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Easter on Our Terms
Excerpts from Luke 19-23

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A pastor was dying and he wanted his death to count. So he sent a message to a corporate lawyer and an investment banker in the church, both whom were members he had known a long time. When they arrived, they were ushered into his bedroom, and as they entered the room, the preacher held out both hands and motioned for them to sit at his right and his left side. The preacher grasped their hands, sighed contentedly, and looked at the ceiling for a long period of time. For that period of time, no one said anything. Both the lawyer and the banker were touched and flattered that the old preacher would ask them to come and be with him in his dying. But they were also puzzled. Why would the preacher ask them? They both remembered his pointed and uncomfortable sermons about money, about greed, and their voracious corporate appetites had made them squirm in the seats. Finally the lawyer said, "Preacher, why did you ask us to be here with you as you are dying?" And the old preacher mustered up some strength and said weakly, "Jesus died between two thieves, and I intend to do the same."

If there comes a time on my deathbed that you receive a summons to be with me, beware.

Palm Sunday is a paradox. We are caught between the celebration, even

including the children, of the wonderful songs and psalms of the Messiah coming into Jerusalem, and the realization that the week goes downhill from there. It is not the glorious victory procession that leads to Easter. It is a funeral procession that leads to the crucifixion. The resurrection is meaningless without the tragedy of Jesus' death.

On the open Interstate 65 through the middle of Kentucky, just before dawn about 5:30 in the morning this past Friday, a semi tractor trailer meandered across the peaceful green meridian that divided the highway and went head on into a van full of a family of twelve. Instantaneously killed were the driver of the truck and nine members of the family. The family was a Mennonite Christian family on their way to a wedding in Iowa. They were well known and gracious; people loved them. They were good people and in the darkness of that early morning, John Esh, a minister, and his wife, Sadie, were killed; so were four of the couple's twelve children, a daughter-in-law, a baby grandson, and their daughter's fiancé. The baby had just been adopted two weeks before.

It's not the first time tragedy had struck the Esh family. The Esh family's house had burned down in December. They had just moved into a new one built by church members. Another Esh son, Johnny, died four years ago in a snowmobile accident on a mission trip to the Ukraine. It was the passion of the parents to be and to have their children invested in the mission of Jesus in the world. Two of the couple's other children are missionaries in Brazil. If there ever was a family that should have a sense of blessing in this world and not tragedy, it would have been and should have been the Esh family.

Why is it, that when we are on the verge of seemingly a most victorious

There is a reality in which that becomes every one of our prayers at different points in life. God, if it's your will, please get rid of the pain in my life. But then we hear the disciples call to Jesus, yet not my will, but yours be done. What were God's terms for Jesus on Easter and before? It was terms of self sacrifice, betrayal, denial, arrest, desertion, grief, conspiracy, accusations, lies, insults, rejection, suffering, crucifixion, public humiliation, abandonment by God, death – even a criminal's death on a cross.

We will at times in life have tragic things happen to us, and we will cry out to God, why is this happening to me. We cannot have Easter on our terms. Life comes at us fast-- sometimes in a head-on truck. We cannot have life work out the way we want it. We can't guarantee our success or even that we will be here tomorrow. We must receive the tragedy of life on Jesus' terms. Unless God intervenes, life is lost. Unless God gives a free gift of grace, life is but vanity. Unless God is with us in the midst of the tragic, we are lost in the illusion of our own terms. So by faith we believe God is there with us in the mist of the darkness, the pre-dawn of the morning. When it is dark, when the truck is suddenly meandering across the meridian and heading right toward us, God is there with us. When Jesus is praying on the Mount of Olives, God is there with him. Not my terms, God, but yours.

Let us pray.

Gracious God, may you help us to live with hope and faith, even when life is tragic, so that we see that your grace and mercy pervades in the midst of the darkest place. Through Jesus Christ. Amen.

American history. Because deep within our souls is a hunger for life to be on our terms.

And what are the terms for completing the Easter deal? There are terms by the disciples, by the people, by the religious leaders and the political leaders. The disciples were passionate for Jesus to become the ruling Messiah so that they could rule with him.

The crowds of people had their passionate terms for Jesus' success. After all, he was healing them and feeding them, and they expected he'd keep on healing all of them and feeding all of them. If he was their king, they would be whole and never hungry.

The religious leaders had their passionate terms for Jesus. They looked for a quiet way to get rid of him because he was their competition. Over a period of time, he was gradually taking away their power with the people, and they knew that if they didn't find a way to put him away that he would eventually usurp their religious leadership. So they did everything that they could to find a way to get rid of him.

