

Sunday of the Passion
Palm Sunday
April 5, 2009

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I begin with a brief prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, You are the light of the world. Fill our minds with your peace and our hearts with your love. In your name, O Christ, our body and blood, our life and our nourishment. Amen.

We are on the threshold of Holy Week; indeed this morning we have crossed the threshold on this first day of Holy Week, the climax of the season of Lent. Together Lent and Holy Week are the most important liturgical season of the Christian year. Here more clearly and emphatically than anywhere else; in this season of the church year we see what the story of Jesus is most centrally about and thus also what the Christian life is most centrally about. Lent is about journeying with Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem. It is about following Jesus on the way, the path that leads to Jerusalem and our Lenten journey began around six weeks ago on Ash Wednesday and today we reach his destination, Jerusalem, and we will be in Jerusalem the rest of this week until we gather again next Sunday on Easter the end of this week that is also a beginning. We call this week not only Holy Week, but it is also Passion Week. It is about the Passion of Jesus. Now, most often when we hear this phrase, “the Passion of Jesus”, we think of it in the narrow sense as referring especially to Jesus’ suffering, crucifixion and death as in Mel Gibson’s film of five years ago, “The Passion of the Christ” which focused of the last twelve hours of Jesus’ life, basically from his arrest through his torture, crucifixion and death. But this morning as we think about the passion of Jesus on this first day of the week of the Passion, I will be using the word “passion” in its broader sense, its broader meaning as when we ask of a person “what’s your passion in life? What are you passionate about?” In this broad sense of the word “passion”, I invite you to think with me, reflect with me about important question; what is the passion of God? What is God’s Passion? What is the God of the Bible, the God of Jesus passionate about? The question is important and our answer matters greatly because it will very much affect our understanding of the Christian life, of what and what it means to take God seriously. Now there’s more than one short hand answer to that question about God’s passion. Some of the short hand answers are good ones: perceptive, discerning, wise, and truthful and some short hand answers to this question are bad ones, by which I mean they seriously distort what the Christian life is all about. To suggest one of the good answers to that question, the one I will develop in this sermon in a very short sentence:” God’s passion is the world”, which of course also includes us. We see God’s passion for the world in the creation story at the very beginning of the Book of Genesis where after each day of creation we are told it was good, good, good, good and at the end of the creation story, it was very good and this is one of the reasons that the Easter Vigil service each year begins with the creation story or in perhaps the best known verse in the New Testament – John 3:16 – most of you know it by heart. Think once again of how that verse begins: “For God so loved the world”, not just me or you and me, or us, not just Christians or believers, not even just human beings, but the whole

of creation. God's passion is the world. But God's passion is not the world as it is, but for a transformed world. Something has gone wrong; something is not right and to paraphrase the epitaph that Robert Frost asked to have carved on his tombstone – God has a lover's quarrel with the world and to a large extent that's what the story of the Bible is about, that's what the story of Jesus is about and that's what the story of Holy Week is about. God's passion is the transformation of the world, which once again of course includes us. It is about our transformation as individuals, as persons, it is about personal transformation, individual transformation, spiritual transformation and of course this is a major theme of Lent and Holy Week and this is why we do Lent and Holy Week every year. We need this transformation; we need to move through this process of transformation again and again. But God's passion for the world is about more than our personal transformation, it's also about the transformation of the world itself, the humanly created world of societies, and social and political systems, with their injustice their domination and their violence. In the Jewish Bible, which of course was the Bible of Jesus, God's passion for a transformed world includes freedom from oppression from slavery to the Pharaohs and Lords of this world and this of course is what the Exodus story is about. God's passion for a transformed world also includes economic justice that everybody should have enough, not as the product of charity, but as the result of the way the world is put together, that things should be fair and this also is central to the story of the Exodus and in particular to the great prophets of ancient Israel. And God's passion for a transformed world includes peace and non-violence. Now, the Bible has a lot of violence in it, but it's dream, God's dream is peace as expressed in that very familiar passage from Isaiah, also found in the Book of Micah: The day shall come when a nation shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, the instruments of war will become instruments of agriculture and the passage ends: and nation shall not make war against nation anymore. This, a transformed world, is God's passion; it is what God is passionate about. And so we turn to Jesus. Jesus' phrase for the passion of God or God's passion was "the Kingdom of God". It is the single phrase most central to his activity, to his teaching, to his mission and the Kingdom of God for Jesus was about personal transformation, that language of entering the Kingdom of God in the here and now, that entering of the Kingdom in the here and now that comes about from a deeper and deeper centering in God, that loving of the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind and strength. To do that now is to begin to experience personal transformation and life in the Kingdom, but the Kingdom of God for Jesus was also about the transformation of this world; it's for the earth; it's not about heaven; there's no denial of an afterlife there, but heaven was not Jesus' passion; Jesus' passion was the Kingdom of God and it's for the earth and of course we remind ourselves about every time we pray the Lord's Prayer – Your Kingdom come on earth as it already is in heaven. That's God's passion as God's dream for a transformed earth and this was Jesus' passion and his passion led to his crucifixion. His passion for the Kingdom of God, God's passion for the Kingdom of God put Jesus on a collision course with the powers who ruled his world. He challenged their vision of how the world should be which they thought was pretty much the way things were. We see this collision, this conflict in the story of Palm Sunday, this story on the first day of Holy Week of Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey and I begin with a few historical comments to illuminate what was happening on the first Sunday, the first Palm Sunday. It occurred at the beginning of the week of Passover, a

