

Life Doesn't Always Turn Out the Way You Expect

Luke 23:1-49

Dear Friends,

Today on this Palm Sunday, we begin to see the climax of our redemption, of the World's salvation. Today we see Jesus and his followers embark on what is known as the Via Dolorosa, the way of sorrows. From the Last Supper to Gethsemane and beyond, the road for Jesus turns in to a road of suffering, with an ending of death, death on the cross. And as we see them on the Via dolorosa, we are asked to stop just seeing and watching, and are asked to go with them, to go with our Saviour on this road of sorrow. And as we join and follow Jesus, we also asked to pay attention. To pay attention because his suffering unfolds in ways that are unusual to us, ways that if it would happen to us, we would avoid them, or at list try to avoid them. And as we pay attention, watch something unfolding before the eyes of those being there that day, and most certainly his disciples, that life doesn't always turn out the way we expect it to be.

Those who followed Jesus or at least listen to his sermons, were expecting Jesus to redeem his people, but to redeem them from the Roman invasion and occupation. He was supposed to return to them freedom they so desperate wanted and needed for over 90 year or more since the Romans where oppressing them, this time around. But no! It didn't happen, instead what Jesus prophesied about the destruction of the temple did come to pass some 30 years later after Jesus said it. Instead of Jesus freeing his people as they were expecting him to, he is now on his way to be hanged on a cross. He is crucified, then insulted and mocked. All his disciples and even his mother, could do is to see him in such a horrendous state. Humiliated, crucified, dead! Truly, life doesn't always turn out the way you expect, does it?

Then, his body was taken down from the cross and wrapped in a finely woven linen shroud the Bible tells us. Think for a moment how would his disciples, and his mother think when they saw all the marks of his suffering, marks of the nails, marks the crown of thorns, the marks the whip, and of the spear. Like a snapshot frozen in time, they revealed the intensity of the suffering he had endured.

We can conclude that consumed with sorrow, grief, and pain, Mary his mother and his followers turned away from that dreadful image, perhaps thinking that their life was now ruined, everything was wasted. Life, you see, doesn't always turn out the way you might expect.

And to think that just a few days before, it had all been so different. Riding confidently into town, seated on a donkey, thousands of people waved palm branches and cheered his name. With great enthusiasm, they cried aloud, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! . . . Hosanna in the highest!" (Mk 11:9–10). Can you sense the excitement? The energy, the passion for Jesus was like nothing they had ever seen. This might be the long-expected King. This might be their deepest hopes and dreams that might just come true.

But then, suddenly, everything changed. He was betrayed, arrested, put on trial, and nailed to that terrible cross. Their hopes and dreams now shattered. How could this be? But as you see life doesn't always turn out they way you might expect. They might have even thought that their lives had been ruined. They followed a leader who, well was a loser, for he is now dead.

Isn't that the truth! Life doesn't always turn out the way we might expect. The older and older you get, the more you discover how true that statement is. The excitement, the energy, the wonder you experience as a child slowly fades away, leaving you with the mundane routine of bills, work, and family obligations. As you grow up, you come to learn that the hopes and dreams of your youth never quite seem to be fulfilled. Even when your life is marked by success, there is always an area that you wished it to be different. That you planned for it that way but didn't turn out the way you expected it to be.

People spend their lives thinking, if only my marriage were a little bit better; if only I could make a little more money; if only my children were a little more successful; if only I were just a little more attractive—then I would be happy. Then I would finally be content. But all too often, loving marriages grow cold, exciting careers turn dull, gifted children lose their way, and youthful bodies grow old. And then, when we least expect it, tragedy strikes. Suffering, disease, and death disrupt our everyday lives, waking us from our slumber and causing us to cry out in despair. Why God, why?

So, we assess our lives, no, things haven't been what we expected to be. Now we see that somewhere along the way we have rebelled against God, or simply taken him for granted, or perhaps traditionally, you know – I go to church because that's the right thing to do... without realizing that we come to Church because, yes, it is the right thing to do, because we have sinned against God and need his restoring power and presence in our lives.

