

Proclaiming the Lords Death: The Night is Nearly Over

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

April 5,2020-Livestream Palm Sunday Service

Romans 13:8-12

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What time is it? That's the question Paul would have us think about this morning. Well, it's Palm Sunday, we could answer. It's the Sunday that sends us into Holy Week. It's the day Jesus rides into Jerusalem in what we often call the triumphal entry. I couldn't help but wonder as I prepared for this sermon, what if Jesus' triumphal entry had happened now, and the people of Jerusalem were sheltering in place? The packed crowds would not line the streets with folks elbowing their way to the front. There'd be no shouting voices or cries of "Hosanna." No coats would pave the road. Not a single palm branch would wave. What a strange scenario to try to imagine.

But it's not all that hard to do because here I am preaching to an empty sanctuary on Palm Sunday, 2020. And there you are at home, maybe yet in your pajamas-and it all feels so very strange and different. Something that's clear this morning is that this is new ground we're traveling, and it feels like we're trying to find our way home while an untimely, unrelenting, disorienting darkness descends on us.

What time is it? Well, to Paul it feels a lot like night. Our entire world is threatened by an enemy we can't see. So many of the things we've valued and trusted in our lives are suddenly wobbling. Our financial institutions. Our health care systems. Our jobs. The routines and patterns of our lives. The nearness and support of family and friends. It feels like we're living and navigating through the thickest of night. And in fact, that's what the Bible teaches us about what time it is.

The Bible teaches that we do live in the night. We live in the age where Satan still rears his ugly head, and evil and suffering plague and disrupt life in all kinds of ways in God's world.

"The day," you see, is that time that's coming-when Christ will return, when God will banish Satan from the earth, and with him, all suffering and evil. Life will once again be the paradise of unbroken fellowship with God and with each other.

Even in our text, the Apostle Paul affirms that we live in the night. But, Paul says, and this is important, we live in the time of night that is just before dawn. We live just before the birth of a new day. We live just before the time when Christ will be all in all. "Our salvation," he

points out in verse 11, "is nearer now than when we first believed." The moment of full revelation of the light and glory of God is almost here.

As my friend, Rev Duane Kelderman once preached, "Christians know how to live just before dawn. Christians know how to live in advent, how to wait in hope. Already back in Egypt, God told Moses and the people, 'Tonight is the night I will deliver you from wicked Pharaoh. Be ready to go. You stand at the edge of something new and great.' In the years that followed, Israel celebrated the Passover with their shoes on, to symbolize being ready, to capture the truth that we live at the edge of a new day. The prophets called a people who had lost hope, who had lost everything, to keep believing, to keep hoping, to keep watching for the dawn of a new day."

Yes, friends, we live just before dawn. Paul says, "The night is nearly over, the day is almost here." That's a message for us today. The night is nearly over, the day is almost here. But let me be clear. I'm not predicting how near or far we are from the end of this global pandemic and its terrorizing threats to life. No! I don't know that timeframe. But I am predicting this-and I'm 100 percent sure of it. Easter is coming. The day of resurrection will come. The night is nearly over, the day is almost here.

You see, Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem was also a time of mixed emotion and fear and doubt for His followers. Even Jesus' closest disciples who faithfully and dutifully followed Jesus instructions on that day, were certainly not prepared for the 'time it was' or for what would yet happen. Jesus knew that when things got rough-they would betray, deny and abandon Him.

Yet, Jesus made His way to Jerusalem and to the cross, despite the shortcomings, fears and failures of His disciples. In fact, Jesus makes His way to Jerusalem and to the cross because of the shortcoming, fears, and failures of His followers. And because of His unfathomably great love for us.

You see, nothing can stop Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Nothing can stop the One who comes in the name of the Lord. Nothing will keep Jesus from being present in the midst of all that shakes us and stirs us and causes us to tremble. Nothing will keep Jesus from going the way of the cross for us.

And for a while, as Jesus dies and is buried-and the crowds go back to their homes, and Jesus closest friends hide in fear-it will seem like all is lost and dead and beyond hope. For a time, it will feel like the darkest of night. But then the dawn will come. Because nothing can stop

the Son rising. Nothing can stop Easter. Nothing can change-that sin and suffering and death gets swallowed up by the power of love.

The night is nearly over. The day is almost here. You've heard it said, 'the night is darkest right before dawn.' I think we're learning that in a new way during this unusual time. Times like this tend to teach us and even change the way we live.

Paul has addressed that too, at the beginning of our passage. Paul says this is the time for unprecedented love-love that does no harm to our neighbor.

You know I find myself so moved by some of the inspirational stories I've heard in the last couple weeks. Folks sacrificing their time, their wages, their respirator, their own health for the sake of others. Some might say-well those are just feel good stories. We crave them so they can prop us up during these difficult days.

But there's more to it than that. Because sometimes it's when the night is darkest that we can be at our best. Not because we are such strong and wonderful people. But because the light of Christ cannot be snuffed out in our world or in our lives.

Love, says Paul, understanding the present time. And I see and hear that happening all around me.

As I opened an envelope received in the mail this week with lovely art work done by young hands and read the note of encouragement from a LaGrave family inside-I saw not only those objects in front of me-I saw light and I remembered that the day is almost here.

I know of a family who grieved the fact that one member of the family had alienated themselves and had not been in contact for decades. But serious sickness entered the picture and in the last 24 hours of life-the person called all the members of the family and said I love you. This is not just a feel-good story. It's a story about seeing the light and realizing the day is almost here.

People of God-we are living just before dawn. Paul says, "the hour has already come for us to wake up from our slumber." In other words, what might you be putting off that matters most in life? To whom might you reach out in love-with kindness or forgiveness or generosity?

"Love," says Paul. And do this understanding the present time: "the hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed." Yes friends, we live in the night. But we also live in hope; hope in a risen Savior, who is King! There will be joy in the morning! For the night is nearly over; the day is almost here. Thanks be to God!

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