

Good morning. I miss seeing all of you in person. This is not how envisioned the final 3 months of ministry here but so be it. We'll get through this and be better for it on the other side. Before getting to Palm Sunday, I would like to say a few things about our current worship situation.

I think it is wise for our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry to put a halt to face to face worship for now. I also think Governor Northam is wise for taking the actions he has taken, though maybe June 10 is a little long. I agree that such action is the thing to do but it is nonetheless difficult.

At the same time, it is in such a crisis that we need what the church offers to its members and others. Hope, comfort, peace, love and care are but a few of the things we have to offer. But we humans are social beings and we seek such hope, comfort, peace, love and care in relationship, in community, in the physical presence of others. Such social "communion" is really at the very center of our faith in God. The fancy theological word for it is incarnation, literally, in the flesh. When God most wanted to get our attention, He sent His Son to be among us. God in the flesh – Emmanuel – God with us.

This is what makes "being apart" for this crucial time so difficult. God is a social Being and created us just for that purpose – fellowship – relationship. Whether we humans acknowledge God or not, and we know some in the world don't, God has created us as social beings also. If it can be more true, then it is more so for the body of Christ. We are knit together in Christ into one body! That said, being so disconnected in physical absence, is what is making our physical isolation so difficult. WE are the body of Christ! Even in our physical separation, we are the body of Christ. Paul wrote, "*Even though I am away from you in body, in spirit, I am by your side.*" As we journey through this unique time, may it be so with us. Though we are away in body, let us be by one another's side in spirit.

Now let us look briefly at the Palm Sunday reading of the Passion narrative.

Matthew 21:6-11 – The Triumphal Entry (this is read outside before we bless the Palms)

⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

'Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' ¹¹The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'

Matthew 26:36-27:54 Jesus in the Garden and through to the Crucifixion

Then he came to the disciples and said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.'

While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, 'The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him.' At once he came up to Jesus and said, 'Greetings, Rabbi!' and kissed him. Jesus said to him, 'Friend, do what you are here to do.' Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, 'Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?' At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, 'Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But all this has taken place, so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled.' Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, in whose house the scribes and the elders had gathered. But Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest; and going inside, he sat with the guards in order to see how this would end. Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for false testimony against Jesus so that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward and said, 'This fellow said, "I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days."' The high priest stood up and said, 'Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?' But Jesus was silent. Then the high priest said to him, 'I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.' Jesus said to him, 'You have said so. But I tell you,

From now on you will see the Son of Man

*seated at the right hand of Power
and coming on the clouds of heaven.'*

Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, 'He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your verdict?' They answered, 'He deserves death.' Then they spat in his face and struck him; and some slapped him, saying, 'Prophecy to us, you Messiah! Who is it that struck you?'

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant-girl came to him and said, 'You also were with Jesus the Galilean.' But he denied it before all of them, saying, 'I do not know what you are talking about.' When he went out to the porch, another servant-girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, 'This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.' Again, he denied it with an oath, 'I do not know the man.' After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, 'Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you.' Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath, 'I do not know the man!' At that moment the cock crowed. Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: 'Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly.

When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus in order to bring about his death. They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate the governor. ...

... Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus said, 'You say so.' But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. Then Pilate said to him, 'Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?' But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time, they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. So, after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, 'Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?' For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. While he was sitting on the judgement seat, his wife sent word to him, 'Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.' Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. The governor again said to them, 'Which of the two do you want me to release for you?' And they said, 'Barabbas.' Pilate said to them, 'Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?' All of them said, 'Let him be crucified!' Then he asked, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Let him be crucified!' So, when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.' Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!' So, he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified. Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' They spat on him and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross. And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; then they sat down there and kept watch over him. Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.'

Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.' In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, "I am God's Son."' The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'This man is calling for Elijah.' At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.' Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

The Gospel of the Lord
Praise to You Lord Christ.

It all was going so well. Jesus enters Jerusalem and receives acclaim, is hailed and celebrated as a king or victorious general with a procession into the city. Fabulous! But things changed within a week. The situation in which Jesus and His disciples found themselves began to deteriorate quickly. By the end of the week, in less than seven days, there was suffering and death. And afterward, there was for the disciples, a period of unknowing, of not having any idea of what might happen next, but they did know that they were afraid of what might happen.

That time of unknowing must have seemed like an eternity to those frightened disciples, huddling together in the Upper Room. Waiting for ... Not to steal the thunder of Easter, what happened next was ... Resurrection! Life! A new sense of how to move forward in a different way.

I see this currently in our society, our nation. I believe God is giving the world a wake-up call. I am not saying that God caused this virus for this purpose. I am saying I believe that God is using the virus for this purpose. In our nation, things have been going pretty well. The economy has been buzzing along in an amazing manner. There has been a lot of political drama, but several polls have shown that a majority of Americans were pretty satisfied with their lives. Fabulous!

Things changed quickly. A new strain of virus was unleashed on the earth and infiltrated many countries before anyone figured out what was happening. This virus – SARS CoV-2 – aka the Coronavirus – went quickly from epidemic to pandemic and was expected to bring about death of biblical proportion in the USA and around the world. The situation deteriorated quickly, as it did with Jesus and the disciples, and there certainly has been and is suffering and death.

We now find ourselves in that period of unknowing. Just not knowing what will happen or how long this all will last or how far this will go before it turns a corner for the better. Some folks are very afraid. Many folks are rightly being cautious and careful. Some folks have acted as if nothing has happened because they apparently believe it won't touch them. (Not good!)

As we go through this time of unknowing, there will come a point at which things will change and change for the better. There will be, figuratively speaking, resurrection and life! Things will return to "normal", but I hope not to the way things were. My prayer in the midst of all this, or at least one of my prayers during this time, is that we, individually and as a society, a nation, will be better after having gone through this. I pray that we may improve how we are and who we are as individual persons and as a people and nation.

As we journey through this Holy Week, which will be like no other Holy Week ever, may we, unlike Jesus' disciples, not fall asleep at prayer but watch and pray - - for our national leaders and representatives, for the leaders of other nations as well, and for all those who work directly with COVID 19 patients that we may come out on the other side in a better world. That's asking a lot, but we have a very BIG God. Amen