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Palm Sunday, the first day in Holy Week when we recall not just the "Us Story" but "The Story," the only story that matters at the end of the day, the story of God coming to show us the way, to save us, to heal us, to redeem us. Palm Sunday is celebrated many ways. There has been a trend in modern times to – oh, you know – kind of increasing the silliness and fun, if you will. I know one minister who told me that last year in his church for Palm Sunday, they had a live donkey come down the aisle with expected, but unpleasant, results. They said "We will never do that again."

I was reading this week about the way Palm Sunday was celebrated in the high Middle Ages across Europe. It's pretty interesting. The citizens of the city, when the day would come, would all go outside the city walls, and they would cut all the branches from the trees. They would gather flowers from the fields. And they would gather outside the city gate, and the priest would come out and would intone to them that they were about to hear the story of their salvation. The priest would lead them in a procession to the gate of the city, and the cross that he was carrying, he would use it to bang on the door, and someone would open the door and the bells of the church would peal, then a great throng would come into the city and be waving the branches, strewing flowers everywhere. They would hear the great story that you are about to hear. When the service was over, there was great festivity that lasted on into the day. When the service was over, they would take the branches they had brought with them and would take them home and would lay them on the foreheads and on the chest of homebound family members, the sick, the infirmed. They believed that there might be some hope for healing.

We come this day to hear the story of Jesus coming to Jerusalem. He was wildly popular the moment that he came in, but the people did not understand. They misconstrued what his mission would be about. As we hear the story, I would invite you to find yourself in the story, and this will not be hard to do. The story will say things like "One of the 12 betrayed him, but the other 11 could have just as well, in the same way that you and I in so many ways betray, forget, ignore, run away from our Lord. I would invite you to listen with saints of old to "The Story." It is the story of God and his people.

Perhaps you will detect the irony, the sad humor and the fact that just as we were about to collect the offering, we heard the story of Judas betraying Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. It seems to be the case that Judas loved money more than he loved Jesus, that he believed the solution to his problem would be money instead of Jesus. This is the temptation that all of us face. It is why each week in worship we collect the offering. We could just get the money some other ways, but we do it in ways as a reminder to ourselves that we have this tendency to love money more than we love Jesus and for that to be corrected, thus remembering what really is the solution to our problems, who really is the King of all Kings so that at the end of the day we might be able to sing "My Richest Gain I Count But Loss." And so let us as the people of God receive our morning tithes and offerings.

In a moment we will hear about a place that is still there on the edge of the city of Jerusalem. It's called the Garden of Gethsemane. There are gnarled, knotty olive trees there that

are centuries old. Some believe that they grew from the shoots of the very trees under which Jesus would have prayed. Certainly, the place looked a lot like it does today, olive wood, not beautiful, long, straight shafts, but gnarled, almost as if the wood is in some agony itself. Jesus goes out to pray under such trees. It's the same kind of wood that his cross would have been formed from. Catherine of Siena once said that the wood of the cross is a bridge into heaven. And that's what we need, a bridge into heaven.

As we hear this moment in the story, I invite you to listen, to listen to the disciples sleeping, to listen to the clashing iron of Roman armaments, to listen for a barely audible kiss, and then to listen to what Jesus says to his betrayer, to Judas who has kissed him to hand him over to the Romans, Jesus calls him *Friend*. And there's no hint of sarcasm in his voice. He says it as if Judas is his friend. As the Gospel of John put it *Greater love has no one than to lay down his life for his friends*. I guess that's what the story is all about at the end of the day, is friendship, God counting us as friends of God.

Week after week we come into this place and something we always do and perhaps take for granted is we say the creed. The creed is full of beautiful thoughts about God making the world, about the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus, about the resurrection of the body, the founding of the church, the gift of the spirit, but then there's that dissident note. Every week we name a petty, cruel Pontius Pilate. The theologian Karl Barth once said that Pontius Pilate is the mangy dog that walked into the beautiful house of the church. And yet, we need to hear that name as it reminds us that all is not sweetness and light, that we live in a world where there is evil, where there is injustice. It is actually Jesus' mission to take on evil and injustice and to defeat it, but not by using its own means, but by being men of peace on a mission of love.

