Grace to you and peace from God, our creator and redeemer, from Jesus the Son, our redeemer and friend, and from the Holy Spirit, our sustainer and guide.

Congratulations! You are the brave ones, or as some would say, the gluttons for punishment… Many people shy away from Good Friday. It is too morbid… too depressing… too sad to hear what people do to one another. It is just icky. Most people don’t want to be reminded of where they came from, or where they would be without God. Most people don’t want to think about why they need God, or even how much they need God.

You have certainly heard this story before. There’s the Last Supper, which we heard again last night, where Jesus sat with his disciples to celebrate the Passover feast and before it was over instituted a meal of grace, forgiveness, and abiding presence. You have heard how Jesus was betrayed by one of his own disciples. You have heard about the sham trial where Jesus was set up by the religious elite and considered not important enough to try very hard to protect by the ruling Romans. You have heard that the crowds, riled up by their leaders’ unscrupulous goals, were led to cry for the bandit to be freed rather than a man who preached
peace. You have heard how Jesus was whipped, and mocked, killed, and hastily buried just before the start of the Sabbath began.

But then again, have you really heard it? Have you really heard the full story, from beginning to end? And yes, I know: you just heard the whole thing a few minutes ago. But did you really listen? Did you put yourself into the storyline as you heard the story move from scene to scene?

And this story is more than just something we tell on this one particular Friday in the spring. In fact, as of this moment, you are involved in the story that lasts all week. The story began Palm Sunday and continues through Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, culminating with Easter Sunday. These days are not separate – they are continuous. And for that matter, this isn’t just a story that lasts for one week; this is a story that lasts your whole life. This isn’t just 82 verses that are read today and forgotten. This is a story that you are living every single day, day after day, know it or not, like it or not.

Does that seem like a strange statement to you? How can this be a story you’re living? It happened thousands of years ago, and we just trot it back out once a year as a preamble to Easter Sunday, the triumphal end of the story. And that’s where you’re wrong, dead wrong. This is our story. We are each in it. This story tells us who we are and what we’re capable of, and I can’t lie to you, it’s not pretty.

We hear in this story about Judas, who succumbs to the pressures of power and money, and abandons Jesus for the favor of the elite and the comfort of financial wealth. It didn’t last long, of course. It drove him to despair, even to his own death. A desire for wealth and notoriety broke his faith and destroyed his purpose. Does that sound like anyone you know? Have you ever sacrificed your faith and your principles to get ahead?

We hear that Pilate faced the crowds demanding to see Jesus killed. Pilate realized that Jesus hasn’t done anything wrong and does not deserve to die. But when he’s
pressed, he chooses what’s easy instead of what’s right, and refuses to speak truth into a charged situation. We heard in this story that Jesus’ disciples, who swore they would stand by him to the end, and especially Peter, who wanted Jesus to wash his whole body when he heard what the stakes were, ran off or denied him. I mean, think about it, when he is on trial, when he is suffering, when someone needs to bury his earthly remains, where are the twelve? Gone, every last one. Other people had to do it. Seem familiar? Have you ever been faithful when the going was easy, but dropped out when your faith called you into uncomfortable, uncertain, unsafe places?

Have you ever been presented with a chance to stand up for Jesus, to defend your faith in him, but found it easier just to talk trash about church to save face with a certain crowd?

We cannot fight it – this is our story. We are in this passion narrative. We are Peter, fickle and feeble, eating our own words of professed faith and trust. We are the crowd, carried away by public opinion and sweeping fear; demanding Christ’s death. We are the criminal hanging next to Jesus, completely damned, trying to make ourselves feel better by mocking Jesus to our last breath. This story is sad, and painful, and tragic, and we are in it. It is a story because of us.

We mustn’t run from it. We can’t hide from it. So stick with it. Watch and listen and pray. We are already in the story. It hurts more in the long run to deny it. We need to be here for this. If we don’t make this journey, walking with Jesus to the cross – if we don’t include ourselves, admitting we are personally responsible for the suffering and death of God’s only son – if we do not hear these words, condemning us for the wrong we have done – BECAUSE IF THE STORY ON THIS SIDE OF THE CROSS IS NOT OUR STORY, THEN THE STORY ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CROSS IS NOT OUR STORY EITHER. Then the words of forgiveness, salvation, and hope in Christ are not ours, either.

So what are you going to do now? Find yourself in Christ’s passion? Or lose yourself to the power of death?

YES, to be reminded of the cost of our sin is icky. No doubt about it. But I have to say… It is necessary. This is the life saving moment, more than anything else. THIS IS CALLED GOOD
FRIDAY BECAUSE THIS IS WHERE GOD COMES TO GET US! God came to the cross because of LOVE, not because of judgment. God comes to meet us in our weakness and pain because of MERCY. THIS is where we truly come alive.

Do you believe it? For real?

Because once we REALLY believe that we are loved, forgiven, treasured, THEN AND ONLY THEN can we live the kind of life the author of the sermon to the Hebrews is writing about...

Therefore, my friends, (he wrote) since we have confidence to be in the presence of God by the blood of Jesus, … let us approach [God] with a true heart in full assurance of faith, … Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, 25 not neglecting to meet together, … but encouraging one another, and all the more for time is short.

Believe it is for real: God loves you just as you are, enough to send Jesus the Son and meet you on the cross. Give yourself to him, and because of that love, be the blessing for one another.

Please join me in prayer…Holy and almighty God, Your love unhinges us, because it comes in such unexpected ways. Help us not to be afraid to follow where you would lead us, to give of ourselves freely and trustingly, and to reach out to those who need your love, that we might serve you in serving your people. Amen.
Thanks to Rev. Megan Torgeson, Augustana Lutheran, West St Paul, MN for preaching an awesome Palm Sunday sermon, that got mentioned on Facebook in a way that made me want to read it, and proved to be the framing for this sermon.