

LIFE THROUGH DEATH

Old Testament Reading: Zechariah 9:9-12

Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the warhorses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth. As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit. Return to your fortress, you prisoners of hope; even now I announce that I will restore twice as much to you.

Psalms 118:19-29

19 Open for me the gates of the
righteous;
I will enter and give thanks to
the LORD.
20 This is the gate of the LORD
through which the righteous may
enter.
21 I will give you thanks, for you
answered me;
you have become my salvation.
22 The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
23 the LORD has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes.
24 The LORD has done it this very day;
let us rejoice today and be glad.

25 LORD, save us!
LORD, grant us success!
26 Blessed is he who comes in the name
of the LORD.
From the house of the LORD we bless
you.^[a]
27 The LORD is God,
and he has made his light shine on
us.
With boughs in hand, join in the festal
procession
up^[b] to the horns of the altar.
28 You are my God, and I will praise you;
you are my God, and I will exalt you.
29 Give thanks to the LORD, for he is
good;
his love endures forever.

Epistle: Philippians 2:5-11

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Gospel: Matthew 21:1-11

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will

find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away." This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: "Say to Daughter Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'" The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!" When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?" The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

MESSAGE:

Palm Sunday is all about victory! In Biblical times, when a king returned with his soldiers from winning a battle, people would line up along the roadside and wave palm branches in the air to celebrate his victory. Jesus had just won a huge victory over death by raising Lazarus from the grave, so when He approached Jerusalem, people waved palm branches in the air and shouted, "Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" They were welcoming a king to His city, His palace, and His throne. And Jesus immediately fulfilled their expectations by telling them that the time had come for him to be glorified. But then He dropped a bomb on them: *He would be glorified by dying.*

Well, as you might imagine, that wasn't exactly what his admirers had in mind. How in the world could anyone be glorified by dying? We were created to live, not to die: how does death fit into the equation? And that is the challenge and the paradox of Christianity.

Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, has made it clear that life and glory come only through self-sacrifice and death. *"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it."* There are no detours around Calvary for the Christian: "taking up your cross" and "being faithful unto death" are the only ways one can receive the "crown of life."

But what does Jesus mean by "death" and what does He mean by "life." We don't have to look far to find examples of death. Death is all around us: It is estimated that over 9000 people in the world die of starvation every day. Thousands more perish from wars, disease, earthquakes, fires and floods. Death is also at work **within us**, for as Paul wrote, *"...all creation is in bondage to decay"*—and that includes us. Physicists call this "entropy": the continual and relentless deterioration of all forms of matter and energy. Iron rusts, engines wear out, toys break, all living creatures perish and return to dust.

The great Irish poet William Butler Yeats put it simply: *"Things fall apart; the center cannot hold."* And this process of deterioration begins in our bodies much earlier than you might suppose. Our sense of hearing begins to decline at age 12. Our senses of smell and taste begin to deteriorate in our teenage years and by the time we are 65 they are

functioning at about 50% of what they were when we were young. Geneticists tell us that certain diseases and even the time of their onset are programmed into our genes—empirical proof of Adam’s legacy: that we do inherit death and disease from our parents. When Adam and Eve ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, death and decay entered the world and permeated creation. If they seem remote or unreal to you, blame your lack of discernment—not their lack of reality.

Since the Fall, physical death is the fate of every human being. But there is a great difference between what happens to people *after* they have physically died: those who have been reborn in Christ live eternally with their Savior, while those who have rejected Him are cast into a lake of fire, which the Bible calls “the second death.” And so if we choose to follow another path than the one Jesus marked out for us, we are basically dead men walking, with biological life in our flesh but eternal death waiting for us up ahead.

But what does this talk of death have to do with Palm Sunday? On Palm Sunday, as Jesus entered Jerusalem, the city sprang to life. Cheers and victory palms abounded; people filled the streets in joyous expectation of the coming kingdom. The whole city resounded with life. But Jesus could see through the celebration and discern what lay outside the city walls at Golgotha, the place of the skull, where in a few days he would be nailed to a cross.

