

March 25 – 31, 2018

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Pioneer Lake Lutheran Church, Conover, WI

Sunday March 25

Text: Philippians 2:5-11

Verse: “...**but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave**”.

When a foreign Head-of-State comes to visit Washington, D.C. protocol is carefully observed. First on the list is pomp. The red carpet is rolled out at the airport. The band plays and the Honor Guard look resplendent in their uniforms. Next is protection. The dignitary and staff are shuttled in limousines with police escort. Next is policy with a meeting with the President and other members of the government. Next is the press with questions from correspondents foreign and local. All events must be carefully planned to avoid any kind of embarrassment.

Today is Palm Sunday, an exciting day of worship as the people gather to receive palms and process into the sanctuary. This remembers Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. He was welcomed as King and Messiah with shouts of Hosanna and affirmation - “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.... Blessed is the coming of the kingdom of our ancestor David.” Jesus' choice of entry on a donkey did not convey military power, yet there was precedent for a king to ride such an animal to show humility. Jesus was protected for a time by the praise of the people. Jesus engaged in policy by an act of prophetic resistance, driving out the animal-sellers and money-changers from the Temple courtyard. Jesus' policy was for his Father's house to be house of prayer for all nations, but it had been made into a robber's hide-out. Jesus met the press of opponents who questioned him about his authority.

This is also the Sunday of the Passion. Jesus will die deserted by his disciples. On the cross with all the physical and emotional torment, Jesus would cry out in spiritual pain, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” For some the death of Jesus just showed another example of the injustice and cruelty of the state. But Jesus was no hapless victim. He chose to be helpless for our sake. Although equal with God he demanded no protocol for his sovereignty. Instead he emptied himself of all glory of his pre-existence and power of his creative might. He chose to come as a slave. He died the slave's death, “and became

obedient unto death, even death on a cross.” He emptied himself of divine distance to fill us with his presence; he emptied himself of divine mystery to touch our lives with mercy; he emptied himself of eternal life to take our death upon himself. Jesus’ sovereignty is his rule of pardon, peace with God, and resurrection life. His royalty and rule are universal: “at the name of Jesus every knee should bend and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

Let us Pray: Merciful God, we ask your blessing for our Holy Week times of worship and prayer. Renew our faith with thanksgiving for all Jesus did for us and the world by being a slave, obediently choosing the way of sacrifice on the cross for our salvation. Prepare our hearts to sing joyful “alleluias” on Easter Sunday. “Thousand, thousand thanks are due, dearest Jesus unto you.”



March 26, Monday in Holy Week

Text: Hebrews 9:11-14

Verse: **“...how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!”**

There was a Bible study prepared for Lent titled “Face of Christ.” In an opening exercise, participants were to come up with as many names or titles of Jesus they remembered from Scripture. In my experience titles such as “Lord” and “Savior” were quickly mentioned. After some more time someone recalled the gospel of John and came up with “Light of the World”, “Bread of Life”, and “Lamb of God.” But no one mentioned “High Priest.”

The Letter to the Hebrews used the office of high priest as a model for the person and mission of Jesus. In ancient Israel the priests served various functions: officiating at sacrifices, teaching the people, and blessing the people. The priests were to bless with the familiar words, “The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you, the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.” On the Day of Atonement the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies in the Temple and

offer the sacrifice of animals without blemish for the sins of the people. The text then made a common form of comparison called 'from lesser to greater': if the blood of goats and calves (poor critters) would help to free people from guilt, *how much more* would the sacrifice offered by Jesus, his own blood, his own life, secure for the faithful the gift of an eternal redemption. Even more the sacrifice of Jesus himself would purify our consciences from dead works to worship the living God! (Interesting, the NRSV adds the exclamation mark.) This good news deserves exclamation because our conscience, our inner self, is purified, cleansed from what causes death to faith, hope, and love. We are purified from self-condemnations. We are cleansed from thinking we are disappointments before God. Our consciences have been purified by the cross. The blood of Jesus removes all condemnation with the eternal forgiveness of sins. Purified does not mean we are perfect, but that with joy we look forward to worship our living Savior who came to serve as our high priest who loves us and gave himself up for us.

Let us Pray: O God, your Son chose the path that led to pain before joy and to the cross before glory. Plant his cross in our hearts, so that in its power and love we may come at last to joy and glory, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.



March 27, Tuesday in Holy Week

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Verse: **“God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.”**

A favorite hymn that congregations sing during Holy Week is the African American spiritual “Were You There.” The lyrics are simple, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Were you there when they nailed him to the tree....pierced him in the side.....sun refused to shine.....when they laid him in the tomb.” Its simplicity is its power because “sometimes it causes me to

tremble, tremble, tremble.” The spiritual invites us in, invites us to not only hear about the cross but also to somehow feel its full redemptive power.

