



Palm Sunday, March 28, 2021

Rev. Dr. Michael R. Fitzgerald, Senior Pastor



“The Critical Moment”

**John 13: 1-5, 18-27, 30
(King James Version)**

The altar area is beautiful this morning with all the symbols of the Lord’s Supper, the palm branches, the large cross behind me to remind us of this Passion Week. We thank Roxanne Higgins and Pam Giles for creating such a meaningful and moving presentation.

As we gather on this Palm Sunday, we consider the final week of Jesus’ earthly life before the agony of the cross and the victory of the resurrection. This day draws its name from His final entry into Jerusalem on that Sunday and is in fulfillment of prophecy hundreds of years earlier of Him riding into the city on a donkey: Zechariah 9:9 “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon a donkey, and upon a colt the foal of a donkey.” The shadow of the cross has fallen upon Jesus these last few days.

Palm Sunday is recorded in all four Gospels: Matthew 21, Mark 11, Luke 19, John 12. I want you to see that God laid down the plan of our salvation long before the cross and the empty tomb. The life of Jesus Christ and the gift of His ministry to us is scattered throughout the prophecy of the Old Testament. We can see His life laid out before us even before the book of Matthew opens. We know the gift of our salvation and eternal life was planned long before the cross ever came. Jesus brought forth that plan, but God had laid it down in His mind and wisdom many centuries before it ever happened. As we think of Palm Sunday, we picture the people of Jerusalem who are laying their clothing and palm branches on the road as Jesus rides this donkey into the city for the last time. The palms are a symbol of joy, respect, and honor; when someone important was coming into the city they would cover the dirt so that the animal or that person didn’t have to walk on the lowliness of the dirt but rather on the respect of the clothing and palm branches. The people shouted “Hosanna” as a welcome of holiness of Jesus coming into Jerusalem. Sadly, at the end of the week many of those same people who shouted “Hosanna” shouted “Crucify Him.”

Those few days between Palm Sunday and Good Friday were packed full of teaching and ministry for the Lord Jesus Christ; He had very little time to rest. Even as He came to the cross, I believe He was tired. He was a man on a holy mission; He had to complete everything that needed to be done before God’s holy timetable could be fulfilled. So Jesus Christ walked among the people—healing, teaching, loving them. Toward the end of that week on Thursday before He goes to the cross on Friday, He meets with His disciples for one final gathering of teaching, fellowship, love, and ministry.

We’ll read today from John 13. This final gathering was a celebration of the Jewish Passover meal with His disciples—His twelve chosen men. Including Jesus, there were thirteen men at this meal. But one more was there—Satan himself was crouching in the corner of this meeting. Where God Almighty is omnipresent and omniscient, all-knowing, all-present everywhere, Satan is very limited in where he can be. But he’s in this room the evening of the Passover. As the disciples come together, Jesus begins the evening

by celebrating the meal with them. The meaning of the Passover meal was established when Moses had gone to the Israelites who were slaves and captives in Egypt. He brought them a message of freedom; the death angel was going to pass through Egypt and take the life of every humans' and animals' first born. As they celebrated the Passover meal in obedience to God, the death angel passed over them on through Egypt. The Israelites were spared because of their faith and love in God. The meal goes backward in history but Jesus brings something out so the disciples can look forward to what is going to happen—His own passing, His own sacrifice, His own atonement for sin for anyone who would place their faith in Him. Let's see how the evening ends in John 13:1-5. ¹“Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end. ²And supper being ended, the devil having now put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him; ³Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he was come from God, and went to God; ⁴He riseth from supper and laid aside his garments and took a towel and girded himself. ⁵After that he poureth water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded.”