seven-day long annual Jewish festival, the most important Jewish festival of the year and that festival remembered the Exodus from Egypt over a thousand years earlier. It happened in Jerusalem, the Holy City, the center of Jewish devotion and Jewish pilgrimage. At the season of Passover the population of Jerusalem ballooned to perhaps as much as a quarter of a million and its everyday population was around forty thousand, so maybe two hundred pilgrims in the city for Passover. And at the center of Jerusalem stood the Temple, the place that symbolized God's dwelling place on earth, the center of the world of Jesus and very importantly in the time of Jesus the Temple had become the center of religious collaboration with Roman Imperial rule. Domestic rule of the Jewish homeland was accomplished through the High Priest and the aristocratic high priestly families who owed their office to their collaboration with the Romans who controlled the land and thus Jerusalem was also the city of the authorities and the center of the domination system. And so we turn to the first Palm Sunday. Two processions entered Jerusalem that year; we all know about one of them, the procession of Jesus, so let me begin by telling you about the other one. The other one was a Roman imperial procession headed by the Roman Governor, Pilot, accompanied by hundreds of imperial troops, foot soldiers and Calvary brought up to Jerusalem to reinforce the Roman garrison permanently stationed on the Temple Mount in case there should be a revolt at Passover, for the Season of Passover was a particularly incendiary time and in the life of Jesus there had been two major revolts centered in the Temple during Passover and so Pilot's procession arrived to provide extra crowd control for the week and the Roman Imperial procession, think of it, hundreds of soldiers, drums, hundreds of Calvary, armor, weapons entering the city from the west. It symbolized as well as expressed in actuality Roman Imperial power and its vision of domination through violence and a threat of violence. On the other side of the city and not by accident, from the east, Jesus rides on a donkey entering Jerusalem at the head of a procession made up of his followers, those who have journeyed with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. And it's clear as Mark tells the story, the story that you heard as part of the Blessing of the Palms this morning, that this is a carefully planned, prearranged counter-demonstration that deliberately counters, maybe even lampoons the Roman Imperial procession entering from the other side of the city. It's very deliberate as Mark tells the story. It was a public act done for its meaning, for what it symbolized and many of the Jewish prophets in the Old Testament performed similar public acts – think of it almost as “street theater”—a street theater with a very serious purpose. And the meaning of how Jesus entered the city is very clear; the symbolism comes from the ninth chapter of Zechariah where we are told about a humble king who will enter Jerusalem riding on a colt, the foal of an ass and this king will be a king of peace. He will banish the warhorse, the chariot and the battle bow from the land and he will speak peace to the nation. And by entering Jerusalem in this way Jesus symbolized that he was speaking about counter-kingdom, about the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom of justice and peace and non-violence. And this story of Palm Sunday sets up the central conflict of the week, the conflict between Jesus as prophet and advocate of the Kingdom of God and the powers that ruled his world. By the end of the week as we all know, he will be killed by the domination system of his day: arrested, condemned, executed and raised by God. This is the story of Holy Week, the week we are now entering and as I move to my conclusion, I return to the question with which I began: “What is God's passion?” From the very beginning of Christianity, Christians have answered that question by

saying: "Jesus is the revelation of God's passion". Jesus reveals, discloses, embodies what can be seen of God in a human life and what can be seen of God in a human life is the character and the passion of God. This is what we see in Jesus and in Holy Week, "The Passion of God. In this week, the events of this week, we see the revelation of God's passion and the passion of Jesus, not just in his suffering and death, but in the passion that led to his suffering and death. That passion is about transformation of ourselves and of the world; and Holy Week is a time when we remember this, when we recall this, but ultimately it is about more than remembering, it is also about participation, about participating in these events and this is what the liturgy and services of Holy Week are meant to do, to lead us to be participants in this story, in this story of the path of personal transformation, symbolized by the cross as a dying and rising with Christ and in this story which about participating in God's passion for a transformed world, for a different kind of world. God's passion, the passion of Jesus is about both. And so this week is about transformation. Next Sunday is Easter. May we awake on Easter and celebrate Easter with a new vision of what is possible for ourselves and for the world with a realization of an internal death and resurrection, the actualization of that as well as the realization that such is possible and that such happens and the realization and conviction that the powers that rule this world do not have the last word. Palm Sunday, Good Friday and Easter are about all of this. They are about the Passion of God and they invite us to participate in that passion.