

Tragedy – Palm Sunday April 10, 2022

On a normal Sunday, the sermon comes after the readings from the Bible. The idea is that the sermon is meant to help understand the Bible readings or look at the scripture with new eyes.

On Palm Sunday, though, I like to give a short sermon, a homily, before the featured Bible reading, which is the Passion of Jesus. This long reading from scripture tells the story of Jesus' final hours on earth and ends with his crucifixion, death, and burial.

And that Passion story is what should stick with us today. That is what we remember when we go home, more than a sermon.

But I would like to just offer a few thoughts to tee up the Passion story, to prepare us for it.

And to do that, I'd like to talk about *Romeo and Juliet*, of all things.

I have to admit, I performed in a production of *Romeo and Juliet* when I was in college. It is a powerful story. And being in the play, all of the actors, at one point, had most (if not all) of the play memorized.

You might know the story, but if it'd been a while since you've read it, here's a brief summary: Romeo and Juliet come from feuding families. They meet at a party and fall in love; they secretly get married. Romeo kills Juliet's cousin in a duel and is banished from the city. Juliet is then about to be married off to an eligible bachelor. But with the help of a well-meaning friar, she fakes her own death to avoid this arranged marriage. Romeo learns of Juliet's death (and does NOT get the memo that her death was faked), so he goes to her burial vault and takes his own life. Juliet then awakes and discovers Romeo's death and takes her own life.

Romeo and Juliet in 1 minute.

Of course, the play is a tragedy. Something we often talked about at rehearsals was how, as events were barreling out of control towards disaster, there were so many opportunities for things to improve. Lots of events went wrong for the final tragedy to ensue.

- If only Romeo hadn't gone to that party and fallen in love with Juliet.
- If only Romeo hadn't killed Juliet's cousin.
- If only Juliet had come up with a better plan besides faking her own death.
- If only the friar had talked her out of it.
- If only the message had reached Romeo that relayed Juliet's plan.
- If only Romeo had waited a little longer at the vault or trusted Juliet a bit more.
- If only Juliet had sought out help after discovering Romeo's fate.

There were a lot of ways things could have gone better. That is part of what makes the story so tragic.

And that is a statement that hold true in the story of Jesus' trial and death. In the tragedy that we call the Passion of Christ, there are so many ways things could have played out better, if only the characters had acted differently.

- If only Judas had not led the crowd to Jesus.
- If only the council of religious leaders and elder had said, "This is ridiculous. We don't like Jesus, but he's no criminal."
- If only Pilate had been more direct and released Jesus.
- If only Herod helped Jesus escape, since he was so impressed with him.
- If only the crowd had called for Jesus' release instead of Barabbas'.

It can be difficult to hear this story because there are so many opportunities for it to have gone better.

So that is something that I encourage you to listen for, as we hear the Passion story. Where were the moments when the players could have been more faithful, had more integrity, thought more carefully, trusted a bit more?

This is a story of human beings not being their best selves.

And yet, in spite of all of these human mistakes, God will still work the greatest miracle the world has known. God works the greatest miracle of all time perhaps because of those human mistakes.

And that is the hope that we can draw from this story. No matter how broken the world is, no matter how foolish or self-serving people are, God is still at work. And that is good news indeed as we hear this Passion story and look towards the cross.

Amen.