

CHRIST MEMORIAL EPISCOPAL CHURCH, NORTH BROOKFIELD, MA

SERMON—Rev. Dr. Paula Winsor Sage

APRIL 9, 2017

PALM/PASSION SUNDAY

MATTHEW 26:14-27:66

PRAYER: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Lord and help us to know you better. AMEN

Good Morning! Welcome to Palm/Passion Sunday! Yes. We have two Gospels and two main events we celebrate today, one downstairs and one upstairs, and they couldn't be more different. One is full of hope and joy and celebration; the second is full of dread and despair and dashed hopes. Those of you who were around in the 80's may remember when Palm Sunday was just Palm Sunday, and we celebrated joyfully on the way in and on the way out, waving palms and singing Hosanna. That changed in the 80's when the new prayer book came out when the church leadership realized that many of the faithful who followed the course of Jesus' life in His last week had no church services to cover these significant events. Maundy Thursday celebrates the Last Supper and ends just before Jesus' arrest and torture; while the Good Friday Liturgy concentrates on

his last hours and death. Everything in between used to be left out of the liturgy for people to read on their own—or was remembered in extra services not in the Prayer Book, like the Stations of the Cross, or the Seven Last Words, which were not widely available, especially in smaller churches. The result is our current Palm/Passion Sunday Liturgy, which begins with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and ends with Him in the tomb—events covering the last 5 days in Jesus' life—the heights and depths all packed into one hour! If you really try to put yourself back into the events in Jesus' life as we celebrate today, you are now in the midst of a roller coaster of an emotional experience which is made the more intense by dramatization. Events that must have been nearly impossible to process for Jesus' followers over 5 days are really hard for us to process in an hour. The actual events in Jesus' life are well known to you and clear enough, so I want to speak today about one of the less emphasized parts of today's story. Most of the time when we look at the Gospels, we are encouraged to learn from

Jesus' good example. Today I want to look at what we can learn from a bad example.

Over and over again as I think about what happened in this carefully planned and much prophesied narrative of God's plan for his only begotten Son, and I try to process it, my heart goes out not only to Jesus and his incredible suffering on our behalf, but my heart goes out also to those who followed him and, despite Jesus' explanations and repeated warnings, felt devastated and betrayed and had their whole lives changed.

Not only were the lives of Jesus' disciples and followers at risk in the days that followed, not only did they have to suffer the loss of their beloved leader and friend, but their lack of understanding made it seem like their entire belief system had come crashing down before them and they were left with absolutely nothing to cling to. And one of the saddest verses of today's Gospel, I think, is the verse in the Gospel, when Jesus was arrested and taken from the garden, that simply says: "Then all the disciples deserted him and fled." (Matthew 26:56). This happened

right after Jesus' arrest, before any of the interviews with the Sanhedrin or Pilate, before the exchanges with the crowd, before the beatings and the crucifixion and death. Three of his women followers were there, though at a distance, but except for Peter who followed at a distance and was destined to deny him, the rest of the disciples all had scattered and were in hiding. Not only were they not available to each other; they were not available for consoling and counseling all of the other followers of Jesus who were devastated and lacked information and resources to deal with what had happened. They seem to have forgotten everything that Jesus had taught them over the three years they spent together—everything about preaching and teaching and healing and loving one another. They simply gave up, felt no responsibility, and thought it was all over. And because they were not together, there was no way for them to talk to each other, to piece together any sort of understanding of what was happening—without contact there was no way to remind each other of the things that Jesus had been trying to tell them over the last few weeks. There was no way for them to see

that all was not finished; that this was part of God's plan; that it was their failure to understand that was defeating them totally and making a terrible situation that much worse because they were not there for each other—or for anyone else.

There is of course no way that they could have changed God's plan for Jesus by behaving differently, but they could have helped themselves--and each other.

They had expected after Jesus' march into Jerusalem that he would ascend a throne and rule as king of heaven and earth, and when that didn't happen, they were more than disappointed. When he was arrested they thought that they had been gotten it all wrong and that He wasn't the Messiah after all, and they were afraid for their own lives. Everything Jesus had taught and showed them, even the institution of the Last Supper and the foot washing and his discussions with them about his approaching death the very night before, left them. If they had not been ruled by fear and had talked to each other, perhaps things could have supported each other and the rest of the followers. We will find that, 3 days later, Jesus' orders after the Resurrection began to bring them together again, and they

began to piece things together—and they began to understand that Jesus really was Lord. But before Jesus returned to guide them, they were lost indeed.

There is a lesson there for us when disastrous events befall. The time when things look their bleakest is the very time to reach out and share, not the time to withdraw alone. Jesus tells us not to fear, but to love one another—to stay together and help one another, and He will take care of the rest. We can learn from the failure of the disciples. Even in the face of disaster, even when things around us seem hopeless and all wrong, God is at work in the world, in our church, and in each one of us; He is at work working out His plans for our good.. He is offering healing, peace, unity, and newness of life to all who are willing to walk together in the way of Jesus. The overarching message is this: FOR THOSE WHO BELIEVES, HOPE RULES, NOT DESPAIR. AMEN