The apostle Paul told his hearers he was not striving to be an eloquent preacher, making for himself a reputation of renown and recognition. Disregarding wisdom with substantial quotations from this or that authority, Paul came to proclaim the cross pure and simple, as he said he did not want the proclamation of the cross “emptied of its power.” Paul knew the message of the cross was foolishness for some. Writing during a time when the humiliation and cruelty of crucifixion were all too common, the message of Jesus’ saving power through the cross was difficult to grasp. Couldn’t Paul preach on another topic that would display his wisdom? Paul was a learned man after all. But Paul said, “Don’t you see, it was the will of God not to be known through human wisdom.” If you want to know God, you must go to the cross. The cross is human foolishness but God’s wisdom. The cross is human weakness but God’s strength. As Jesus spoke in the Gospel of John, when he is lifted up on the cross, “he would draw all people to himself.” The drawing power is forgiveness of all sins, peace with God, and a love revealed beyond any measure. The cross may be foolishness for those who are perishing, but for those being saved it is the power of God.

Paul had another reason why he would stress the cross. Some in the congregation at Corinth were taking pride in their wisdom and spiritual gifts. They even thought they ranked higher than others in the congregation. But the ground is level at the cross. There is no superior or inferior, no ranking and award ceremonies. At the cross all are brothers and sisters saved by grace, loved by Jesus eternally, who gave himself as sacrifice for them.

Let us pray: *Lord Jesus, you have called us to follow you. Grant that our love may not grow cold in your service, and that we may not fail or deny you in the time of trial, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*



March 28, Wednesday in Holy Week

Text: Hebrews 12: 1-3

“...looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Many love to watch sports. There were the Olympics in February. “March Madness” refers to basketball championships. There was a video clip of a three-point shot at the game-ending buzzer that won the game for the University of Michigan. The last second shot was made by a freshman, and what a joy to see the excitement on his face and the explosive excitement from the rest of the team. Even though behind in the game, they did not give up.

The writer of Hebrews used a sports metaphor to encourage the Christian faithful to ‘stay in the game’. The writer used the image of a race, a long-distance race like a marathon. The text said “Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” The word translated ‘race’ could also be translated ‘struggle’. We know life has times of struggle and even agony. It is important to persevere, translating a word that means a ‘victorious patience’. This comes from “looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” The word translated ‘looking’ comes from a word that means ‘to look away from something in order to concentrate on another.’ Perseverance for the race/struggle of life comes from concentrating on Jesus. He is the pioneer, the one who has cleared the way for our goal by his cross and resurrection. The race actually has already been won for us by Jesus and so we claim the victory through faith in him. Jesus is also the ‘perfecter’ for he is the one who brings us to our eternal goal. The text said “who for the sake of the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.” It is also possible to translate “instead of the joy that was set before him...” I can understand the latter translation since the suffering endured on the cross was anything but joyful. But on the other hand there is a wonderful image of Jesus joyfully thinking of us, securing our salvation, empowering his endurance. We are joy to Jesus. Risen from the dead Jesus has taken his rightful seat of rule at the right hand of the throne of God. But don’t surmise this means Jesus is done with us. Earlier in Hebrews we are encouraged to understand Jesus like a compassionate priest who understands our struggles and temptations, so therefore with boldness come before the *throne* of grace to find help in our time of need.

Let us pray: *Almighty God, your Son our Savior suffered at human hands and endured the shame of the cross. Grant that we may walk in the way of his cross and find it the way of life and peace, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord,*

*who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
Amen.*



March 29, Maundy Thursday

Text: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Verse: **“For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”**

I once had a confirmation student who was a hellion in class. At the end of the program he and others were required to write essays or faith statements. With this young man my expectations were low, way low. But was I ever surprised. He used an expression I have not forgotten and I rather like: “we should covet communion.” The word ‘covet’ is often used in a negative sense like ‘do not covet’ your neighbors house or possessions. It means an attitude of the heart, where one has placed hope and happiness. As sinful people we can covet the wrong things, things which only provide a counterfeit hope. But this young man at the time used ‘covet’ in a positive way: truly, with heartfelt desire, receive Holy Communion. Since communion is receiving Jesus’ body and blood, his sacrifice for our redemption and peace, this is true hope indeed.

Maundy Thursday begins the “Great Three Days” understood as one continuous worship service finishing with the announcement of Jesus’ resurrection during the Easter Vigil. According to the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) Jesus was celebrating Passover with his disciples. This meal was one of redemption, not only remembering the past when God freed Israel from slavery in Egypt, but ever expecting God’s redeeming love to act in the present. The Passover was to be remembered for all time. Jesus took the bread and the cup and gave us the grace of deliverance: “my body and blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” This was the Exodus Jesus was to accomplish on the cross for us. As the apostle Paul would write in Romans, Jesus was put to death for our transgressions and raised for our justification. So we are to ever remember what Jesus accomplished: he has freed us from sin’s domination rule of guilt, to now be under the rule of grace. We have been freed from the fear of death by the Savior who took upon himself our death so we would be with him forever.

