

Palm / Passion Sunday

April 2, 2023

Let's just take a minute to reflect on what we just heard. (pause)

Such a powerful story. Such an incredible one. Such a meaningful one. Such a heartbreaking one.

Let's change gears for a second. Do any of these sound familiar from your childhood? Your dad reminds you that you have a dental appointment after school. Or your mom won't let you watch TV until you finish your homework. Or you have to clean your plate at dinner before you can have any dessert. Or you are dragged to the grocery store because you're too young to be left home alone. Or you're woken up from a deep sleep to go to Church. Or you are made to go to your soccer game even though it's rainy and cold. Or it's a beautiful summer day and your parents say, "Get in the car. We're going to visit grandma and grandpa." In each case you probably uttered the same four words . . .

Do I have to?

Today we find ourselves on the threshold of a difficult week. Holy? Yes. Easy? Not a chance. And in the coming days we are invited to walk with Jesus, invited to put our hand in his and be led to places we would rather want to avoid. To be judged. To be ridiculed. To be abandoned. To be abused. And worse.

Do I have to?

In some ways it is not unlike our experiences of American kids I have gotten to know, not unlike the many times we had to go to places we didn't feel like going to, the many times we had to forgo something we enjoyed for something else - something we would never have chosen on our own. The big difference, of course, is that as children we didn't have a choice. The choice was made for us by people who, in theory, knew better, people who were entrusted to care for us more than any others. For most of us (but sadly, not all) the safest thing to do was to accept the decisions our parents made for us, accept that following where they led would ultimately help us grow into the men and women we were created to be. But when we were young, the choice was theirs, not ours.

For most of us here today, that is no longer the case. We are no longer children. We do have a choice. An important choice. A life-changing kind of choice. We can either continue to ask the wrong question - "Do I have to?" - or we can embrace a much different attitude

. . . . "Jesus, I'll go wherever you lead."

That sort of attitude takes deep faith, it takes authentic faith. And I certainly won't pretend that it's easy. It is anything but.

Truthfully, it takes a level of trust some of us don't put in anything or anyone else. It takes a kind of surrendering to our own wants and our own egos and our own plans. In a certain sense, it takes a sincere willingness to put our feet into the footprints of Jesus, without being able to know or see the path ahead. It indeed takes faith.

Well, that's not entirely true. In faith, we DO know where it leads - and it frightens us. We know that when we choose to love as Jesus loves, there is a steep cost, and that cost is our very selves, our very lives. That's the sort of self-emptying God asks of us, the kind of self-emptying that will be on full display this week.

God, do I have to?

No we don't. Yet the deepest mystery of our faith, the one that seems so counter-intuitive, is what we call the Paschal Mystery, the template for each of our lives, the mystery that tells us that there is no joy without some experience of sorrow, no hope without a certain level of doubt, no true fulfillment without sacrifice, no life without death, the daily dying to self that helps us resist the temptation to feel as if it's all about us, that the world revolves around us, that all that matters is what we want, what brings us temporary satisfaction or happiness.

It's a mystery that tells us that we can't experience an Easter by circumventing the hill before us. We must climb it, my dear people of God, and we can only do so with Jesus hand in hand.

That's the invitation this week. Will we take it?

Or will we stand our ground and ultimately miss the life-changing opportunity before us, an opportunity to be more than we were yesterday. In other words, will we keep on asking . .

Do I have to?

My dear friends in Christ, God won't make that choice for us. And he will never force himself on us. That's not the God we have. So let's pray for the courage to embrace the profound truths that are on display this week. And may what we discover, inspire us to fully embrace a life of love, a life that assures us that what happens on Calvary is not the end of the story.

Have a blessed Holy Week.