

Holy Week by Elaine Swinehart

Can you believe that we are in the middle of Holy Week? I don't know about you, but being sequestered because of the corona virus, has made the days run together. The days seem to creep by, but the months seem to fly. I wonder if this is how it felt for the disciples.

Whenever I read the account of the last week of Jesus' life I feel as though I'm on a roller coaster ride, (high, low, high, low, high.) The day Jesus entered Jerusalem, what we celebrate as Palm Sunday, was a day filled with excitement and hope for the people. They believed that their Messiah had come and they welcomed Jesus with the waving of palm branches and shouts of hosanna. It was a grand day. Surely, He would soon liberate them from their bondage to Rome. But, while the people celebrated, the Jewish leaders began to plot ways to kill Jesus. That was Sunday, but Friday was coming.

This year our Palm Sunday celebration was rather subdued. It's difficult having a one-person parade while waving a paper palm leaf and getting excited about it. But you know, it is not about the pomp and circumstance, it is about the truth we celebrate - Jesus, the Messiah has come! The events in this world today: massive fires, tornadoes, locusts' swarms, and of course this corona virus do not change this truth. Neither should they stop our celebration. So, let us continue, for it was Sunday, but Friday is coming and almost everything will change.

By Thursday of that week Jesus' disciples were preparing for their Passover supper. (This would be our Maundy Thursday service) As they gathered in the upper room, around the table, events took a different turn. Instead of the servants going about their tasks, Jesus got up from the table, placed a towel around His waist and began to wash His disciples' feet. This was the job of a slave, not the Master. But Jesus wanted His disciples, then and now, to know that He had come to serve, and we too are called to be servants too.

While having your feet washed upon entering a house was a common practice at that time, for us it is very foreign and often uncomfortable. However, it is something we need to get used to. First, like the disciples we must get used to allowing God to work in, through, for, and with us to accomplish His perfect will. Being people who want to do things ourselves and our way this is not easy. But this is our call. Second, we must be open to allowing others to help us, to wash our feet for example. I have found that this can be a humbling experience. Giving up my control and allowing someone to do for me is definitely out of my comfort zone. But this too is our call and when we refuse, we deny someone the opportunity to obey their call from God. (Stop and think about that for a minute.) Third, we need to get busy with work of service that God has waiting for us. Especially in this time of uncertainty there is so much that we can be doing. For those not in the high-risk group, perhaps you could be running errands for those who are confined. But for the rest of us, we can be praying, writing notes, making phone calls, sending emails or Facebook posts, simply keeping in touch with those who are confined at home. Now might be a good time to work on those projects you never had time to get to: knitting lap robes for the residents of nursing homes, or hats and scarves for the homeless shelter, sewing masks for healthcare workers, sowing and tending a garden for food for yourself and enough share with others at harvest time. Let your imagination and prayers be your guide. Finally, be joyful and do all things to the glory of God. Yes, it's Thursday, but Friday is coming!

It is still Thursday as the meal continued and they conversed around the table, Jesus picked up a loaf of bread, blessed it, broke it, and said to His disciples: "Take and eat this is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." Then He took a cup and after giving thanks He gave it to them

saying: Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins." That night Jesus established a new covenant. A covenant made with His blood. A covenant that would save all people from their sins. A covenant we are invited to become part of when we believe He has done it for us.

There are two important phrases in the words Jesus spoke here. First, "do this in remembrance of me." The purpose is the Lord's Supper is for us to remember what Jesus did for us. As I have said many times before, it is not about us, it is about Jesus. The second phrase is: "for you". Jesus did all of this because He loves you. He loves me. Amazing, incredible, and as difficult as it is to comprehend, Jesus loves you and Jesus loves me to the extent that He would suffer and die in our place. I know this is hard to comprehend, but it is true! So, remember this the next time you take Communion.

Not being able to gather for Communion this Holy week will be what I will miss most. Perhaps though in times such as these, it is not the actual bread and grape juice, it is not the physical gathering, but rather it is the remembering of what Jesus did and the believing that He did it all for you and me that is vitally important. Still I look forward to the day when we will celebrate our Lord's Supper together. This finishes up Thursday and Friday has arrived.

I said before that on Friday things would be different than were on Palm Sunday. Instead of a procession of palm branches and cheering fans there were chains and armed soldiers leading Jesus away to an illegal mock trial with the Jewish leaders. They could find no reason to kill him, so they made up lies. Lies! It was all a bunch of lies! And on the basis of these lies they condemned Jesus to death. There was a little problem with their plan, the Jews had no authority to put a man to death only the Romans could sentence a person to death. So, their plot thickened and their hypocrisy increased with each step. Up to this point the Jewish leaders had arrested Jesus with no cause, held a trial at night, and hired witnesses to lie all of which were against Jewish law. Now, as they took Jesus to Pilate, they became very concerned that they avoid ritual defilement by entering the Roman headquarters, and not be able to eat the Passover so they waited outside while Pilate went out to them. Think about it, ritual purity was more important to them than the fact they were in the process of getting a righteous man, the Son of God to be more precise, crucified. Imagine their shock when after questioning Jesus, Pilate found no fault in Him. Pilate even tried to get them to change their minds offering releasing Jesus, (as a fulfillment of a Jewish tradition where Pilate would release one prisoner to them at Passover) but they prompted the crowd to call for the release of Barabbas instead. Forced to make some judgement on Jesus, Pilate had Him flogged (that is having strips of leather, with glass and metal embedded in them whipped down over His body, shredding the skin, sometimes down to the bone). Jesus was then brought back to Pilate who once more presented Jesus to the crowd and asked them what they wanted Him to do with Jesus. Once again, the Jewish leaders pumped the crowd up to demand His crucifixion. Five days earlier the crowd had shouted "Hosanna, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" and now they were shouting: "Crucify Him, crucify Him!" Washing his hands from all guilt, Pilate handed Jesus over to the soldiers to be crucified.