The political leaders had their passionate terms for Jesus. They wanted to stay on good terms with all the people, particularly the religious leaders. They'd keep peace at all costs, so they let Jesus be sacrificed instead of Barabbas, who was a criminal, because it made political sense.

And even Jesus himself did not get to Easter on his own terms. Remember on the Mount of Olives with his disciples, he withdrew to a place by himself. He knelt down and prayed, and then he said, "Father, if you are willing to remove this cup of suffering from me, yet not my will, but yours."

moment in life, and the celebration of that which is wonderful to come, tragedy strikes our lives? We want success on our terms. We want to avoid tragedy. We want prosperity and safety the way that we dream about it. We want God to bless our grand plans. We want God to give us success as we conceive and practice it. We want God to be on our side when we're on God's side. We want God to give us the good life, and we will even tell God how to give it to us. We want God to bail us out because we are too important to fail. But we cannot guarantee success or health or longevity of life on our own terms. Easter will not happen because everybody becomes a Democrat or a Republican or a capitalist or an advocate for civil rights. Easter will not happen when everybody agrees with me.

There are two ways to look at holy week. There are two ways to look at this day -- as events in which we can be pumped up to go out into a world as if everything was going to be okay forever, or as a pattern of life to experience in the midst of tragedy. If we are attending events of Palm Sunday and Easter, it sometimes is almost as though Palm Sunday should be the little "e" Easter before the big "E" event next week.

Last year we received some comments from people that they didn't like the way we ended the Palm Sunday service. It was a letdown. My sense is, if you felt that way, you will be let down again today. But the important thing to realize is that Easter week, the week of Passion, the week before Eastern happens, is, in fact, a letdown. It is an act of disillusionment because people had other expectations for Jesus.

As Ernest Becker said in his Pulitzer prize winning book *The Denial of*

Death, Americans would rather go shopping than deal with death. We would rather go to a parade than an execution. That only makes good sense, right? But this week is about the execution and not about the parade.

There are two views of Palm Sunday – one with the emphasis on the Palms and the other one with the emphasis on the Passion. And the Palms give way to the Passion very quickly in Jerusalem.

The Palms are about the grand procession, the glory of the Messiah, the victory of the one who wins. The Passion is about failure. The Passion is about a Messiah who dies, who disillusiones the people – a Messiah who is a failure.

This is the paradox of Palm and Passion Sunday. The victorious Messiah who is winning the battle and persuading humanity that he can heal and that he can have a victory over all of the difficulties of life suddenly turns and becomes a sacrifice as if he were the weakest human being on the face of the earth. Disillusionment takes the place of optimism. Darkness overcomes the light. Death wipes out life. The cloaks of honor are trampled under the muddiness of chaos. The scepter of power becomes a spear in the side. The throne is a cross. The Messiah is sent to a criminal's execution.

We want Palm Sunday to move quickly to Easter. We don't want the traveling through the darkness; we want the victory procession to end in a crowning of Jesus as king. We want our enemies destroyed. We want good deeds to be rewarded. We want success to be permanent. But we don't get Easter on our terms. It only becomes the Easter because Jesus is willing to die. We don't get what we want. Our dreams are not fulfilled. Our

plans are not completed. Our order is shattered by chaos. Our portfolio is cut in half. Our retirement plans become useless. Our children are jobless. Our marriages dissolve. Our businesses go bankrupt. And we suffer from cancer and get ready to die.

Now, at this moment, you are thinking, did I show up on Palm Sunday for such a depressing sermon? No, probably not. But the reality of what we walk as disciples is the reality of what Jesus walked -- life through the tragedy with the faith that God is present in the midst of the disillusionment and darkness. We want to arrive at Easter on our terms with it being up and successful, but we can't have it our way.

You remember Frank Sinatra's famous song, "I Did It My Way". And now the end is near, and so I face the final curtain. My friends I'll say it clear. I'll state my case of which I'm certain. I lived a life that's full. I've traveled each and every highway. And more, much more than this, I did it my way. I planned each charted course, each careful step along the byway. And more, much more than this, I did it my way. For what is a man, what has he got? If not himself, then he has naught. To say the things he truly feels and not the words of one who kneels. The record shows I took the blows and I did it my way.

The irony of the song "My Way" is Frank Sinatra did not write that song. It was a gift from his friend, Paul Anka, another great singer and songwriter who made a personal sacrifice to fly to France, buy the rights of the song, stayed up all night one night and rewrote the words to fit Frank Sinatra's philosophy of life. And it is one of the most popular songs in