

March 28, 2021 - Sermon notes - Palm/Passion Sunday

Isaiah 9:4-9a; Philippiian 2:5-11; Mark 15:1-39

“Endurance till the end”

In the children’s movie “Up!” the main character is grieving the death of his wife and he decides to complete a journey that they hadn’t been able to accomplish -even though they had made it a common goal early in their marriage. In the silliness of animated movies he attached hundreds of helium balloons to his house and had soared into the heavens in this most unlikely fashion. He was determined to complete his quest and plant his house at the top of Angel Falls in South America. As the story unfolds he meets all sorts of obstacles that tempt him to give up the task but he perseveres. One of my favourite characters in the movie is the dog named Dug. He has been equipped with a device that allows him to speak and, for the most part, he pays attention to what he is supposed to do except when he thinks he has heard a squirrel. I think I like Dug because distractions often pull me away from tasks the way squirrels make some dogs go bonkers. Now if you are wondering what all this has to do with Palm Sunday let me try to make the connection for you. Jesus has been welcomed into Jerusalem by a crowd of admirers waving palm branches and his path has been strewn with clothing but he has come with a particular task in mind. We don’t usually refer to it as quest but Jesus’ journey toward the cross has some of the elements of a quest. There are many distractions along the way and temptations for him to swerve from his purpose but he perseveres. The disciples, on the other hand, are a bit like Dug, the dog. The slightest thing seems to take their attention away from their purpose and they fall away from the task of being Jesus’ faithful disciples. We see the endurance required to finish a difficult task in the person and work of Jesus and so as we embark on this Holy Week journey may we find inspiration and encouragement to stay focussed on our task of being faithful disciples.

Our attention is drawn to Isaiah’s writings in which we hear the writer proclaiming that he has been assigned a task by Almighty God - not a task like Jesus but a task nonetheless. There is a little debate about the translation of the word that in our text is ‘teacher’ because the word can also mean ‘student’. Now in my experience all of my best teachers were also students so I understand the confusion and I try to keep the options in mind as I read the passage from the 50<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah. What strikes me about the writer is the steadfastness of purpose that we read. The readers of Isaiah in Jesus’ day certainly saw the characteristics of Jesus represented in those ancient words. I take comfort from the portion of the passage described by the words which states that he knows how to ‘sustain the weary with a word’. The writer’s task as student or teacher is one which includes communication of encouragement to keep going. In many ways Jesus adopted the task of sustaining the weary with a word

and bringing the important messages from God to those who became his disciples. As Jesus received messages from his Father in heaven he passed them on to his disciples as a good teacher would. In this way the writings of Isaiah outline the level of perseverance common to those who have been tasked by God. Once again I hope that we may find inspiration and encouragement to stay focussed on our task of being faithful disciples.

“I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame” (verse 7) says the writer of Isaiah. When a difficult task is given to us we are asked to ‘set our face like flint’ in order to accomplish the task. I recall many times when an idea that I believed was important to implement was ridiculed or ignored and I was faced with the decision to ‘stick to my guns’ or ‘let the idea go’. When I have been convinced in my own heart that the idea is from God I do not turn away from the idea in the face of objections. Jesus was on his way to the cross because this is what he knew to be the will of the Father who sent him. No amount of distractions or objections were going to deflect him from that purpose and so we see in Jesus a face that is set like flint and one who knows that he will not be put to shame. The task of being God’s ministers to a world that often ridicules or under-values the work of God’s people requires this kind of steadfast attitude toward the work. The long-term view that recognizes that our vindication is in the strong hands of the Almighty helps us in our struggles. As we journey with Jesus on this Holy Week journey may we be encouraged and sustained.

St. Paul then picks up the story with the verses recorded in the second chapter of his letter to the Christians in Philippi. The picture painted by this beautiful poem also features Jesus as a person who lets nothing stop him from moving toward the task God has set for him but we also see the humility required.. “Though he was in the form of God he did not count equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.” (Phil. 2:6,7) In the story of the passion told by the disciple John we see a picture of this humble attitude when Jesus, the Master, stoops to wash the feet of his disciples. The self-emptying of Jesus was not just a one time act but one which shaped all of Jesus’ actions. He was the embodiment of a servant who had been given a task to perform on behalf of a beloved Master. It is the Master who gets the glory for a completed task and the humility required for that is part of what we see in the days leading up to the Crucifixion.

Holy Week draws our attention to one of the most important periods in human history and it is in those last days that we are given the most profound images of Jesus and the work of God in the world. The journey we have been on throughout Lent is about to come to a climax and, even though we have been through this journey before, it is new once again because we are not exactly the same people as we were last year and all the years prior. Our lives have been affected in profound ways by the experiences

of the past year - the joys and the sorrows - and so the events of Holy Week are seen with new eyes. As we walk with the Lord through these experiences we are invited to 'take up our cross and follow' which means to learn the lessons of perseverance from Jesus and others in whom we see this attribute. May we be encouraged and sustained as we journey with our Saviour.

The task we have been given to bring the message of the Good News into the world is one which has been made more difficult by the introduction of various restrictions brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. The events of Holy Week ask us to 'set our face like flint' when it comes to the goal of accomplishing this task to the best of our ability. We are asked to trust that God will not let us be brought to shame and that our actions will one day be vindicated. We are asked to exercise humility in the process of going about our task. We are asked to "Endure until the end". I share your frustrations at the length of time we've been under restrictions and I too am growing tired. The weariness that I feel is being addressed by the one who said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matt. 11:28-9) May God bless us with encouragement and strength to sustain us as we do His work in this world.