

SERMON PALM SUNDAY 2022

NEW SONG EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Today is Passion Sunday, the beginning of Passion Week in our liturgical calendar. ‘Passion’ comes from the Latin “passio,” suffering, to suffer. These days we use the word passion more for dedication to a vocation or a cause or a lover, so it carries a sense of endurance too.

Perhaps the two meanings intersect when our particular passion proves costly to follow to fruition—like working out all those expectations and projections of an intimate relationship; or being faithful to the needs of our children; or being a schoolteacher astronaut aboard the tragic Challenger; or being a Chad Pregracke who grew up in East Moline on the river, did commercial shell diving with his brother, then realizing the extent of river garbage, he has spent the next twenty-some years cleaning up now 15 rivers.

With 12 employees and 70,000 volunteers, they have pulled out 67,000 tires, 1000 refrigerators, and countless other tons of trash. That is a passion.

Your life vocation can just drop into your life, but you then have to nod your head ‘yes.’ You choose. Any passion worth its salt will probably expose you to risk, and just plain expose your vulnerabilities.

This is today’s backdrop for the famous hymn in St. Paul’s Letter to the Philippians, which hymn may have come from an early Christian source or not. [Amazing what was being composed no more than twenty years after Jesus’ passing]

“He did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited

But humbled himself, taking the form of a slave...”

“Exploited” literally means grabbed or snatched. Paul is contrasting Christ with someone else in the image of God who indeed grabbed after equality with God. Who else could that be? [Adam]

Yes, Adam had not, as some wag put it, read his Apple Rights and Responsibilities. So he and Eve had their own best ideas of how things ought to go and were not obedient to God's way, were not passionate for the plan, and decided they knew as much as God. That is a partial summary of the human condition.

We get into trouble when we ride our ego as hard as it will go, when we insist on our supremacy or the supremacy of our cultural assumptions over others, when our passion settles for control and domination rather than real intimacy, true service, and taking your knocks along the way.

Christ's passion led to his *passio*, of course. It's fair to say that he had insurrection—non-violent—on his mind when he came into Jerusalem on the east side on a donkey, in deliberate contrast to Roman troops with Pilate on a horse coming into town from the west. He made it hard for the Romans to ignore him or stop him--Surrounding himself with crowds, disappearing at night, having disciples

make the arrangements—it was all meant for an uprising of the peaceable kingdom of God on the Passover holiday. This Passover was going to be a real celebration of Exodus liberation.

And of course it went haywire, as Jesus knew it probably would, and he suffered an execution meant to be an example for everyone else who entertained such ideas.

And so it was and is, but not as the Romans anticipated. “The noble army of martyrs praise thee,” sings the *Te Deum*. And the martyrs ultimately brought down Roman authority.

“And became obedient even to the point of death.” A few of us are called to sacrifice life and breath for God’s sake, yet more often are we pressed to sacrifice the life of the ego, the fantasy of controlling our fate, the wish to manage other people. Those sacrifices would change society, and they also teach us humility, or perhaps we have been humbled into giving up grabbing

equality with God for our lives. Our soul understandably feels empty.

In those moments of our *passio* we come closer to Christ's way. A former professor of mine, Morna Hooker, put it this way: "Christ emptied himself, not in spite of being in the form of God, but because this is what God is like." God sacrifices God's very self. In Christ it is perfect love, "Therefore God also highly exalted him."

There is a charming book called "The Book of Joy" which is mostly dialogue between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu—two old men, awesome spiritual leaders involved in political affairs too. The Archbishop speaks of this emptying.

"Sometimes we get too angry with ourselves thinking we ought to be perfect from the word *go*. But this being on earth is a time for us to learn to be good, to learn to be more loving, to learn to be more compassionate. And you learn, not theoretically. You learn when something happens

that tests you. ‘ HELLO, you said that you wanted to be more compassionate, HELLO. ‘

“And so I would say to everyone: You are made for perfection, but you are not yet perfect. You are a masterpiece in the making.”

Holy Week is upon us. A week to work intensely on our masterpiece self. Opportunities for love and compassion everywhere, from inside your home to your community to refugees from many lands at our borders. The way of the cross is along your path to the city of God.