This scenario causes me to wonder at the way God used to hatred, lies, and hypocrisy to bring about His will. Jesus's mission was to provide the perfect sacrifice to pay the debt we owe for our sins. All of these events were working toward this end. What the Jewish leaders meant to stop the ministry of Jesus actually moved His mission forward. This has me looking for the hand of God at work in the events in this world, especially this corona virus that has spread across the world. Finding the hand of God in the midst of this pandemic is overshadowed the grim news on TV, on line, and in the newspapers. But I think we can see God working as families are staying home together, parents are now working at home

schooling their children, church buildings are closed and have gone on line which has opened their mission field too an expanded world, and there are the miracles of healing that have occurred. These are only a few examples. Keep watch for other signs of God at work. May we be open to the lessons God desires to teach us.

The events of Friday continue as Jesus is led through the streets of Jerusalem carrying His cross all the way to Calvary. Once there they nailed Him to the cross, they raised the cross upright and dropped into the pre dug hole. There Jesus continued to suffer as He hung on the cross struggling for each breath. People passed by derided Him and the chief priest, scribes and elders mocked Him. Even one of the thieves hanging beside Him taunted Him, while the other thief sought God's forgiveness. While most of the disciples watched from the distance, John, Mary Magdalene, Jesus's mother Mary, and Mary the wife of Clopas kept vigil at the foot of the cross. It was there Jesus saw them and relinquished the care of His mother over to John. With this final obligation taken care of Jesus announced that He was thirsty, He was given some wine to drink, then He declared to the world: "It is finished!" and He bowed His head and gave up His spirit. The centurion declared: "surely this man was God's Son!"

Pause and take a look at the people that were there that day. Do you see yourself among the crowd? There were the people passing by. Some of them hurled insults while others kept their heads down and hurried on their way. The Roman soldiers were part of the crowd that day and it is recorded that at least the one centurion proclaimed that Jesus was the Son of God. We do not know if any of those under his command came to believe or not. Maybe. Of course, the Jewish leadership were there. They would not have missed this for anything. They needed to make sure that He was dead. There were however a few, like Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus who would step forward as followers of Jesus. Finally, there were the disciples. Judas in distress for betraying Jesus committed suicide. John was at the foot of the cross with some of the women, and the rest of the followers either watched from a distance or had already gone into hiding. What a diverse group. And Jesus died for each one. Just as He died for each person reading this message. What you do with this information is what makes the difference. You can mock Him, deny Him, ignore Him, or hate Him and suffer the consequences, OR you can believe that all Jesus did, He did for you. You may boldly stay at the foot of the cross, you may watch from afar, you may even have gone into hiding for a spell, or like Joseph, Nicodemus and some of the women follow all the way to the tomb, you believe and the miracle of Sunday is yours.

This was Friday, but Sunday, Easter Sunday is coming.

Early Sunday morning a group of women went to the tomb to anoint the Lord's body. As they walked, they wondered how they would remove the stone from the tomb. But when they got there the stone had been rolled away and when they looked inside the tomb, they found it empty. What was going on? Mary Magdalene ran to find the disciples and tell them that the tomb was empty and someone had stolen His body. Peter and John ran to the tomb. John got there first and looked in, Peter arrived and walked into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had covered Jesus's head folded up and placed by itself. They did not understand what had happened, so, they returned to their homes.

During the three years that Jesus was teaching them, He frequently spoke of the day when He would be arrested, killed, buried and raised from the dead. But the grief was too great for them that day to comprehend. Jesus also left another subtle sign that day in the tomb. Remember that cloth, or napkin that had covered Jesus's head? It was folded neatly and placed off by itself. In first century, Jewish culture the slaves would set the table of their master, plate, chalice and napkin placed just so. The food

would be served and the slave would stay just out of sight waiting to meet any need of his master. When the master was finished eating, he would crumble his napkin and toss it on the table, but, if he just needed to leave the table and planned to return, he would fold his napkin and place it apart from his plate. This way the servant knew not to remove his plate because his master was returning. This detail was included in the details of Jesus's resurrection to reinforce the message Jesus will return.

Easter Sunday is truly a day of celebration! Jesus, who suffered and died on the cross for our sins, rose from the dead so that all who believe in Him will not perish but may have eternal life. This wonderful news is ours because of God's love, mercy, and grace for us! We do not deserve it. We cannot earn it! Jesus has paid the price for us, and God freely forgives us, saves us and brings us into His Kingdom.

Throughout this Holy Week we have cried with the people: "Hosanna, to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" We have heard Jesus say, "This is my body, which is given for you do this in remembrance of me." Then, on Good Friday we heard the crowd demand: "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" Now we can proclaim with the Church through all ages the Easter Greeting: "Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!"

Brothers and sisters, rejoice! Because of the resurrected Christ we can live victoriously through the tumult of this age. To the glory of God! Amen.