Palm/Passion Sunday, April 5: Isaiah 50:4–9a

Other Lessons: Psalm 118:19–29; Philippians 2:5–11; Matthew 26:1–27:66

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This is a very special time for reflection and repentance. Yes, I already said this in last week’s sermon. It is a special time because we are thrown into this difficult time with the pandemic, lockdowns, and various restrictions in our lives. But I say this again this week because we are now entering Holy Week. We may have lost that sense of time in the church and in the church year because we haven’t been able to attend Sunday and Lenten mid-week services, but Easter is only a week from today. Today, Palm Sunday, we continue to follow Jesus in his journey as he finally reaches his destiny in Jerusalem where he would be betrayed, suffer horribly, die innocently, but he would also rise again victoriously, because as we heard in last week’s Gospel, Jesus IS the life and the resurrection (Jn11:25).

This is the one week in the whole year that the entire church of God, all the Christians across the world highly anticipate, more so than Christmas because this is what Jesus came for, to die on the cross for the sins of the world (although the world often turns things upside-down, so that you see more pomp and celebration during Xmas). And so, it is right for us all to focus more on the word of God, especially since we cannot gather together and receive the Lord's Supper. This is the time that we must be reminded that “man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God (Deut8:3).” This is not to downplay the severity and seriousness of this current plague, but rather, it is for us to understand the greater severity and seriousness of another, deep sickness and disease that has affected us all, namely, sin and death.

No doubt, “death” has been on everyone’s minds more and more these days. You hear about it every day on the news. The death tolls keep rising, the spread of the virus doesn’t seem to be stopping, at least not in North America and Europe. Before this we seldom think about death, but now we are more aware of it because anyone of us can get this virus and possibly die. We cannot forget that it’s not sicknesses and diseases that take our lives away, neither is it old age. We die because of sin. We may avoid the virus and other diseases but no one has ever escaped death except Elijah and perhaps Enoch. But today we are reminded of that one person who truly embraced death with such joy and glory that he even had a great parade for it. Indeed our lord Jesus Christ did not come into Jerusalem, or this whole for that matter, to be a physician of the body, a master of healing. Isaiah would tell us (on Good Friday) that “by his stripes we are healed” (Isa53:5), but it is a healing that goes deeper than the physical body, for it is a healing of the entire being, of both body AND soul. As Luther says in the Large Catechism (regarding the Lord's Supper) “where the soul is recovered, the body is also relieved”. There is a deep connection between the two that we cannot neglect. And this is what Jesus came to do, to save us, to save our entire being, to save both our body and soul.

And this was announced about 1000 years before Jesus was born through the prophet Isaiah. Our section from Isaiah today is third of the four so-called “servant songs”. These are: 42:1–4 (my servant whom I uphold and delight, read on Jesus’ baptism); 49:1–6 (the servant called from the womb who will be light of the nations, read on 2nd Sunday after epiphany); 50:4–11 (today’s reading); 52:13–53:12 (the suffering servant, read on Good Friday). There are also other “servant” songs throughout Isaiah, but they refer to the whole nation of Israel (but often portrayed as the unfaithful servant who is blind and deaf) and the other “servant of God” was Cyrus, who was also called the “anointed one” because he would be the deliverer of Israel from Babylon. These of course come after chapter 40 where God says “comfort, comfort my people…a voice cries in the wilderness…”, which is read during Advent.

The people needed comforting because of their sins and God’s pronouncement of judgment upon those sins. The exile and the Babylonian conquest haven’t happened yet (not until the time of Jeremiah and Ezekiel about 100 year from Isaiah), but they have their sins and they would not repent and turn to God for forgiveness. It is always that same pattern: the people are unfaithful by turning to false gods and they walk in wickedness and unrighteousness, prophets are sent to preach repentance and forgiveness (= Law&Gospel), but they would not listen. And here, Isaiah was one of the first prophets sent to the Southern Kingdom of Judah, as they have just witnessed the complete and utter destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. One would expect the people to listen and pay attention to what God is saying now, but that did not happen. The people were more concerned about what they see, what is immediately before their eyes. They were concerned about their crops, their cattle, to live a “good” life. They did not have time for self-reflection, they did not have time to stop and look at their sins, and certainly they had no time for going to the temple in contrition and repentance, and most certainly not the sacrifice of a perfect lamb that could be sold for a good price. Can forgiveness of sins bring me a good crop? Can forgiveness of sins bring me more money? Can forgiveness of sins make me more successful than my neighbor? Can forgiveness of sins help me prevail over my rivals or enemies? No? Then this Yahweh God and religion is not as useful as the other foreign gods.

And even when God promises great news of salvation, that he would pardon all their sins and give them life, they have no regard for it. Thus they were blind when God shows them signs and they would not see, they were deaf when prophets preached and they would not listen. But this promise has come, and it has come to us. And now that we have entered Holy Week, we ought to look at ourselves and see whether we have been blind and deaf to the works and word of God. It is a time set apart for us to ponder the birth, life, death, and resurrection of our lord Jesus Christ. For the past few weeks, this pandemic has occupied our hearts and minds, it has gripped us with fear, anxiety, uncertainty. It wears us down. But for this week, let us look, not outside at the gloom and deaths and the confusion and chaos of the world, but look inside at the darkness of our sin and evil and the certain death that awaits us. And in this week let us look forward to that light which shines in this world, the light which darkness has not overcome it (Jn1:5).

And here in these words of Isaiah 50, we find that very light. Verse 4 tells us that his word sustains those who are weary. Those who labor and are heavy laden find rest in him. His word alone gives rest, for when declared from his cross that “it is finished”, all things were completed: the atonement for the sins of the whole world, our salvation, our eternal life. And this word is still proclaimed to you and among you, even if we are not gathered in the church, we are still gathered around the word of God. This is what church is all about, gathering around the word and the sacraments. The word of God gives us rest from our sins and from our deaths.

And then verse 5 says that Christ’s word is true and effective because he has been obedient, he is always by his heavenly father. And his ultimate obedience that makes all these things work was in his suffering and death on the cross (v6). But that was his glory. The world and those around him saw this as an execution of a shameful and guilty criminal. But Isaiah tells us in verse 7 that he was not disgraced or shamed. In fact, this was his glory, for in it and through he procured for us the forgiveness of sins and life eternal. That is the true glory of God, because it was all done for you. That’s why the cross can be applied to us. In his cross, we too can boldly proclaim these words in v8-9, which Paul actually does in Romans 8:31-39: “**31**What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? **32**He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? **33**Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. **34**Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. **35**Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? **36**As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” **37**No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. **38**For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, **39**nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

So dear brothers and sisters in Christ, ponder these words from Isaiah and Paul. Let us all enter this Holy Week with a deeper conviction and understanding of our depravity and lack of holiness, but at the same time we can look forward with great faith and hope as we approach Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, and finally when we arrive Easter Sunday, we can burst with joy and jubilee in the God who saves, the God who came in the flesh to die and rise for us, the God who sustains us with his word.