

17 April 2011  
Palm/Passion Sunday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Dying Christians in a Dying Church”  
Text: Philippians 2:5 (Matthew 26-27)

Jesus enters Jerusalem riding upon a donkey. He will leave it with a cross riding upon His back.

Jesus enters Jerusalem to cries of Hosanna - or, “Save us!” He will leave it being serenaded with the mocking that He cannot even save Himself.

The hands of the One who formed Adam from the dust of the ground, who built a helper for him in Eve, are now pierced with nails by the very men He created.

From start to finish, this seems like a story gone horribly wrong.

But then we hear in God’s Word that no, not horribly wrong, but exactly right. This is why Jesus came. To lay down His life for the life of the world. To give Himself to men. To give Himself to death. To give Himself as the sacrifice for our sins.

And so He does not resist. He does not speak in His own defense. He does not ask His Father to send legions of angels to protect Him. He is not interested in Himself, but you. *God is committed to you.*

And so He has come not just to get you off the hook from your sins, but to make you who are unholy holy. That’s why we call this week Holy Week. It is the week we will once again hear of our holiness in Jesus - in the forgiveness of our sins, in the new life He has come to provide for us.

So far, I don’t think I’ve said anything that surprises you. But then we heard this: ***Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.*** And we also prayed: *Mercifully grant that we may follow the example of His great humility and patience.*

What does this mean? Do you know what this is saying? With these words we are really saying: Lord, help us to die. Help us be dying Christians. Help us be a dying church.

Ah, no. That doesn’t sound right! We don’t want to be a dying church! We don’t want to be dying Christians, do we? That sounds like failure. We want to be

successful, we want to be admired, we want to be big, we want to be glorious. A dying church sounds . . . like . . . a story gone horribly wrong.

But this is exactly what it means to have the mind of Christ. We are to be a dying church, because we have a dying Saviour. For only by dying can we live.

For Jesus didn't suffer and die so that you wouldn't have to, but to redeem suffering and death. You see, if you think that Jesus came to suffer and die so that you wouldn't have to, so that you could live a successful, happy life, what does that mean when you suffer and die? What does that mean when you get cancer or another disease, or when horrible accidents befall you? Well, then Jesus isn't much of a Saviour, is He? Or maybe it's you that's wrong. Your faith isn't strong enough. You weren't good enough.

That's why the church can never be about what we do. About our making a decision for Christ. About me making Jesus my personal Saviour. About living the victorious Christian life. About me doing great things for Jesus. Because in all those things you will fail. Peter and the other disciples couldn't do it. Neither can you.

But what has Jesus done? What is this story we are hearing again today and will remember all this week? This story is not a story gone horribly wrong, but of our Saviour using suffering and death for life, for good. That what looks like defeat is really victory.

And so we are a dying church because we have a dying Saviour. This is not our doing - our Saviour pulls us into His dying; for to die with Jesus is to live. And so in baptism we are pulled into His death and resurrection. We hear the preaching of Christ crucified and are pulled into the story of the cross. We die in repentance and are raised in absolution. The dying and rising body and blood of Jesus are put into your mouth, to pull you into that same dying and rising.

You see, that is what set the Apostles free to face death when they went out into all the world - they had already died with Christ! They had nothing to fear.

That is what set the early martyrs and the Reformers free to face death - they had already died with Christ! They had nothing to fear.

And this is what sets you free to face whatever this world and its evil prince may throw at you - you have already died with Christ! You have nothing to fear.

And so it is only by dying with Christ that can we then live. For dying with Christ, we live a life that suffering cannot take away, that the sins of others cannot take

away, that the struggles of this world cannot take away, that disasters and tragedies cannot take away, that laying down our lives for others cannot take away, that not even death can take away.

That's the story we are hearing again today and all this week.  
The story of our dying Saviour, and His forgiveness, His life, His salvation.

***Have this mind among yourselves.***

Let us die with Him that we may also live with Him.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

*(Some of the thoughts in this sermon taken from Rev. Kevin Martin's study in Concordia Pulpit Resources, Vol. 21, Part 2, p 25-26.)*