

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

April 2, 2023

Passio

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Forty days now. Forty days of Lent. Forty days of abstaining from the “a” word and the praise it represents. Forty days of focus on spiritual discipline. Forty days of prayer, almsgiving, and fasting. Forty days of self-reflection and confession of sin. Forty days of preparation for this week. Forty days since you were reminded that you are dust and to dust you will return. Why?

Why do we put ourselves through all of this? It seems like a lot of effort for a church season. Doesn't it strike you as odd to give something up for forty days? Or to dedicate forty days to a spiritual practice or devotional or some such? It sure seems supremely weird to put ashes on our brows and be reminded that we are mortal. Why do we do this to ourselves? What's the point of all this? Is it just to prove ourselves? Or to show off our piety? I hope not!

Now I do believe it's important for us to be able to express why we do the things we do. And I mean beyond more than just “it's tradition.” Why do we dedicate forty whole days to all of this stuff? What's the point of it all?

Well, from my perspective, Lent has everything to do with the major theme of Matthew' Gospel. I shared my understanding of that with you back around Christmas when we read Matthew 1. As a quick reminder, each of the Gospel writers provides different “bookends” to their Gospels, themes that are highlighted at both the Gospel's beginning and end. These important themes crop up again and again in that Gospel. And for Matthew I believe the major bookend and theme is the idea that Jesus is “Emmanuel” or “God-with-us.”¹

Lent is all about this understanding of Christ's mission and ministry on earth. Why do we do the things we do during Lent? As a small reflection of what Christ's very Incarnation is all about: *passio*. The Latin term, *passio*, is the

¹ Matthew 1:23; Matthew 28:20

root of our English word, passion. Now, with that information can you take a stab at what *passio* means?

Not an easy question to answer, is it? Let's start with English, what does passion mean? We tend to associate passion with strong emotions, don't we? We hate or love passionately. Acting passionately often seems to mean almost being out of control. Being passionate about a subject means being intensely interested in it or even obsessed with it. Does any of that help define passion? How about *passio*?

What does any of that have to do with Lent, Holy Week, or spiritual practices? Passion almost seems to be the opposite of the solemn season of Lent or its focus on self-reflection, prayer, and confession. And yet this is Palm and **Passion** Sunday. We refer to the narrative of Christ's arrest, trial, torture, and crucifixion as his **Passion**. Now perhaps that makes a little sense...what Christ experienced was the sort of chaotic and emotional experience that smacks of passion. But it's still not quite a perfect fit between the English meaning and how the church uses it.

Okay, for those of you who are not Latin scholars, the Latin term "*passio*" means "suffering."² Ahhhh! Now perhaps the connection becomes a little more obvious! The Passion of Christ, and the Lenten season that prepares us for it, have more to do with suffering than with strong emotion, being obsessed with something, or being out of control.

So let's put this understanding of passion along with the theme we identified earlier that Christ's main mission in Matthew's Gospel is to be "God-with-us." To that end, let's now consider another English word with its root in *passio*: compassion. We know now that the passion part of compassion has to do with suffering, but what about the start of the word? What does the "com" part mean? In Latin, "cum" is the preposition "with." Put that two together with *passio* and you get compassion, meaning to suffer with someone.

Christ is "God-with-us" and Christ's willingness to be "God-with-us" perfectly illustrates God's all-encompassing compassion for humanity. This Sunday, Palm-Passion Sunday, beautiful illustrates this reality. Christ is God's only Son, the long promised King, who should certainly be welcomed to Jerusalem with praise and adoration. But because he came to be "God-with-us" he

² Merriam-Webster online dictionary calls the "suffering" definition of passion "obsolete"! <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/passion>

doesn't just stay with the parade and party. Emmanuel is not just with us in the good times. He doesn't fill our expectations of a victorious king.

We almost get whiplash from how things change so quickly from this glorious moment to what will happen just a few days later. Rather than being greeted with "Hosannas," the crowds will be shouting "Crucify him" instead. Rather than a throne he will ascend to a cross. Rather than a golden crown and opulent clothes he will wear a crown of thorns and nothing else. Rather than important advisors or even his own disciples, he will be crucified with strangers...criminals.

Christ does all of this, the parade and celebration, the supper and betrayal, the arrest and trial, the torture and execution, all to be "God-with-us." All to prove how God is with us always, in both the highs and the lows. And all of this God's Son does out of compassionate *agape* love. The sort of love that sees an other's joy and amplifies it. The sort of love that sees an other's pain and tries to alleviate it.

Lent isn't about preparing for Christ's Passion, rather it's about trying to emulate Christ's COMpassion. During Lent and Holy Week we see just how crazy in love with us God is! We see the depths to which God is willing to descend in order to be with us. Christ is showing us the Way of the Kingdom, the Way of Compassionate Love. And so, we take forty days to practice compassion in different ways. Forty days of practice at walking the Way. How'd it go? How was the practice? The prayer, fasting and almsgiving? Did those practices deepen your compassion towards others? I pray this season did increase your compassion, because this world certainly needs more of it!

So go out into the world to be people of compassion. Be with the people around you. Share in their joys and celebrations! Join them in their pain and suffering. Stand in solidarity with the strong and the weak. Give up some of your own power in order to empower those who don't have any. Practice compassion, not just for forty days but every day. Practice the sort of compassion that Christ will show us this Holy Week. The compassion that centers loving others enough to want to truly be with them, no matter what that might mean. Amen.