

V Lent 2021 (Passion Sunday)
Sermon – Saint Joseph Parish
Father Craig Looney
Hebrews 9.11-15 St. John 8.46-59



Something is different about the way the church looks this Sunday. Gone are the rose-colored vestments worn by the Celebrant and the pink flowers decorating the High Altar of Refreshment Sunday. Violet-colored vestments have returned. The Crucifix at the High Altar and all of the icons and statues are now hidden behind purple veils.

The *Book of Common Prayer* designates the last two weeks of the Lenten Season *Passiontide*. *Passion* means *suffering* or *endurance*. It also means a *powerful conviction to complete a task or mission*.

Passiontide is our Liturgical reenactment of the last two weeks of Jesus' earthly life. He suffered humiliation; he endured pain; and with a powerful conviction motivated by his love for us, completed his mission to reconcile mankind to God through his death on the Cross; executed like a common criminal. Jesus' life was never about himself...it was always about us!

The custom of covering crucifixes, statues and icons during Passiontide likely originated in 9th Century Germany, where a large cloth called a "Hunger Cloth" was extended in front of the Altar from the beginning of Lent. The hiding of sacred object in church comes from the Gospel...Jesus went and hid behind a curtain.

Over the next two weeks the Gospel readings reflect Jesus' increasingly heated encounters with the Pharisees and other religious groups that want him dead. He is setting himself up for his own execution...the completion of the mission he cannot avoid.

In today's Gospel reading Jesus is calling out the Pharisees for being religious hypocrites who don't even know their own religion. He is accused of being a Samaritan and having a demon...an accusation he denies. He tells them anyone who follows his teachings will never die...a claim the Pharisees dismiss as delusional.

The Pharisees repeat their accusation that Jesus has a demon...after all...Abraham and all of the great prophets are dead. They want Jesus to explain himself. Certainly he doesn't think he's better than Abraham. Who does he think he is, anyway? What Jesus has to say is more than they can bear.

His reply Abraham was happy to see the time of his coming when he isn't even fifty years old further convinces the Pharisees Jesus isn't playing with a full deck. Jesus then says to the Pharisees before Abraham lived..."I AM"!

There is no turning back for Jesus now. He has just called himself by the Name reserved for God alone. He has just said..."I AM GOD"! The outrageous claim Jesus has made of being God provokes an immediate response from the Pharisees...they pick up stones to throw at him. But Jesus hides from them...perhaps behind a curtain or wall.

What about our own Lenten Journey...our own Passiontide...our own time of endurance and suffering? Lent and Passiontide are much more than seasons of the Church Year we go through on our way to Easter. They are rich and meaningful times to share with Jesus the journey he took to the cross...our own journey to the cross.

Passiontide becomes more meaningful for us if we try to imagine ourselves as part of the crowd following Jesus during the last two weeks of his earthly life. How will we respond when he says if we follow him we will never die? Our relatives and friends have died. How will we respond when he says to us..."I AM"? What do we make of Jesus?

We know what happens next. We will be with Jesus on Palm Sunday during his triumphant procession into Jerusalem. We will be with him on Maundy Thursday...he will give us his Body and Blood and a new commandment to love others as he loves us. And we will be there on Good Friday...the darkest day in the history of mankind...dark...but not without hope.

On Easter Day the High Altar crucifix, statues and icons will no longer be hidden behind purple veils. We will look at the crucifix and remember everything Jesus did was for us.

We have a powerful conviction motivated by our love for Jesus and his love for us to complete our Passiontide journey. We will remember that he said, "I AM". And we will reply..."Yes, you are"!