I would invite you to listen to the way Jesus takes on evil in his confrontation with Pontius Pilate. I would invite you to listen for Jesus' silence and to remember that Mother Teresa said that "God is a friend of silence." And as we listen to the silence of Jesus, it becomes more noticeable because of all the rest of the racket in the story. The Roman soldiers are making much noise, indeed. The people, the mob, it is a racket with them. They say things that we will invite you to say as part of the story. We will invite you to join with them in saying "Crucify him." When that first crowd said "Crucify him" they needed to be forgiven, and you and I need to be forgiven. What we really need is expressed in the irony of the last words that you will say. The crowd that day said "His blood be on us and on our children." They meant it in a cynical way and yet, ironically, they spoke the truth, and this should be our prayer, "May Jesus' blood, the healing power, the amazing grace of God poured out for us, may his blood be on us and on our children."

It's such a good question *What wondrous love is this to cause the Lord of Life aside his crown for my soul?* Onlookers who saw Jesus thought of him as poor, homeless, ineffective, a failure, if you will, but his first followers believed that he was the King of Kings, that he was the King of Heaven, that he had laid aside that crown in humility to come down, to be God with us, to redeem us. Of course, he did not remain crownless. The soldiers, I guess in a funny, cruel mood, decided to mock and ridicule him by fashioning a crown for this one who some foolishly thought was the king. The crown was made of thorns. Every time I'm in Israel, if I see it by the side of the road, I get the driver to stop and I get out and try to cut loose some of this thorn that

grows wild by the roadsides there. It's called Ziziphus Spina-Christi. It has a very sharp thorn. I've never succeeded at cutting it without actually sticking myself. And in the point of the thorn there's some kind of poison that grows naturally in that, and it stings and you find that where you've been poked, it hurts and burns for several days. You can wash it but you can't get rid of it. They formed a crown of such thorns for Jesus and pressed it into his brow. They must have doubled over with laughter. We wonder how God the Father felt in that moment. Certainly, God felt deep grief over the pain and humiliation of his son, but I suspect also that God had a small smile or chuckle because they were making fun of him, saying "Is this the king?" God thought "Yes, he is the king." It's a different kind of kingship though, isn't it?

On the cross, as Jesus hung there, he uttered a prayer that his mother had taught him when he was a little boy, and she watched as he cried out to God *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* I guess if you're the kind of person who has never felt forsaken by God, this story might not mean much to you. But if you've ever felt heartbroken, distant from God, alone, hopeless, and what we see is that this King of Kings laid aside his crown, and he was crowned with harsh, poisonous thorns in order to be with us in our God-forsakenness. And whatever it is that we suffer – I thought about this over the past week – my son, nine days ago, challenged me to a game of basketball, one-on-one. There's a reason 55-year-old men don't do this, but I played him and was doing pretty well. I actually was on the verge of winning. He realized this and as I went for the winning shot, he came up with some defensive aggression to be sure his dad didn't beat him, and it wound up with his elbow being planted in my side. I now have a broken rib to show for it. It hurts – it hurts in the middle of the night – try to roll over, get some sleep – it hurts. I was feeling sorry for myself in this pain but then the other day I read something that a great Christian wrote back in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century. I guess this man had suffered some wound or had some disease or perhaps somebody had jabbed him in the side and he had a broken rib. He complained of a pain, and he said when he thinks of the pain in his side, he remembers the wound in the side of Jesus. Jesus was nailed to the cross and the soldiers came and one had a lance and pierced Jesus in his side and blood and water came forth. This writer said that when he feels his pain, instead of feeling sorry for himself, he remembers the pains of Jesus, that Jesus came down to be one with us, to redeem us, to heal us, to raise us up into new life. *What wondrous love is this.*

One of my favorite prayers coming out of the Middle Ages was written by St. Francis of Assisi. He was, of course, a great lover of nature, a peacemaker. He was known as a musician, something of a comedian, someone that people enjoyed being around, great frivolity and laughter at all times. And yet, as he grew older, he thought more and more about the crucifixion, sufferings of Jesus, and there's a prayer that he began to pray day by day. I think we can make it our closing prayer. Would you bow your heads and pray with me and St. Francis.

*My Lord, Jesus Christ, two graces I ask of you before I die. The first is that in my life I may feel in my soul and body as far as possible that sorrow which you, tender Jesus, underwent in the hour of your most bitter passion. The second is that I may feel in my heart, as far as possible, the abundance of love with which you, O Son of God were inflamed so as willingly to undergo such a great passion for us sinners.*

Amen.