Pastor Frank Espegren

Sermon for Palm Sunday – March 5, 2020

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Matthew 21:1-11 – “Blast-off”

Grace and peace to you this day from God our Loving Parent and from the One who both makes a Way and comes back to meet us on it, Jesus Christ, our Savior & Lord. Amen. Well, here we go! Holy Week, 2020, the most important week of the Christian church calendar, for our understanding of the story of Jesus, with this Palm Sunday worship it is hereby, albeit virtually, launched!

I do think “launch” is the right word for today because the story of Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem (as the tradition has come to call today’s Gospel) is very much like a rocket igniting its zero stage boosters to get it off the ground. I’m going to date myself here, but I’m still going to say it, “Houston, we have lift off!”

Palm Sunday is the text and homiletical assignment I deeply desired out of all the preaching opportunities this Holy Week and Easter. We’ve all heard the pastor or staunch churchgoer say (sometimes with just a little too much pride) that really, you can’t grasp the significance and impact of the Easter story without first experiencing the scriptural and liturgical journey of that which precedes it. That is the pitch for the liturgies of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday - that without them Easter is diminished, which is, of course, true. But I have come to believe the same applies to Palm Sunday, the Sunday before Easter, today. Without grasping the significance of Jesus’ triumphal (and as it turns out ironic) entry into Jerusalem, we will not fully appreciate the stories that come later in the week, nor appreciate fully Jesus’ words and actions and ultimate sacrifice when things in Jerusalem (from our vantage point) start to go awry.

Palm Sunday is a rocket ship of a start, a blast-off of immense significance! Jesus rides a donkey into the great city with shouts of expectation. According to Zechariah’s prophecy, this could mean only one thing, and I quote, “Look, your king is coming….” And O how Israel needed a king, needed someone to break the oppression of years, decades, centuries of oppression and hardship, the most recent manifestation of its brutal grasp coming through Roman rule. Enter Jesus to cheering, palm-waving, ecstatic crowds. He creates such an enthusiastic response that Matthew describes the city as being in turmoil. The people got it right away – the prophet Jesus has arrived, there’s reason to be excited; but here’s where they, and where we so often, will soon get it wrong – when the darkest moment arrives and all seems lost, will they, will we, trust in this humble king who has meekly come into their midst – can we, will we, see him for who he is, no matter what.

During the Space Race of the 1960’s and early 1970’s, every blast-off of an American rocket was a highly celebrated event – mirrored, as often such things are, by the dread of any Soviet space program success. There was a lot of fear in that era, but the stories also include amazing tales of courage and dedication and commitment. Perhaps the best Space Race story of them all is the one that never got to where it was going – the story of Apollo 13. Of course, the most famous Apollo story was Apollo 11 – Neil Armstrong taking those first steps on another heavenly body besides Earth – you remember, “One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.” We can all agree how huge this was for humankind!

I need to stop the flow of this sermon just for a minute here to implore you my brothers and sisters in Christ, that one of things we must be doing with our “Stay at Home” days is to pray for all first responders, medical professionals, and essential services workers, those who are not staying home, but rather, answering the call to go to work for us and bravely confronting the societal consequences of the Covid-19 virus. To support them and to flatten the curve of infection so our healthcare system will not be overrun, the rest of us are ordered to Stay Home. And so, if that is you, in addition to praying for these key “brothers and sisters,” to fully hear my sermon today, I invite the rest of you to drift with me back into space.

On Amazon, you can find the wonderful movie created by Ron Howard, who cinematically captured with great accuracy the story of the Apollo 13 mission. It starts with a bang, a blast off really, just like our Palm Sunday Gospel. The movie is 15 years old, but really holds up; very much still worth watching, a sort of modern day parallel of sorts to the Holy Week/Easter story of Jesus, the Christ, and the “Greatest Story Ever Told.” Of course, you will have to check in at our website, and pay attention to e-communications, throughout the week as we offer up new ways to tell this “Greatest Story” in unique and home-based ways. I implore you to commit in this strange new reality we are going through to full participation this whole week – so, kudos to you for tuning in to Palm Sunday today, may you return for the pilgrim journey of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, the Easter Vigil, and then of course, Easter morning on Sunday, April 12th. Make this investment in your faith. Now if you want to dive further into the story of Apollo 13, beyond my briefest of homiletical summaries, you will need a different kind of investment - an Amazon account & $3.95!!

