

Palm Sunday – 2020
Isaiah 50:4-9a
Philippians 2:5-11
John 12:12-19

“But even if he does not” (Daniel 3:18).

There are certain phrases from the narrative of Scripture that have been seared into the collective mind of Christ’s church. Powerful moments that are full of insight, full of emotion, full of Gospel clarity – we resonate to these scriptural scenes and they drive us forward. We learn who we are, we learn what the heights of faith are by inwardly digesting these glorious moments and incorporating them into our perspective. I suggest to you that that is precisely why they are there in Scripture – for us to see our own lives aright through them.

Here are a few of my favorites. Thomas refuses to believe what the other disciples said to him about the Lord’s resurrection. His heart had been blistered by seeing the one he loved crucified and he was despondent, crushed. “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe” (John 20:25). Eight days later Jesus again appears to the disciples and the Lord turned all of His attention to Thomas, beckoning Thomas to do the very things he said that he must in order to believe. Thomas’ response is priceless. Upon seeing the Lord and His wounds, and hearing Christ call him to faith, Thomas replies: “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28). Brilliant!

A Canaanite woman comes begging the Lord Christ for mercy. She has no where left to turn. Her daughter is demon possessed. The disciples view her uncharitably. Jesus tells her that He was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. Her pleas continue. Finally, the Lord says this: “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to dogs” (Matthew 15:26). Then this humble woman, this marvelous woman said this: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table” (Matthew 15:27). Brilliant!

A father comes to Jesus needing aid. This beleaguered man’s son is plagued by an unclean spirit. The fellow describes his son’s suffering in detail. Clearly, he is in inner turmoil. He probes Jesus with a petition: “If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us” (Mark 9:22). The Lord seizes on the nature of the man’s request and highlights its ambiguity. “If you can! All things are possible for the one who believes” (Mark 9:23). The father is clearly pierced to the heart and gives voice to his conflict, throwing himself completely on the Lord’s mercy: “I believe; help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24). Brilliant!

I see all those people in my mind’s eye, I see all those scenes and they leap off the page into my heart. You are the same. You feel what those people felt. You can see what they saw, you can sense the conflict in them and how masterfully the Lord resolved that conflict. It is so universally Christian. The same Spirit that animated them, animates you. You stand with them. You know that you do. “One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all” (Ephesians 4:5-6). There is one other biblical scene that I’m going to pull into your mind this morning, one powerful incident, full of tension and resolve. The primary players are Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah – you know them as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

With Daniel, these three Judeans are in Babylon, held captive under Nebuchadnezzar. A trap is set. An idol is crafted and a new law demands that the whole land is to bow down and worship this idol. The Judeans refuse. Nebuchadnezzar is enraged and orders the fiery furnace to be heated to martyr temperature. The threat comes with zero exaggeration. If you don't fall down and worship the image that I have made then you shall be cast into the fiery furnace. "And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?" (Daniel 3:15). Were Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah conflicted? Were they afraid? Did they think that the threat was made up? An exaggeration, a bluff, was Nebuchadnezzar a paper tiger? Yes, they were afraid. But what did they say?

"The God whom we serve is able to save us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (Daniel 3:18). Did you hear that? Did you hear the attitude, the strength? Even if He does not. I want to stand with them. I want to stand with Hananiah, with Mishael, with Azariah. Courage, fortitude, humility, faith – those Christian virtues leap out of their mouths as they face their dread predicament. Even if He does not, we will not worship the image of gold you have set up. Stand with them. Whether at home or in this Divine Service – stand with them.

Are you confused by this strange moment we are living? Are you afraid, dismayed – are you depressed, feeling defeated, abandoned? Where are you going for direction, hope, comfort? Where is your heart? But your heart here... our Lord rode into Jerusalem to thunderous shouts of Messianic hope. Like a geyser, the "Hosannas" welled up in the throats of the faithful. This is the One. He is coming to deliver us, to bring God's kingdom, to establish the throne of His father David. Hosanna to the King. Blessed is He. Jesus had just raised dead Lazarus. He had changed water into wine, healed the sick, cleansed the leprous, made the lame to walk, the deaf to hear and the blind to see. Hosanna. Save us. Oh, that *is* His intent. It will come, this salvation... but not how these pilgrims to Jerusalem expected.

In mere days, the shouts were altogether different; darker, filled with man's hate – crucify, crucify him! The throne prepared for the Lord is a cross. God's Son, God's only Son, whom He loves, is handed over to the shameful cross. Save us! Hosanna to the King. You see Him bleed and you know that it is for you. You see the love that pours out of His body and you know that that love is for you. A sinner with no claim to heaven, no claim to righteousness, no claim to stand in the presence of God and there He is, the King of kings and He is paying your debt, dying your death, giving all He has for you. God truly saves you. He is active and intent – you shall be saved, you shall live, you shall be His, you shall not die. Christ dies and He is your shield, your righteousness. Christ dies and heaven is your home. You belong to Him!

All those episodes in Scripture that you love most are anchored in Jesus – His death and resurrection. That is Christianity. That is the hope that beats in your breast, the faith that animates your spirit, the truth that makes the church the church in every age. Whether you know it or not, whether you feel it or not, you do stand with Hananiah, you do stand with Mishael, you do stand with Azariah. They knew the God whom they served and they would not serve another. You know who your Redeemer is and you know that "neither life nor death, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else

in all creation, will be able to separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:38-39). You stand with the great saints of old because you stand on Christ.

He is able to save us from this virus... but even if He doesn't... we say with Thomas: my Lord and my God. **He is able to save us from this virus... but even if He doesn't...** we say with the Canaanite woman: I gladly take whatever crumbs fall from His table. **He is able to save us from this virus... but even if He doesn't...** we say with the conflicted father: I believe; help my unbelief. That is where I want to stand. He is able to save us from this virus... but even if He doesn't... That is the church's confession in this hour. That is the faith that makes Christ's church the blessing to the world that she must be. Blessed is He who comes to us for He comes with the power of His resurrection, He comes to give us His body to eat, His blood to drink. We are more than conquerors through Him who loved us, through Him who set His face toward Calvary and entered Jerusalem in triumph. He is the Lord of this hour. He is the Lord of this land. He is the Lord your life and He is revealing Himself as the One we are to trust. Blessed is He, Blessed is He, Blessed is He that cometh in the Name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.