Foot washing was reserved for the lowest, most menial slave in a household. Feet were considered a lowly part of the body, and cleaning dirty feet was the lowliest job any servant could perform. When people visited a home, either those who lived there or visitors, the servant was dispatched to wash caked-on mud off their feet. In Biblical times, that servant had to splash more than just a bit of water and dry their feet—he had to clean every speck of dirt off between the toes and anywhere dirt might cling. The job was menial and not easy. Jesus did the same thing with His disciples, humbling Himself to such a task. The disciples were amazed and in awe, perhaps even embarrassed by this act of their Master, their Lord, that He knelt before them to wash their feet. Peter even said “You cannot wash my feet as my Master.” Jesus insists saying “You will have no part of me unless I wash your feet.” The disciples had no idea that Jesus would be far, far more humiliated the next day when He went to the cross to die for the world. Yes, He was humbled on Maundy Thursday when He washed their feet, but He was completely humiliated the next day when He died on the cross as a common criminal—bearing our shame and sin, taking our place, our punishment. The disciples didn't know that was coming.

After Jesus finishes washing their feet, He instructs them (and two thousand years later, us) to humble themselves in service to others as He humbled Himself in service to them. We are to serve others with the same humility with which we see Jesus serving His disciples that night. We've had a rough year, and I think the light is beginning to glimmer at the end of the tunnel. The pandemic has caused a rough time for the church's life and has disrupted our personal lives. But it's given us the opportunity to practice some true humility as we've strived to protect other people. We've looked beyond ourselves to take care of somebody else. I pray we'll keep that going.

At this point in today's Scripture, the devil has already dealt secretly with Judas Iscariot by implanting a plan of betrayal in his mind and heart. Judas was going to betray the Lord by turning Him into the Roman authorities as a rebel and traitor. Judas agrees with Satan—Jesus has to die, and I'm going to hasten that process by turning Him in tonight. After the foot washing, Jesus announces another stunning truth—one they never thought they'd hear: “One of you at the table with me will betray me.” The disciples were

shocked! One of us, a betrayer?! One of us who's followed you three years to betray you?! None of them know the plan of Judas Iscariot. John 13:18-21 **“¹⁸I speak not of you all: I know whom I have chosen but that the Scripture may be fulfilled, He that eateth bread with me hath lifted up his heel against me. ¹⁹Now I tell you before it come, that, when it is come to pass, ye may believe that I am he. ²⁰Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that receiveth whomsoever I send receiveth me: and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me. ²¹When Jesus had thus said, he was troubled in spirit and testified and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you that one of you shall betray me.”** Jesus tells his twelve disciples that one of them is going to turn his back on Him—a cruel act against the Savior. Read verse 21 again; you may want to underline “he was troubled in spirit.” In the Greek word “troubled,” we see the humanity of Jesus. He is the Son of God and Son of Man—He’s one hundred percent God, one hundred percent Man. The Greek word for “troubled” is *etarachthē* which means Jesus had extreme anxiety, even to the point of horror, that He was going to face the cross of Calvary. It was the weight of the sin He would bear on His shoulders on the cross that caused the greatest anxiety—that God the Father would unleash all this punishment upon Him in that moment for every sin and sinner in the world. Jesus knew it was coming; He faced taking the wrath of God. As Jesus reveals a betrayer, the disciples were in shock wondering who it could be. The Gospel writer, John, gives us a glimpse of a conversation between himself and Peter. Read verses 22-27. **“²²Then the disciples looked one on another, doubting of whom he spake. ²³Now there was leaning on Jesus’ bosom one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved. (This is John; he never calls himself by name—it’s always the one whom Jesus loved.) ²⁴Simon Peter therefore beckoned to him that he should ask who it should be of whom he spake. ²⁵He then lying on Jesus’ breast saith unto him, Lord, who is it? ²⁶Jesus answered, He it is to whom I shall give a sop, when I have dipped it. And when he had dipped the sop, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon. ²⁷And after the sop Satan entered unto him. Then said Jesus unto him, “**That thou doest, do quickly.**”**”

As the news of this betrayer sinks in, John records he’s sitting next to Jesus. In Leonardo DaVinci’s painting of “The Last Supper” we see the disciples sitting around in groups with Jesus in the center. In reality, the Passover was symbolic of the freedom in Israel and was taken in a reclining position. So here’s John in this position and leaned his head on Jesus’ chest. Peter sees him and whispers “ask him—find out who it is!” John looks at Jesus and asks “who is it?” Jesus says “I’m going to dip a piece of bread in the sop (an element of the Passover meal) and offer it to that man. The one I offer it to is My betrayer.”