Apollo 13 captures the excitement of the Cape Canaveral launch, but just like the Palm Sunday story of Jesus, and the story of his “Passion” that follows, the “starts” do not unfold according to popular expectation. Jesus was set up for victory, but after riding the donkey into the capital city as royalty, he does not proclaim his own greatness, gather up forces, or launch a military offensive against Rome. Although Jesus starts out on Palm Sunday as people expect, they forget the one key descriptor of his leadership and his mission – although he has the ride of a king, Jesus comports to a characteristic most consider antithetical to power – “Look, your king is coming to you, **humble**, and mounted on a donkey. Here comes the humble king – that is what the people get, but do not “get,” that we still don’t “get.” Humility, sacrifice, service – the hallmarks of love. This leads to different scenes than expected on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, although it does bizarrely explain the yawning silence of Holy Saturday’s Vigil. Jesus is the humble king, not what we think we need, but as it turns out, the authority we most desperately and certainly do.

You might have to watch the Apollo 13 movie again to fill in all the details of that story – let’s just say the mission does not go according to plan. Because of what happens, the astronauts do not get their moment in the sun, and by that, I mean their moment on the surface of the moon. The great dream vanishes – and is replaced by a mission of stark humility, sacrifice and service; you know, the hallmarks of love. The astronauts, those in space and those at home, mission control, every single NASA employee refocus to determine what is truly important. When one NASA direcor characterizes Apollo 13 as a complete disaster, Mission Control Flight Director Gene Kranz saw it differently, as he famously says, at least in the movie, “I believe this is going to be our finest hour.” The Apollo 13 astronauts have a similar moment of clarity, their focus leaves the moon’s surface, and they begin to see what is most important of all in a new way, planet Earth; they understand that the story, the mission, is about how we are to make our way back home. Apollo 13 is a story worth telling, and frankly a movie worth seeing again - I commend it to you. But it will not even come close to replacing the story you most need to hear this week, the story of Jesus, and the mission he is most willing to undertake. And what mission pray tell is that you ask? It is the story of Jesus, of our God, who will do anything necessary, to bring us home! For God, failure is not an option – that is the short answer to the question, “What is Easter?”

2020 has not rolled out according to plan. A month ago, we did not see the spread of this Coronavirus, the closing of schools, businesses, churches; the sacrifices some are making, the uncertainty of it all. It looked like such smooth sailing in the early part of the year – an “all systems ‘Go’” ride through life. But here we are. And the question before us is this – if it’s not going to be one sure thing after another triumph, if there’s going to be disturbing jolts to the system, sacrifices to be made, uncertainty even about what really is coming our way; in and with and through all of it, **can we trust a humble king who says he has even this within the grasp of His divine love for us, can we trust God when we just don’t know for sure what is before us**.

In the Apollo 13 movie, there is a wonderful Good Friday to Holy Saturday moment – I don’t know how else to describe it – when the problem has become all too real, the risk revealed, and there is only the last act to the mission of “Coming Home.” The trouble is, this last step necessitates radio silence as the Apollo 13 astronauts in their small ship reenter the Earth’s atmosphere – truly a moment of not knowing, of everyone to their own thoughts, of yawning silence, the moment at NASA and in our country when everyone held their breath. We are living into one of these moments again right now, and I ask you to journey with Jesus through it. Breath with Jesus. The cross means that God, completely and fully understands “by experience” moments such as these. It always seems to start out all hurrahs and hosannas. But Palm Sunday never stays as planned. Faith is humbly putting your faith in God when everything else goes silent. Will there be something after Covid-19, something after the cross? I’ll give you a hint, a suggestion really – make this journey with Jesus, to see what next Sunday, Easter Sunday morning, brings. As we humbly make our way on this journey, may we become more and more aware that Jesus joins us on the journey year to year, week to week, “morning to morning,” as the prophet Isaiah says. Ok, I’ve preached long enough – here’s the Cliff Notes version in sumary: it goes from “We have liftoff.” To “Houston, we have a problem;” from radio silence to “Houston, we hear you loud and clear!” Amen.