But we do look back and see that we have suffered, we have suffered ruptured relationships perhaps, lost opportunities of job and income, damaged reputation, monetary debts, earthly goods repossessed, doubt, health issues, depression, and anxiety. The list could go on, and there's little you can do to fix the mess. You can try, but we do realize that life is not turning the way we expected.

Perhaps we had banked our happiness on all the things that got us into this hot mess in the first place. But still we cry out, why God, why?

It is true, we do think of God as one source of good among many, of course he is the chief source, and should be the first and sole source of joy, happiness, and hope, but the reality is that we consider him just one source among many. Ever so slowly, we begin to look to other things for our good and security. And it does start ever so thoughtlessly and carelessly. Sometimes things just present a seemingly innocent opportunity to take, and it does make sense to take it. Others are doing it, why not me. Only to find that those opportunities, those other sources of good we thought were great, have become our enemies.

We do have enemies out to get us, and sometimes our biggest enemy is our own sinful nature. During this pandemic many said that if God is on our side, then nothing will affect us, that could be true, but by that same statement they tested God, ending up seeking to trust their own strength only to fail afterwards. Now, we all fail at some point or another in pandemic season or not, and we fail quite often, and when failure takes place, we cry, why God, why?

“Why, why would God allow this to happen? Why does life always have to be so full of sorrow and pain and hurt?” We seek answers for those questions.

The answer to those questions might not come the way we want them to be but can certainly be understood in the light of the cross of Jesus Christ. Because through

his death we do have life. Yes, as we will celebrate next Sunday, that a few days after he died, Jesus rose again from the dead and appeared before his disciples in the Upper Room where they had been hiding.

Strong and full of life, Jesus raised his arms into the air; his hands opened wide, inviting all to see. Incredibly, just above both wrists, the large gashes left by the nails could still be seen, except now they looked—somehow—beautiful. Filled with wonder, joy, and awe, his followers must have stared at his wounds, realizing in that moment that the nails hadn't ruined their lives after all—the nails had saved their life.

On the day that you stand before the Lord in glory, gazing upon his nail-scarred hands, you, too, will realize that everything you thought had ruined your life was actually used by God to save it. In that moment, every single thing that has caused you sorrow will not simply be forgotten, but will become for you an everlasting source of joy. Your cries of pain will one day be transformed into endless songs of praise. There is your answer to your question, as per why, why God.

For now, our sufferings may seem to be the ruin of everything we hope for. But since Christ bears those scars for us, through the Cross, we can be confident that our present suffering will one day be transformed into everlasting Joy. Life, you see, doesn't always turn out the way you might expect. In Christ, it will be all different! Wholesome, hopefully, joyful!

And because we now know that life doesn't turn out the way we might expect, on this Palm Sunday, instead of focusing on our victories and self strength, let's focus on Jesus' victory for our victories.

He is after all our Rock and our salvation. There is no one besides him. He is our defence, our shield and our tower of salvation. And do you know how he acts on our behalf? He does his greatest work when he is most powerless, hands pinned to the cross, the blood draining out. Thus destroying the power of death itself, thus forgiving our sins, thus becoming our king of kings, thus becoming our life!

He took on the form of a servant, your servant. He dies. Life did turn out to be the way his mother and followers expected it to be after all, only it turned out way better, better for them, and better for each one of us, because he lives, we to live! Because he lives you live!

Therefore, we eagerly prostrate on our knees and readily confess Him as Lord even now. Jesus lowered himself unto death on a cross to demonstrate his love and effect our salvation. As he did on Palm Sunday when he entered Jerusalem on a donkey's colt, he uses humble means to make his redemption accessible to us. Baptism and His Word and Sacraments have regenerated us according to his image. Our soul, inspired by his Word, is not only eager to honor the Lord Jesus at all times but also to submit to him willingly by extending his love to those around us. As we repent of our desire to make ourselves higher by making others lower and as his grace moves us to serve others, we find relationships resurrected. In his life we find courage to live with his mind among us.

In his name, amen.