgery at the children's hospital. And I remember holding my daughter as she struggled against the pain of the shots, the I.V.'s and the excruciating procedures to correct her blocked intestines. She was so upset. We were so upset. And then after checking the results, we had to go through the whole procedure again. And when that didn't work either, they had to operate. I still remember it all so vividly. Her pain was our

pain. Her suffering was our suffering. When she was suffering most, Maria and I wanted to be with her, in that surgery room, holding her, caring for her in the best way we could. And even if you haven't had an experience something like this, you would do the same.

And that's how it is with God. When we are injured, when we are hurting, when we are in distress, God is with us. That is the very nature of God. Filled with passion and compassion, our God is a God who suffers, and cries and dies.

In fact our God is a God who loves his children so much that God is willing to die on our behalf. Jesus Christ was willing to die for us so that we might live.

Many of us have seen the movie the passion of Christ and have experienced the pain in our hearts, as we get a glimpse of what Jesus may have gone through in his last hours. But there's a scene in another old movie that comes to my mind that also gets at this wonderful truth. The movie is called "The Bridge over the River Kwai" and it is the story of English prisoners of war who are in a prison camp in Thailand. The POW's are made to work in the jungles to rebuild bridges and roads. Every day they work with their shovels and dig the roads by hand. And after a long day's work they return to the camp and leave their shovels by the guardhouse, line up for inspection, and then go back to the barracks to eat and sleep for the night.

But on one night when the prisoners lined up for inspection, the guard counted the shovels and found that one was missing. For this group of ten prisoners there were now only nine shovels. So the guard became furious with the men. "Where is the other shovel? Who sold it to the Thais in the jungle? Who stole that shovel?" He began screaming at the top of his lungs, while all the men just stood there in silence. The guard started swearing at them, getting more and more hostile, demanding an answer, "Who took the shovel?"

None of the ten men moved. Then the guard took his rifle and put the barrel against the forehead of the man who was first in line, and spoke more calmly, "I am going to pull the trigger and blow this man's brains out unless one of you tells me who took the shovel. I want to know who did it." And there was a long silence. Then a man in the middle of the line stepped forward. He didn't say a word, he just stood there in silence. The guard then attacked the man, knocking him to the ground. And then he continued to beat him, and he died. The other soldiers remained motionless at attention until the guard told the nine soldiers to carry their fallen comrade back to the barracks. The guard was still furious and went back to the guardhouse, but then for some reason he recounted the shovels. Ten. There were ten. He had miscounted. Now we condemn such brutality even in war. But in this tragic story we have an incredible example of courage and grace. The soldier who stepped forward, died so that one of his friends would not have to. That is passion.

And Passion Sunday is that Sunday in which we tell the world that there was a man named Jesus of Nazareth, who stepped forward from the line, and took the death

penalty so his friends would not have to die. For it is at the cross where we see God for who God is. Jesus even taught us the words that describe his very life, he said, "No greater love has a person than this, that he is willing to lay down his life for his friends. That's what passion is.

In these last few weeks as we've heard stories of people suffering with the COVID-19 coronavirus, we've heard of how they have suffered and how many have died. We've heard stories of how families have been separated as they are quarantined in an effort to prevent the spread of the virus and the emotional distress experienced by these families. And God is suffering with those families, for God knows our suffering and God is with us through the suffering. God will see us through these difficult times so that no one experiences more than they can bear.

And we've also heard stories of courageous health care workers and people who are providing all the services to keep our medical efforts going, people who are giving their lives for us all. Jesus example of life giving service will continue to lead us and we too are encouraged to devote our lives to the service of others.

So in the face of all these great challenges, we celebrate. We celebrate our King of grace and healing and peace. Who on this day humbly entered into Jerusalem on a donkey as the crowd cheered, for Jesus was about to save the world.

Ours is the only religion in the world whose God steps forward and dies on behalf of his friends, so they wouldn't have to. Our God who created you and me, that God, the one true God, suffers and cries with us and ultimately dies for us, for all of us. One small word describes and reveals our God: Passion. Amen.