

Palm Sunday 2024

Does God love me? Does God care about me? Have you ever asked that question? Maybe you've even asked God that very question. I think it's honest to say that we all, have at one time or another, wondered if God loves me. And so, we want a **sign**, we demand a sign from God to assure us that He loves us and is with us. The Sunday of the Passion gives us that sign – the **cross**. Our comfort comes from the words of Paul, *And being found in human form, He [Jesus] humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Ph 2:8)*. TODAY, WE LOOK AT THE SIGN OF THE CROSS AND ARE COMFORTED THAT GOD LOVES ME, CARES FOR ME, AND IS WITH ME.

On this side of heaven, we live in the darkness of the valley of the shadow of death. We, like sheep, have gone astray from the flock and protection of our Good Shepherd. The wolves of this world howl and hound us. That prowling lion Satan tries to devour us. It is lonely. And, it is frightening.

“Cancer” is the word from your doctor. Your children have turned from the delight of your heart to breaking your heart. Your spouse once said “I do,” but now doesn't. Death's cold grasp has taken your helpmate and friend, now you are alone and mourn. We hear, almost on a daily basis it seems, words – scary words -- like opioids, fentanyl, murder. We are not accustomed to hearing things like that in our neck of the woods and it's unsettling.

In the weakness of our flesh, with danger and sorrow at every hand, we ask: “Where are you, God?” We doubt. We doubt that He loves us. We doubt that He cares for us. We doubt that God is with us.

Today, we see the visible sign of God's love. The very Son of God rides into God's city in triumphal procession, but not on a mighty stallion, as a conquering general. He rides on a beast of burden, carrying the burden of the sin of all the world. And, as a lamb to the slaughter, so the Lamb of God, bearing all the world's sin, is led to the slaughter of the cross.

Sign. Want a sign? Look at the cross: the sign of Christ and Him Crucified! *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son,"* the Bible says (Jn 3:16). And again, the Scriptures tell us, *[God] did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all* (Ro 8:32). The cross tells you that God gave up His own Son into death for you! Luther said it so well: "We see the deepest into the heart of God when we see His Son hanging on the cross."

Jesus carries that cross, He is nailed to the cross, He is raised up on that cross, and He dies on that cross, to do away with sin and its dreadful curse of floods and fires, cancer and death, infidelity and heartbreak, worry and fear, once and for all.

In the season of Lent, our Gradual is taken from the book of Hebrews,

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

We fix our eyes on Jesus to learn from Jesus. Jesus carried the cross, and you will carry the cross. Everyone who confesses Christ's holy name, everyone who desires to live a holy, God-pleasing life and not be conformed to this present age, will bear the cross.

We may cringe at the very thought of it, and try to avoid it. Bearing the cross is not easy; it is most certainly not fun. We have no patience. We do not suffer well.

Who among us really wants to embrace and carry the cross? We want the Easter bunny, Easter bonnets, and Easter baskets. We want glory! The cross is to be avoided at all costs. Oh, how wise we are in our own eyes, that we think we know even more than God what is good for us!

In this season of Lent, we heard the voice of Jesus, *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me”* (Mt 16:24). Following Jesus means carrying a cross. God lays the cross on us to **conform** us to the image of His Son. Paul writes in our Epistle: *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus (Ph 2:5)*. The crosses God permits in our lives prevent us from becoming complacent and indifferent. Crosses teach us the truth of the words of the song we learned as children in Sunday School -- we are weak, but He is strong.

Like Simon of Cyrene, we shoulder the cross and bear it! The cross marks us as God’s own! Like Simon, we do not bear the cross alone. Christ is with us to help us bear the cross.

God gives us signs of His love that we may never doubt. The cross, upon which the Prince of Glory won forgiveness for the sins of all the world, and the Word and Sacraments, where He distributes that forgiveness, making it your very own forgiveness.

The Rev. Dr. Luther wrote:

“Our merciful God always placed some outward and visible sign of His grace alongside the Word, so that men, reminded by the outward sign and work or Sacrament, would believe with greater assurance that God is kind and merciful...To us in the New Testament, Baptism

and the Eucharist have been given as the visible means of grace, so that we might firmly believe that our sins have been forgiven through Christ's suffering and that we have been redeemed by His death. Thus the church has never been deprived to such an extent of outward signs that it became impossible to know where God could surely be found."

Sign? Want a sign that God loves you? Then look to those means where He Himself has promised to be found – the Word and the Sacraments.

Remember your Baptism and the gifts God has given you in the water and the Word. You are God's own child, redeemed by Christ the crucified. Never will God leave you, nor forsake you. Be comforted that God has plans for you, plans to prosper you, not harm you; plans to give you hope and the glorious future of heaven.

Come to the Lord's Table to eat our Lord's Body and drink His blood. Come, and taste the goodness of God, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins. And, where there is forgiveness, there is life and salvation, and strength to carry the cross.

Remember and cherish the words of the blessed Psalm, *Thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.*

As we wait for that day that we will dwell in the house of Lord for ever and ever without end, God gives you signs to comfort and assure you of His love – the sign of the cross and the signs of the Sacraments, that we may not fear.