He had repeatedly told his disciples what was going to happen: “*We are going up to Jerusalem and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified.*” Plain enough—but they couldn’t—or wouldn’t—believe him because they clung to their hope for worldly power and glory which blinded them to the kingdom of God. Jesus knew that the jubilant, adoring crowd of Palm Sunday would soon turn into a bloodthirsty mob that would scream, “*Crucify Him! Crucify Him!*” He knew that there is a bloodlust that simmers within men that can erupt at any time. And we know that as well—or at least we should.

Even a superficial look at human history reveals that it has been shaped by sin and death. Someone once wrote that the history of the world is primarily the history of warfare. Generation after generation, we increase our expertise in killing each other in new and terrible ways. Weapons of war increase in magnitude and horror. Genocides, ethnic cleansings, torture and rapine abound. Art and movies and videogames are filled with the bizarre, the macabre, the violent, the ugly and the obscene.

Like people who are chronically depressed, we have become fascinated with our own disease. The novelist Mario Puzo, author of *The Godfather*, wrote that there were only two proper subjects for a novelist: love and death, and that between the two, death was a more majestic subject than love. Several years ago, my daughter and I got hooked on the TV program “24.” One night we estimated that so far in the season Jack Bauer had killed 21 people—and the season wasn’t over. And we couldn’t wait to watch the next show.

Even though we know that sin and death are diseases, we have a certain fascination with them, and this fascination makes it difficult for us to distinguish between things that bring us life and things that bring us death. God, however, has acted to save us from ourselves by doing two things.

First, He has clearly shown us where we can find life. True life--eternal life--can be found in one place and one place alone: in Jesus Christ. Everything else is ultimately darkness and death. St. John wrote, *"In Him was life, and that life was the light of men."*

Second, He has turned death into a doorway to life. Five days after Palm Sunday, on the real day of victory—Good Friday—Jesus drew all the poison of sin and death into himself. He was saturated with sin: all the sin of mankind, past present and future, seeped into the cells of His body. In Paul's words, "he became sin for us." And He did it all alone. He endured the agonies of death and of hell itself. That was the work He had come to do.

By suffering OUR agonies and dying OUR death, he swallowed up death once and for all in our behalf, so that all who place their hope in Him are set free of death's power. Jesus knew that all this lay ahead of him as he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey that Palm Sunday, nearly two thousand years ago. He saw the adoration on the people's faces, heard the joyful shouts, felt the warmth and love of the crowd. But he knew that all of it, however sincere it might be, would change in a heartbeat when they discovered that the kind of life and victory He was offering them was a very different kind than they had expected. He knew that He would have to tread the path that led to the cross alone—against everyone's wish and will except His Father's. That He would endure not only the extremes of humiliation and physical pain, but the torments of eternal hell.

Only God could have borne it; only God could have endured it. But even God could not survive it: sin had to lead to death or God would be a liar, and God cannot lie. The scales of justice had to be balanced; only death can atone for sin. His would be a just death: He would accept payment for all our sins so that we could accept the gift of eternal life.

Palm Sunday is a victory celebration to be sure, but a celebration of a very different kind of victory: a victory life **through** death. And like the people of Jerusalem 2000 years ago, today we welcome our king to His palace and to His throne. We too celebrate by waving palm crosses of victory. We too rejoice by receiving His body and blood. We too celebrate his triumph over death and the grave, for just as he raised Lazarus from the tomb, he has raised each one of us up to new life.

Shakespeare wrote, *"Death once dead, there's no more dying then."* John Donne wrote, *"Death shall have no dominion!"* Beautiful words, but the words I like best are inscribed on my Great Aunt Belle's tombstone in Pierce City, Missouri: *"Death is but the dawn of eternal day."* They all mean the same thing: Jesus has replaced our death with His death and He offers new life to all who believe in Him. In Isaiah's words, he has destroyed the pall that covers the nations and the shroud that enfolds mankind.

Because He rose from death, we too shall rise from death, and that is the victory that we celebrate on Palm Sunday. Amen.