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St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington
24 March 2024

Sermon on Hebrews 12:1-3

Worship Theme:

RETHINKING RELIGION: RETHINKING REAL STRENGTH

We have come to Holy Week. It begins with Jesus humbly riding a donkey colt straight into the hands of his enemies. As the week progresses, it will appear that Christ's adversaries are the ones in a position of power, and Jesus is in a position of weakness. Yet what Christ does this holy week—setting his divine strength aside, being passive in the face of death—would change the world. To do what Christ did for us and our salvation took real strength.

Sermon Theme: **“Consider the Christ Who Comes for You”**

Grace, and mercy, and peace – all these have been freely given to you by God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. AMEN!

What is real strength? That's the question we get to focus on in our time together today. It's certainly not a new one – we're constantly striving to discover real strength: looking for it within ourselves, trying to obtain it from some outside source, or determining if other people have it or not. As strange as this sounds though, it can be difficult to tell the difference between unmatched strength and profound weakness. For example, which is the stronger thing to do – knock someone flat on their back in a fight, or walk away without throwing a single punch? And if strength is so difficult to determine, it can be even harder to know who has it and who doesn't. So the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews invites us to **Consider the Christ Who Comes for Us** and ask: “Is THIS real strength?”

Hebrews was written to a group of Jewish Christians who were struggling with the temptation to leave their faith in Jesus behind and return to the old familiar ways of Judaism. It isn't too difficult to see why that could be so tempting: Jesus often looked weak. Christianity seemed boring. It was much smaller than Judaism and had much less to draw people's attention and appeal to them.

Judaism on the other hand had a long, well-founded history. It had tales about the power and majesty and glory of God that would knock your socks off! Plagues in Egypt, parting the Red Sea, miraculous provision and protection during decades in the wilderness, defeat of powerful enemy nations, winning the Promised Land for his chosen people... not to mention the worship life – special sacrifices, incense, a tabernacle designed by God himself, a temple designed by God himself, a huge priesthood, and so much more! That's a powerful religion which clearly worshiped a powerful God!

By comparison, Jesus didn't seem like much. The illegitimate son of a carpenter from up north. A poor man with a ragtag bunch of followers. Someone who associated with outcasts like the demon-possessed, the sick, the poor, the tax collectors... It seemed that the only people who went to Jesus were the ones who

either didn't have anything better to do or the ones who were out of options and figured it was worth a shot to see if he could help whatever problem they had.

Almost nothing about him was impressive. His appearance was normal, but he was lower class. He walked everywhere. He was basically homeless for the last few years of his life. And he kept doing weird things like going out into the wilderness or climbing mountains for alone time with his little group of disciples.

Then came today, a day that would eventually be called Palm Sunday. The day he showed up with the finest transportation he ever had! But it was just a dirty donkey. And this event began an entire week that made absolutely no sense. He deliberately entered a city filled with his enemies, knowing full well that he likely wasn't coming out again. And sure enough, by Friday the Roman governor had been convinced to crucify Jesus to death.

Oh and let's not forget the most confusing part: he claimed that he did all these things, even dying, so to SAVE HIS ENEMIES. If he were saving friends, then we might understand that. Or if all this happened because of some terrible thing he had done, that would make sense too. But no. This Jesus died at the hands of his enemies because supposedly it would help them with a very serious problem.

It doesn't make a lick of sense – surrendering yourself to help and save your enemies doesn't look like strength! A dead Jesus can't help anybody, either 2,000 years ago or today! And if Jesus is unable to help, then why would I go to him for anything? This temptation wasn't just something the Jewish Christians faced a very long time ago. People today face this temptation and struggle all the time. And not just people “out there” either! People in this very room right now.

We wrestle with two main thoughts – first, that I should be strong enough to deal with my own problems (because that's REAL strength!), and second, Jesus doesn't seem to care about or isn't able to help me with the “real” problems in my life. Sure, maybe Jesus was a good guy who has some nice moral teachings to pass on if you're into that sort of thing, but how is that going to keep my marriage from falling apart? How is it going to pay the bills I keep falling behind on? How is it going to help my cousin get over his addiction, or how will it help my best friend fight her Stage 4 cancer diagnosis? Jesus may have had some nice things to say to a bunch of ancient people who lived halfway around the world, but these are real-world issues we face today, and they require real strength to overcome! If Jesus isn't going to help, then it's up to us!