“For as often as we eat this bread and drink the cup, we proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” The word ‘proclaim’ is the verbal form of a word that means ‘messenger’ or ‘herald’. We herald the Lord’s death by a mind-set of grace, suspending condemnation or judgment of others. We herald the Lord’s death by a heartfelt desire to give testimony—by our words and by our lives,—of the steadfast love and mercy of God. May this mercy and compassion ever empower the church with its witness in a hurting and struggling world.

Let us pray: *Eternal God, in the sharing of a meal your Son established a new covenant for all people, and in the washing of feet he showed the dignity of service. Grant that by the power of your Holy Spirit these signs of our life in faith may speak again to our hearts, feed our spirits, and refresh our bodies, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*



March 30, Good Friday

Text: Hebrews 10:16-25

Verse: **“Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.”**

Years ago, a member of the congregation told me she had made a banner for Good Friday. It was sheer simplicity: a black background with a tear in the center. Certainly tears were shed at the time of Jesus’ death. The Gospel of John tells us that his mother was right there, at the foot of the cross. Also there was the disciple known simply as the “one whom Jesus loved”. Jesus commended the care of his mother to this disciple (“woman, behold your son, son behold your mother”).

Although the worship service for Good Friday is solemn, it is not sad. It is not a funeral for Jesus. For the gospel of John, Jesus on the cross revealed his glory. This was why Jesus, the Eternal Word, became a human being. Truly a human being Jesus ever kept faithful to what he called ‘his hour’. The gospel of John referred to the cross of Jesus as his hour to be ‘lifted up’, not only a physical

reference but the word also means 'exalted'. Jesus is truly glorified because his hour on the cross revealed him to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. In John's gospel Jesus' last word from the cross was not one of being forsaken, but one who was faithful to his mission. "It is finished" meant more than breathing his last, but accomplishing the blessing of driving out the ruler of this world and assuring us eternal life.

Thankful for all Jesus had done, the author of Hebrews wrote we approach worship with confidence, assurance, and a clean conscience. There was a reference to baptism with our hearts cleansed from evil and our bodies washed with pure water. Of course this is water with the word, the word centered in Jesus and his blood, his sacrifice, cleansing us from sin.

We gather for worship confident of grace, and also promoting care for one another. The text "let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching." The word 'provoke' reminds me of a hymn in our ELW, #547: "Your grace shall incite us, your love shall unite us, to work for your kingdom and answer your call." As Christians we should incite a riot, a riot of love and good deeds ever inspired by the love and grace of Jesus.

Let us pray: *Merciful God, your Son was lifted up on the cross to draw all people to himself. Grant that we who have been born out of his wounded side may at all times find mercy in him, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*



March 31, Holy Saturday, Vigil of Easter

Text: Romans 6:3-11

Verse: **"For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like is."**

In my first parish experience in Saskatchewan, the Lutheran Church did a lot with the local Mennonite congregation. Both congregations were small and they

would work together, for example, with Vacation Bible School. The Easter service was always in the Community Hall with both congregations joyfully singing their “Alleluias, Christ is risen!” The village had a small, 10 bed hospital. If a member of the Mennonite Church was in hospital and was near death, the congregation would keep what they called ‘vigil’. The person nearing the end of their earthly journey would never be left alone. Someone would be in the hospital room with the dying person. Sometimes they would sit in silence or sometimes there would be Bible reading. This vigil or waiting was not only for death to come, but the hope of the faithful: that one dies not alone, but with Jesus. It is Jesus who leads from death to life.

The Easter Vigil service begins in darkness. Worshipers process into the darkened sanctuary with candles as the pastor/cantor singing “The Light of Christ, rising in glory dispel the darkness of our hearts and minds.” After a series of Old Testament texts, the reading of the Easter Gospel is accompanied by the lights being turned to full brightness and the altar candles lighted.

This service would be a wonderful occasion for Baptisms. The New Testament reading said when we are baptized, we are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Baptism is serious grace going on! We are baptized into Christ’s death, we are buried with Christ. With this baptismal death with Jesus, we put to death our sinful selves. We are also raised with Jesus “so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” Baptism is serious grace: we have been untied from sin’s hold by being united to Jesus Christ and his resurrection hold. The word in the text translated ‘united’ actually is a word meaning ‘planted with’, a good spring time metaphor indicating we are to grow in faith, ever nurtured by being attached to the vine, Jesus Christ. Baptism bestows the Holy Spirit who inspires growth in our lives (the fruits of the Spirit).

A happy and blessed Easter! The Paschal or resurrection candle is lighted for every Sunday after Easter. May the power of his death and resurrection be our power source for being the lights of Jesus Christ for the community, lights of faith, hope, and love.

Let us pray: O God, you are the creator of the world, the liberator of your people, and the wisdom of the earth. By the resurrection of your Son free us from our fears, restore us in your image, and ignite us with your light, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