In the reproduction of the Passover meal here at the altar is an example of the sop—a mixture of nuts, dates, raisins, figs mashed into a paste that could be dipped out with the bread. As Jesus dipped the sop and approached Judas Iscariot, note that it was always offered to the guest of honor in a Passover meal as a symbol of love, respect, and invitation. Jesus is giving Judas one last gesture of love, one last opportunity of decision. Here’s a man who literally walked in the footsteps of Jesus for three years, and he was lost. He didn’t know Jesus as Savior. As Jesus offered him the sop, He basically said Judas, you can choose Me and reject Satan or you can choose Satan and refuse Me; it’s your critical moment. We know Judas’ decision: No, Jesus, I will not follow You. I’m going to follow the plan already in my mind and heart, and I’m going to betray you. Satan has entered into him, and there’s no turning back. Judas will end up in hell very soon as He turns Jesus in. Read verse 30: “He then having received the sop went immediately out: and it was night.” This is very symbolic; outside the Upper Room it was dark but it was darker in Judas’

heart. He was headed out to betray the Savior, the Son of God, the Lord of the Universe. His heart was much darker than the night could be. Now Jesus enters the hours of trial, mockery, cruelty, the scourging, the crown of thorns, the shame of the cross. Today, we worship at the foot of that cross. Amen? We're here to say thank You, Lord, that You took my place.

Judas turned Jesus in and Roman soldiers took over. Nobody forced Jesus to the cross; He went of His own love for you and me and laid down His life willingly for us. He endured the ultimate, unthinkable agony to forgive us—Isaiah 53:5 “...and with his stripes we are healed.” We gathered around the Lord's table today to remember Him, to thank Him, worship and praise Him. My prayer is that we leave through these doors with that same praise on our hearts during this week to come. Praise God we know the end of the story! When we meet here next Sunday, we'll celebrate His resurrection!

As I close today's sermon, we who are believers, praise God we can thank Him and worship Him. Maybe you're here in person or via media and have never come to Jesus as your Lord and Savior. Jesus held up the sop for Judas Iscariot and said this is your critical moment to make a decision. This moment is your critical moment; you came in with a weight of sin on your shoulders. Jesus is reaching out to you saying “I want to be your Savior; I've gone to the cross to earn that right. I love you, and you can lay down your sin and come to me as your Savior.” Will you come—right now? Come to Jesus; He's ready to receive you. His arms are open, and He's waiting for you.

Let Us Pray: Our Father, our God, thank You for these moments. Thank You that it should have been my hands and feet on that cross. Thank You for Your word of love for us, Lord. Thank You for Your gift—a gift we cannot conceive that You died and laid down Your life as the Savior of each person in the world who would come to You. May we be strong in our mission outreach and in our daily lives to know we'll have appointments with people this week. May we fulfill them with Your love. We love You, we trust You, and pray You'll carry us forward in how we reach out for Jesus. For that one who needs You, their “critical moment” is right here and he or she can become a son or daughter of God through Your forgiveness. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

**** A SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT ****

After his message, Pastor Mike announced his plan to step down from the position of Senior Pastor. According to Ecclesiastes 3, God has a holy timing for all things, and Mike has felt the Lord's leading in his decision. He gave notice to the Personnel Committee in June, 2020. In February, 2021, a Senior Pastor Search Committee was formed as directed by our church Constitution. This committee will begin its work upon confirmation by the church body. A called Business Meeting was announced today, March 28, to vote on the members of the Senior Pastor Search Committee. This vote will take place within the worship service on April 11, 2021. The date Pastor Mike will step down is his 40th anniversary with Clifford Baptist Church, June 5, 2022.

The Proposed Senior Pastor Search Committee members are: Jim Saunders, Derek Keiser, John Coots, Sarah Beazley, Betty Fortune, Glenda Wray Jennings, and Matt Giles. Alternate Members are: Chad Fleming, Erin Minter, and Jeremy Fulcher.