

Sunday of the Passion (b)
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
March 27, 2021 (Saturday Service Only)

When you hear the word “passion,” what do you think of?” I immediately think of young love. I think of Kris Schneekloth, when I was in sixth grade. Kris Schneekloth had a terrible name, but I was passionately in love with her. Or, I think of the long-lost lovers falling into each others’ arms at the end of all those movies. That’s passion. Or, in a different way, I think of an orator, like Martin Luther King, Junior, giving his “I have a dream” speech with such power and passion.

But, in the bible, passion doesn’t really mean any of that. It comes from a Latin word which means “to endure suffering and pain.” As of tonight, we’re entering into Holy Week, the week of the suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We’ve got to let this sink into our hearts. Our God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead, the God who created the mountains, the fields and the oceans; the God who crafted each petal on each flower blooming in our gardens, the God who created your life and mine: that God, the true God of the universe—our God—is a God who suffers and cries and dies. Our true God suffers and cries and dies. When we say God suffers, we’re not using symbolic language. God’s suffering is as real as yours and mine, and more so, because he is God and his suffering is infinite.

The nails through his wrists were real. The five wounds on his body were real. The thorns in his head were sharp and real. The lash against his body was painfully real. Passion Sunday reminds us that God suffers and cries and dies, like we do.

The other religions of the world are not willing to go where the God of Israel takes us. The God of Israel became a man who writhed in pain on the cross, and who screamed in the middle of his suffering on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In no other religion does a cross become the throne of God.

It’s interesting, how the farther people move away from church, the more they tend to keep their idea of God safe from time and suffering and death. We’d like to say, that’s where God lives, safely up there in heaven, where there is no divorce, no cancer, no accidents, no bullets, no bombs, no wars, no pandemics, no assassinations. In our minds, we try to make God be like we are. We move away from violent neighborhoods! So God, we think, should obviously stick to the suburbs too. Out there, on the edges of life, removed from it all. But it’s just the opposite. Our God left the safety and sanity of heaven to come to this violent neighborhood called Earth. He took on flesh and suffered and died, like the rest of us do.

And another thing: When one of his children is hurt on this earth, God himself is hurt. Imagine, that I hit my finger with a hammer. Obviously, my fingertip is going to hurt. But it’s not just my fingertip; my brain is going to get all the pain signals. My brain will also hurt because it’s central processing unit of the body. Well, Christ is the center of God’s physical body on earth...the church. When any part of the body of Christ is hurt, the pain center is feeling the pain. It goes directly from the members of the body to the brain of the church, to the head of the church, which is Christ.

You think of how you feel and respond when your kid gets injured or sick and goes to the hospital. Are you going to stay home? Are you going to want to take a drive in the country to escape? Will you want to go to work? No, you want to be with your kid,

holding them tight, comforting them, letting them know you're there. Their pain is your pain; you would trade places with them if you could. That's how it is with God. When we're hurting, God is with us, holding us tightly. That's his essential nature: Passionate. He's always exiting heaven, and entering into our lives right here and now, to suffer with us.

And he's willing to die for us. Maybe some of you have seen the great movie, "The Bridge On the River Kwai." It's also a good book, based on a true story. It's about some British prisoners of war at a prison camp in Thailand during WWII. Now these guys are being forced to build bridges and roads for the enemy. They go out every day with their shovels and dig the roads by hand...grueling physical labor...all in the Thai jungle. Terrible working conditions: poisonous insects, dysentery, malaria, malnutrition.

Well, one night, this group of ten prisoners were doing the routine. They got back from work and leaned their shovels against the guardhouse wall, and then they lined up for inspection. The guard, as he always did, counted the shovels and one shovel was missing. There were only nine. He became furious and yelled at them, "Where is the shovel? I know you sold it to Thais out in the jungle to get money for contraband! Who did it!" All the men stood there silently. The guard got more and more angry, swearing at them and demanding, "Who took the shovel?" None of the ten men moved. So the guard put the barrel of his rifle against the forehead of the man who was first in line.

He said, "I am going to pull the trigger and blow this man's brains out unless one of you tells me who took the shovel." There was a long pause. And then a man down the line stepped forward. A young Scottish soldier. He didn't say a word, just stood there in silence. The guard then started using the butt of his gun like a baseball bat on this young soldier until he was dead. The guard stepped back, barked an order, and the nine soldiers picked up their fallen comrade and carried him to their barracks. The guard went back to

his guardhouse and saw the shovels leaning against the wall. Something clicked in his mind as he saw them, and he decided to count them again. There were ten. He had miscounted the first time. The Scottish soldier had stepped forward and died, so that one of his friends would not have to. And that is the love we are talking about. That's passionate love.

And that's the good news of Passion Sunday. Jesus steps forward from the line and takes the full force of the enemy's assault, so that his friends would not have to die. As Paul said of Jesus, "No greater love has a person than this: that he is willing to lay down his life for his friends." Ours is the only religion in the world whose God steps forward and dies on behalf of his friends, so that they would not have to.

Keep this word in your hearts and minds this week. Our God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead, the God who created the mountains and the fields, and the oceans; the God who crafted each detail on each flower blooming out in our gardens, the stars and planets and all the galaxies, the God who created your life and mine: that God, the true God of the universe—our God—is a God who suffers and cries, and ultimately dies on our behalf. One small word unlocks so much of our faith, and tells us who God is: passion.