



FROM THE PULPIT

North Shore Congregational Church

“I Am the Good Shepherd”

Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching

John 3: 11-17; John 10: 11-18

March 20, 2016 – Palm Sunday

As odd as it may seem, this year I am kind of looking past Palm Sunday, a bit, because I think we often lose out on some of the power of this story because we don't really discuss what happens between Palm Sunday and Easter. Every year we gather on Palm Sunday and we sing the songs we know so well, and we get our palm branches, and we reflect on that glorious entry into Jerusalem in which people were singing his praises and chanting Hosanna as they were drawn to the momentous occasion of Jesus entering the city. Then, a week later, we gather at the empty tomb and we rejoice. We look at the beautiful flowers, we listen to the wonderful music, we sing at the top of our voices amidst a room filled with more worshippers than almost any other time of the year, and we rejoice at the rolled stone, the folded garment, the empty tomb, and the angelic proclamations of resurrection. But, in-between those two Sundays – in the midst of Holy Week – the truth is that we spend precious little time and energy actually considering the fact that, after he entered Jerusalem and before he rose – he died!

Now, I know that some of you attend our Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services, and we reflect on that truth, some, at that time. But, even during that service, we are limited to a much smaller portion of our – so many of us never take the time to really talk about what it means. Every year we celebrate and explore what it means that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of a colt. And, every year we celebrate and explore what it means that Jesus rose from the dead. But, every year, between those two celebrations, there is an entire narrative of pain and sacrifice – and we don't talk, often enough, about what that means. But, I am increasingly convinced that we can't truly understand the promise and exultation of Palm Sunday, or the power and hope of Easter, if we don't fully understand that he died – and that he died for us!

“I am the good the shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” “Greater love has no one than this: to lay one's life down for one's friends.” I think one of the things that has emerged in my own understanding of the Easter story, in the past few years, is the power of the fact that there was a choice here. I think we sometimes get sucked into the notion of this all being “God's plan” and, in the process, we turn the story into some scripted reenactment in

which the pawns each played their role and we turn Jesus into this anthropomorphic deity that simply came down to do his little salvation thing before popping back up to Heaven. But, that's not what happened here.

Jesus agonized over this. Jesus felt the pain, the fear, the worry, the distress, the despair, the angst, and every other emotion you might imagine one would feel in the face of these trials and turmoil.

- When Jesus shared his prayer in the garden at Gethsemane, he didn't look up to God, plainly, and say, 'Ok God – let's get this done.' No, when Jesus went to Gethsemane he dropped to his knees and he pleaded with God, "Lord, if it is your will, take this cup from me." In other words, 'God, I don't want to do it.'
- When Jesus is breathing his last breaths on the cross, he doesn't sit there and blithely await his death. No, when Jesus is breathing his last breaths on the cross he cries out in anguish, to God, 'Why have you forsaken me.'
- And, when Jesus talks about his pending crucifixion and death he talks about how the good shepherd lays his life down – he reflects the decision and intent that is behind his sacrificial act.

There was a choice in this, for Jesus. He could have fought it. He could have stood up for himself. He could have let his disciples fight the guards when they came to arrest him. He could have hidden, run, compromised, contrived, or otherwise altered his fate to avoid the pain and suffering that he knew he was going to endure, but he didn't. He chose to walk this path.

And, there was choice in this for God. This is not, by any stretch of the imagination, the only way God could have restored humanity's relationship with God. Jesus didn't HAVE to die for us to be reconciled to God. There were other ways. There were other options. This is not what HAD to be done, this is what God CHOSE to do.

There was choice in this. There was choice for God, there was choice for Jesus. This was not the way things had to unfold. This was not some puppeteered enactment in which the players didn't feel the pain and emotions involved. This was a specific choice to reconcile humanity to God in this way, through this process, in this manner. And, what I really want us all to consider is the possibility that the very reason God chose this way – and the very reason Jesus chose to follow – is exactly that which Jesus proclaims so clearly in John 15: "Greater love has no one than this: to lay one's life down for one's friends."

Using the language of shepherding that was so common to the agricultural society in which he spent most of his time, Jesus compares himself to a good shepherd. He's NOT the hired hand. He's not there just to fill a role. He's not there to do a job. He's not there to do his thing until he wants to move on or run away at the earliest sign of trouble. No, Jesus is the good shepherd who cares for the sheep, who loves the sheep, who will do anything to protect the sheep – who lays down his life for the sheep!

The simple truth is that God could have restored humanity to God through the proverbial snap of the divine fingers. The truth is that God could have restored humanity to God through some flood-like cleansing of which we read in stories such as Noah. The truth is that God could have

restored humanity to God in more ways than we could ever imagine or consider. But, the other truth is that there was no other way – no other option – that would reconcile humanity with God while showing humanity that the reason God wants to be reconciled is because there simply is no more profound love that we will ever know, than the love God holds for us. In other words – God chose THIS way, because THIS is how much God loves us!

Jesus, rightfully, proclaims that there is no greater love than the love that would cause someone to lay down their life for the sake of the person they love. And, then Jesus goes and does that – by choice! I think we are so often overwhelmed by the pomp and circumstance of Palm Sunday and Easter that we forget that, between those celebratory events, Jesus died – and he died for us – and he died for us because that is how much God loves us and there was no better way to show it than to lay down his life for us!

Today, as we gather on Palm Sunday, we have a privilege that those on the morning of the triumphal entry didn't – because we know the rest of the story.

- We have the joy, as we look at this parade-like atmosphere of Jesus riding into Jerusalem, of knowing where it is all headed and what it all means.
- We know, like those who were there that morning, that there is much to celebrate in his teachings, healings, miracles, and life.
- But we also know what they didn't – that his teachings, healings, miracles and life were but a prelude to his sacrifice, his crucifixion, his resurrection and his ascension to the right hand of God.
- We know what they didn't – that his journey into Jerusalem was the beginning of his journey to the empty tomb – and to the ultimate revelation of the grace and glory of God in the resurrection.

But, what I want us to remember, today, is that before Jesus got to the resurrection he had to go through the cross – he had to die. And he died, for us, because that is how much God loves us.

“I am the good the shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” “Greater love has no one than this: to lay one's life down for one's friends.” As we celebrate the triumphal entry today – as we symbolically consider what that means for the entry Jesus is seeking to make into our hearts and lives – I want us each to consider the profound truth that God chose this act, and Jesus chose to die, because that is how much we are loved. And, as trite as it may seem, I'm not sure there is anything more we need to know than that!