

Year B – Palm/Passion Sunday  
Luke 22:14-23:56  
March 20, 2016

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!  
Amen.

Down by 7 points. Up by 16 points. Half-time. Then suddenly that lead has slipped away. Back and forth it went. Up and down. A missed free-throw, rebound, and outlet leading to a score on the other end tying up the game with just under three seconds to play. Overtime it appears; but, then a half-court heave heard throughout the world (well, at least it was heard quite loudly at my house), which hit dead center on the bank-board and dropped through the basket. Complete chaos ensued. Jubilation erupted on one side while utter shock, disbelief, and heartache was draped across the faces of the other side. Final score: UNI Panthers 75 and Texas Longhorns 72. What a game. What a roller coaster ride.

This basketball game, along with the Iowa game earlier in the day also won by a last second shot in some ways are a microcosm of this final leg of Lent, which begins today with Palm/Passion Sunday and concludes at the empty tomb next Sunday. It encapsulates our worship service today as we enter with Palms and hear the shouts of “Hosanna,” which is a joyful shout of praise and glory to God. We too, like the people gathered in Jerusalem, wave our palms and give thanks for the Messiah, which has come to save us. And then we hear our gospel text, which starts with a meal with Jesus, the very same meal He invites us to and we will share in shortly. But, oh how quickly things change and this goes from a nice, quiet meal among friends to a drama full of betrayal, anger, shouts of hatred toward an innocent man who has been made the scapegoat of so many, and finally the deep darkness

of the night and the now lifeless body of Jesus hung high upon a cross. From joy and jubilation to the depths of utter despair.

Wouldn't it be so much simpler if it didn't have to play out this way? Truthfully, God – why couldn't you have spared us the cross? Why couldn't you have just set things right another way without all the agony, the betrayal, the desertion of the disciples, the shouts of “crucify”, and the horror of death? If God is all-powerful and all-mighty then why did things have to play out like this? Why couldn't we just have a happy, fairy-tale like ending? Have you ever pondered that question? In the words of the Apostle Paul, the cross is foolishness. It's incomprehensible in so many ways.

It does seem logical God could have rescued God's people and the whole of creation from the stain of sin and death in some other way that didn't include the agonizing, brutal death of God's Son, Jesus Christ, on the cross. It would have been much simpler for us to come to church and not have to experience these ups and downs of the roller coaster ride this week. Couldn't we just skip past this part and race straight to the empty tomb of Easter? Spare us the pain? Spare us the heartache? Spare us the despair? Yes, God could have done and some churches do that as well – simply promote and promise the goodness of life. Yet, God knew life would still have gone on and the ups and downs would have continued. Ultimately, in this world God created there is an ongoing battle between good and evil and there continues to be chaos lurking around every bend. Ups and downs. Highs and lows. Joyful celebrations and tearful disappointments. There continues to be confessions of “Lord, I will follow you wherever you go” and then words and actions which run quite contrary that emulate the same betrayal of Peter. Words we utter. Actions we live out that run so counter to the message Jesus came to proclaim and the servant-life He

walked on this earth. There would still be moments the faithful people of God would be full of energy, exuberance, and excitement they are ready to take on the world with Jesus and then moments when He turns and sees them sleeping. There would still be shouts of hatred looking to scapegoat another innocent victim and pass the buck onto to someone else. Moments of seeking a Savior in someone who appears more powerful, more wealthy, and promising to eradicate all our fears and problems through means of force rather than peace. Yes, life would still have gone on and is that what we truly would have wanted? A God that meets us only in the joyful, happy times? A God who simply sits high above and waves God's wand and remains distant and hidden. Yes, the pain is difficult. Yes, the horror of the cross should indeed shock us and move us emotionally to a state in which we finally realize just how much God loves us. Just how far God will go for us. Just how desperately God longs to be with us and experience life just as we experience it. Just how much God comes alongside us and how far God goes to rescue us!

Life is full of hurdles. Life is an emotional ride where at times we are jumping up and down cheering and at other times sitting on the edge of our seats wondering just what is going to happen next. Yet, God entered into all of this. There is great comfort knowing our God is one who experiences and endures every ounce and then some of what life throws at us. We don't ride this roller coaster alone. No, we ride it side-by-side with the One who never sleeps, never slumbers, and never gives up on us even when we are asleep at his side, even when we repeatedly betray him by failing to follow, to faithfully steward all we have been entrusted with, to love as He has loved us, to forgive as He has forgiven us, to welcome as He has welcomed, to give as he has given. I ponder if Jesus doesn't stop each time and look upon us just as he did Peter after following the crow of the rooster after his

third acknowledgement indicating he did not know Jesus. The text tells us, “The Lord turned and looked at Peter.” (Luke 22:61) What was that look? One of anger. One of disappointment, sadness, and sorrow. One of “See, I told you so.” One of love and compassion because He knows just how difficult it is to follow Him and stay by His side through thick and thin knowing all too well the temptations and wicked schemes the evil one throws at us to pull us away from Jesus. I often worry about that look on Jesus’ face. It pierces through me like a dagger. That look when I give into despair and momentarily lose hope God is present and at work in the world. That look when I fail to follow him. That look when I sin against another brother or sister. That look when I let him down and wonder if He will ever love me again? Yet, then I hear those words from the cross, “Father, forgive them” and envision that look of love in His eyes even as He is about to breathe His last. I envision that reunion with Peter and the rest of the disciples following His glorious resurrection and that look of compassion, joy, and trust that says once again, “I forgive you. I understand. I am not done with you. I am going to use you despite all your doubts, fears, struggles, and sinfulness. I love you. I am with you wherever you go – through the ups and downs, twists and turns, highs and lows. I am with you! May the peace of God be with us all through the ups and downs, twists and turns, and emotions of the week in which we now embark on!