

Sermon for Palm Sunday
Sunday, April 14, 2019
“Holy Week: The Most Important Week of the Year”

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Before I begin my message to you this morning, I'd like to say that some of you may have already read what I'm about to say if you read your online newsletter this week. If you did, then I'm going to give you my permission to take a nap during my sermon. For the rest of you, listen up!

Palm Sunday begins the most important week for the Christian Church, because it displays the roots of why we call ourselves Christian. Today's liturgy captures the extreme contrasts of triumph and tragedy. The procession of palms exults Jesus with the glory of a king, and the recitation of the Passion traces the tragic journey from his arrest to his death on the Cross. The rest of the week directs our attention to the fundamental things that make us uniquely Christian: Baptism and the Holy Eucharist. At the core of Christian worship in a liturgical tradition such as ours is the understanding that how we pray, how we worship, expresses what we believe. These liturgies preach themselves; they tell our Christian story. Connecting with these liturgies helps us understand who we are and why we are, and I would like to take this opportunity to begin preparing you on how to make the most of the most important week of the Christian life. What's going to happen, how should you approach it, and how should you respond to it.

The first thing I want to say is that you need not be afraid of Holy Week. The events of this week are meant to challenge us and they're meant to teach us. Much of it may seem unfamiliar to you, but you already know the story. The strangeness of them is intended to challenge you to experience the story in a new way, so that hopefully, you will hear, see, and feel something you've never heard, seen, or felt before. You should come away from Holy Week knowing a little something more than you didn't know before about God and the incredible gift he gave to the world through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If we gave you the story in the way that you always have heard it, then you might not be pushed to learn anything new. Now if you're reading what I just wrote and you are saying to yourself, “But I don't really know the story you're talking about!” That's ok, too. Take in what you can, ask lots

of questions, let God meet you where you are and let him take you to someplace new. That's why you're here. That's why all of us are here!

I don't get these fancy liturgies. They're over my head.

I grew up a Baptist. We did almost nothing in the church I grew up in the way we do here at All Saints, and we didn't really celebrate Holy Week. (I didn't even know that you were supposed to get palms on Palm Sunday!) I say that to say that I didn't always get the stuff we do either. A lot of the stuff we do is really old. Some of it reaches back to practices from the earliest centuries of the Christian Church, practices that have been lost in the many stages of the Church's history. Some of the things we're going to do during Holy Week are new to me too, but I'm opening myself up to experiencing new things with you, because I want God to teach me something new about himself that I didn't know before. I want to learn a little more about why we Christians believe what we believe. I'm not expecting you to get everything. I'm not even expecting you to like everything. I'm just asking you to try. I'm asking you to open your eyes and your ears to what God might be trying to say to you. Believe me, there's something in all of these strange Holy Week services that will strike a cord in you, that will evoke a memory—a phrase, or a hymn, or prayer that will just "take you back." Maybe something will cause a lightbulb to go off in your head and make you say, "Wow! I never thought of that before!" Enjoy those moments as gifts from God and hear what he is revealing to you. Our worship is meant to stimulate the five senses, so that the glory of God hugs you and infuses every fiber of your being.

I don't feel like I can participate, because it's just not what I'm used to.

Again, I'm not expecting you to get everything all at once, just try. The roots of the word 'liturgy' means the *work of the people*. Without people, **there is no liturgy and there is no worship!** Without you, there is no liturgy and there is no worship. You have to participate or it's all just for show. You don't need to be afraid of it. You don't have to be perfect. Just make an effort to try it out. Remember who it is you're worshipping. God! Don't you want to give him your very best? Don't you want to tell him how great he is for all of the wonderful things he's done for you and the incredible ways he's brought you through? Sing your heart out!

I feel I'm not participating, because somebody else is doing it for me.

Now, there are a lot of parts of the Holy Week services that are chanted. (I've already started practicing all the chanting I have to do!) There are many things that you will hear coming from those of us dressed in vestments. You may think that because somebody else is doing it, saying it, or singing it, that you have no part in it, but that's not what's happening. You're supposed to be listening and praying. You're supposed to be listening for God to speak, and the reason somebody else is "up there doing it" is so that you can talk to God and he can talk to you without having to be distracted by reading words on a page or thinking about what tune you're supposed to be singing. It is an opportunity for you simply to talk to God and let him talk to you; pray and listen. There's something that God needs to tell you. Appreciate the space that the liturgy gives you so that you can do that.

Everything is so structured now that I don't have time to talk to anyone!

I know that as a community, we like to participate in worship. But whom are we worshipping? God or ourselves? Who are we coming to praise? Ourselves or God? The worship is about God, praising him, adoring him, thanking him for how awesome he is and how much he has blessed us, calling on him to hold our hand and lift us up out of our tribulations. And here at All Saints, we are going to do that in the most beautiful and sincere manner that we can. Worship is *not* the time for us to socialize and catch up with Sister Sally and Brother Jim; that's what coffee hour is for. Some people who come here simply want to walk in, worship, and go home. Others want to chat and catch up with one another. We are here to bring a glimpse of God's Kingdom in Heaven to us here on earth, and to do it in the most beautiful way possible, AND we are a community where we should have a chance to hang out with each other and enjoy each others' company.

So what is the reason for all of this? Why does it matter?

It matters a lot. For starters, like the passage from Isaiah says above, we are people whom God formed for himself so that we can declare his praise.

We come to praise God, to worship him in the beauty of his holiness. (Psalm 29:2) When we walk in the doors of the church we leave all of our baggage outside the door. The church is a sacred place where we come to meet God in his holiness, to bask in the radiance of Christ's presence. What we experience when we come here should look, feel, smell, taste, and sound different from what we encounter in our everyday lives. That's why it doesn't. Do all churches do it that way? No. But this is how we do it. This is how we express our faith in God and our message to the world.

The message doesn't stop there. You know that TV commercial that says, "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas"? Well, that doesn't apply to us. What happens here is intended to be shared with those who aren't here. We are supposed to praise God, and Jesus Christ issued The Great Commission: "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:19-20) We're not supposed to keep our experience in a box, but we are to go out and tell our story. Tell the world that God is good all the time! That means that we have the responsibility to carry the energy that we get in here into the streets and make the world around us a better place to be...wherever that may be.

The second reason why all this is important is because as I've talked to a lot of you over the years, what's clear about All Saints is that we're like a family, a worshipping community, and a place where you feel like you belong, where we take care of each other. That's one of our core values. Whoever enters the doors of All Saints should enter a space where they will know that they are loved. No matter where you come from, no matter how much or how little money you have, no matter where your journey of life has taken you, when you walk into All Saints you should be met with nothing less than the incredible outpouring of God's love through God's people. Come as you are and be transformed. All are welcome.

So, Father Whitmire, what are you asking me to do?

First, I want you to know that you matter. You are an important part of this church family. I want you to be a part of what's happening. Holy Week is a family gathering and Daddy wants the whole family here

celebrating it together. I look forward to you joining me in walking this sacred journey. Let's experience it together. The Holy Week story is our sacred story as Christians. If there's something that you don't understand or if there's something that's not making a connection with you, please ask me! I'm here for you. Second, I want you to share the love. Bring somebody new with you to the events of Holy Week and Easter—a family member, a friend, a coworker, whomever! When you invite them, say something like, "I'm going to church on [*insert the day and time*], and I would like for you to come with me. Will you be my guest at church? I will pick you up, if you need me to." Put on your Sunday best. On Easter, wear a special hat, if you're into that.

Holy Week is the most important week of the Christian year. Come. Hear the story. Feel the story. Live the story. Tell the story.