

NOTE: This homily was preached as an introduction to the Passion Gospel as we transitioned from the "hosannas!" of Palm Sunday to the passion of Jesus' final hours.

In a moment, we will enter a story that is both unique and universal. It is a familiar story. You need not have every walked into the doors of a church or heard it year after year to know it. It's familiar, it's universal, hear because we have lived it.

It is the story of Jesus' final days on earth. More than that, it is the story of the heart of God and humanity laid bare. We live it each time fear leads us to shun, demonize or turn to violence toward one other—the violence of our hands and the violence of our words
...Just as many of the religious leaders will do when they realize that they can't tame Jesus' generosity and the transformation he has wrought.

We live this story every time self-reliance and pride and confidence in our own ingenuity leads us to think that perfection and excellence will save us from mistakes or regret only to discover that we're all in need of grace.

...Just like when Peter is so certain that he will never, ever deny *his* Lord. "No, not me!"
And then he does.

And we live this week of passion when selfishness and disgust with ourselves and others causes us to turn away from being the beloved

...Just like when Judas betrays his master for some more money in the bank and the admiration of those in power.

We also live this week when we latch onto what is popular or what everyone else is doing because we are not sure what we feel or believe; we just know that something isn't right, and the effort to figure it out might cause us to go against the grain.

...Just like the crowds will do as they shouted for Jesus's death.

We live this story when we see not a child of God next to us, but a stranger, a source of competition, a potential threat to our wellbeing, and life becomes to us a zero-sum game of winners and losers

...Just like the two disciples who demand to know who was the greatest.

We live it when shame and a sense of unworthiness causes us to sell ourselves short and reject the generosity of others and the call of God to taste and see that the Lord is good ...Just like many of the disciples when Jesus washes their feet.

We live this week when our purpose gets lost in others people's admiration and expectation of us...Just like Pilate will do when he acquiesces to the demands of the crowd.

Yes, we live this week every time we wonder if God will still love and forgive us after all we've done even though God does—every time ...Just like the repentant and sorrowful thief on the cross seeking Jesus's mercy and heard in return, "I promise you; Today, you will be with me in paradise."

We live the roller coaster of sorrow, beauty, and love of this week every time we claim our belovedness in God even when all hell breaks lose and darkness is our only companion...Just like Jesus on the cross.

Or when—

the marriage falls apart,

the depression silences,

the loneliness pervades,

the friend walks away,

the last paycheck arrives and your tears become your food.

Like when a man cries out, "I can't breathe,"

and Jesus declares "it is finished."

Holy Week, my friends, is more than mere play-acting. This is the week when we recall that our sorrow is Jesus' sorrow, his story is our story. Our sin becomes his sin.

And though we may cower in shame and sorrow. We need not do so.

In the face of darkness and fear; abandonment and betrayal; and, suffering and questions, Jesus says, yes. Yes, I will love you. Yes, I will stand by you. Yes, you are worth it. Yes, this creation is worth it.

That is why we all need the cross—not to make us “right” but so that even the worst of life cannot overcome the best of God.

So, let us not flee. Let us not make excuses or remove ourselves from what we hear. Let us enter this story, this week, and all of our lives with honesty, vulnerability, and courage. Then and only then we will be changed.

Death *will* win the battle this week. There’s no denying that.

But Love, my friends,

Love is gonna win the war.

The Rev. Dr. Maria A. Kane
St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Waldorf, MD
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