Whether you've struggled with any of those specific situations or if your life has its own flavor of “how-is-Jesus-supposed-to-help-me-with-THIS”, we all have times in life when real strength is needed. Nothing else will do. But you and I also know that it is these very moments that it becomes so painfully obvious how weak WE are and how much we need help. So where do we turn?

Hebrews has the answer: *Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.* Or to say that another way, **Consider the Christ Who Comes for You!** Now what does that mean? It means when we're searching for real strength to navigate life, survive hardships, and obtain eternity, we already know where to look. In spite of everything our natural

thinking and sinful nature may tell us and regardless of how much the world around us may protest, Jesus IS the one and only source of real strength.

After all, he is the Christ! We often use the term “Christ” as interchangeable with Jesus, which it certainly is, but there are differences. “Jesus” is his name; “Christ” is one of his many titles. Christ is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word “Messiah”, and both mean “anointed one.” When the very first human beings chose sin instead of obedience to God, God promised to send a solution, someone who would defeat the dreadfully powerful enemies of sin, Satan, and death. This solution would need to be completely perfect and the most powerful being the world has ever seen, because taking down these foes would certainly not be a walk in the park. For such a difficult mission, someone would need to be specially chosen and dedicated for it. Throughout the Old Testament, anointing was the way kings and priests were chosen to serve God’s people, which made it the perfect way for God to describe his Chosen One who would be the Savior of sinners and the Defeater of death: he would be the **Christ**.

And this Christ did exactly what he was chosen to do: he **came** to this world, embracing his mission from God the Father and joining the human race to redeem it from eternal slavery. It’s truly mind-blowing – the Christ came to free his sworn enemies, people who had rebelled against his Word and his will at every chance we got, people who were deserving of nothing but wrath and punishment from the Holy God. But instead of coming to inflict us, the Christ himself was inflicted. He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, knowing exactly what would happen to him only a few days later. He endured derision and mockery and physical pain and suffering at the hands of every human who surrounded him. And we are not exempt from that – our hands are stained too, for it was our sin that caused him such suffering. But the Christ who so easily could have wiped humanity from existence and sent us all straight to hell DIDN’T. Instead he *endured such opposition from sinners*, because he came to overcome sin and free sinners from it.

Why did he do all that? Why did he live a life of perfect obedience to every law and command of God only to have that life come to a crashing halt with the events of the very week we enter today? **For you. The Christ Came for You.** And he didn’t come as a weak “wannabe” Savior. No, he came with the ALMIGHTY POWER of God, so much real strength that he needed to hide it so that his mission could happen. If people had seen the entirety of his true strength, power, and glory, the Christ’s mission would have failed because he would have been too much for people to handle and then Holy Week likely never would have taken place. So he hid his strength in his humility and his humanity, and focused all his attention on showing himself to the people he came to save in a way they could receive him.

But make no mistake – his hidden strength was no less real! Jesus used his strength to pay the punishment price sin demanded, not just for one or two people, but for everyone. He did that because sin has always been the worst enemy we face and the most destructive part of our lives, because even one sin has the power to give us an eternal address in hell. So when we wonder why Jesus doesn’t take care of “the real problems” we face in life, there are two things we need to remember:

First, he does care and he does help in his own timing and way, because he alone knows how to work in our lives for our eternal good; and Second, he proved how much he cares and loves us by focusing on sin first so that now the hardest things we deal with in life are things that only affect THIS life: whether it's a marriage falling apart, bills stacking up, addiction destroying relationships, cancer striking again, or any of the other countless hardships we endure, they're all for this life and this life only; Jesus already saved us from eternal hardship! He did this *so we will not grow weary and lose heart*. He did this **for you!**

The entire Letter to the Hebrews was written to encourage God's people to never forsake Jesus and to always cling to him in faith. As we see again just how powerful our Jesus is – overflowing with REAL STRENGTH! – we know without a doubt that he is worthy of our confidence and trust. During this most Holy Week of the year, there are times when Jesus will look very weak. But we know what happens only one Sunday from today, when any thoughts of a weak Jesus go flying out the window and the real strength of our Almighty Christ is revealed. *Therefore, let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy set before him, he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.* Dear brothers and sisters in Jesus, today, all throughout this Holy Week, and every day for the rest of our lives, we have a priceless privilege to **Consider the Christ Who Comes for Us!** – he is our gracious Lord, the God who made us and loves us and saves us. To him be all praise and thanksgiving, now and forever. Amen!

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.