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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/20/2016, Palm Sunday – Passion Sunday
Luke 22:14—23:56

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text is the prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane:

And he [Jesus] withdrew from them about a stone's throw,
and knelt down and prayed: Father, if thou art willing,
remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but thine,
be done. (Luke 22:40-41, RSV)

As I get older, I admire even more the strength and energy of youth. It delights me, for example, to see little children on the sidewalk skipping on ahead a little ways before their parents. I doubt that I even remember how to skip. But those little ones go merrily skipping along. It would be more efficient for them and would save them energy if they were to walk in a calm and orderly way. But what do they care about energy? They have an abundance of energy and they seem to take physical delight in exercising their energy. They skip, they run, they play basketball, they do all kinds of physical things, never even wanting to spare their strength and energy — not even thinking about it all that much.

As I turn now to preach about Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, I want to begin by referring to another young man — a lad, probably with energy to burn. I am thinking of young Isaac. You remember him, I bet, from the story of his father, Abraham, and the great test called “The Sacrifice of Isaac.” It is an appalling story in many ways, especially if you are a parent. Imagine that three day trek to Mount Moriah (Genesis 22). The old man, Abraham, has his assignment: The LORD has commanded him to sacrifice the son of his old age, Isaac:

get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a
burnt offering... (Genesis 22:2, KJV)

So, the old man travels along, with a heavy heart, I am sure. He probably regrets every step forward, every mile bringing them closer to Moriah. But as for the boy himself, he knows nothing of his fate. He is simply going along with his father on this deed of piety. From the boy's point of view, he and his father are off to do a good deed, never imagining that *he* is to be the sacrifice to the LORD. The boy probably enjoys the journey. He runs ahead, he throws stones, like boys often do. Perhaps he even skips at times. He has the strength and energy of youth.

Now we approach the part that especially interests me. When they reach the mount of sacrifice, Abraham lays the wood for the sacrifice upon Isaac his son, while Abraham himself carries the fire and the knife. The two walk together, the

Bible says (Genesis 22:8), but what a world of difference there must have been in their hearts. The old man walks along horrified at what he must do — he must slay his son and burn him to bones. As for the boy, he simply walks along in a carefree way, curious about the lamb for the sacrifice. He had asked his father about it:

He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” (Genesis 22:7, RSV)

What could the father answer? He simply says his great cry of faith:

And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: (Genesis 22:8, KJV)

God will provide. It is the best the old man can think to answer.

Then Abraham binds his son and lays him upon the altar ready to slay him. And I find myself thinking, I bet that boy could have escaped! I bet he could have slipped away from his father. When it dawned on Isaac what was happening, there was a moment or two when he could have escaped. He could have pushed his father aside — pushed him to the ground. Why, Abraham was ninety-nine years old when the LORD told him that he and Sarah, his wife, were to have this child, Isaac. He must be over a hundred years old at the time of this story. And what hundred-year-old man is going to be able to contend with a lad if that lad wants to slip away? The boy has strength and energy to spare. The stiff legs and the creaking knees of the father never could have caught up with the boy if the boy had tried to escape.

The story of the Sacrifice of Isaac, of course, is not really about Abraham sacrificing his son, Isaac. In fact, the LORD forbids the old man to harm his son. The LORD intervenes, and forbids this sacrifice:

And he [the LORD] said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: (Genesis 22:12, KJV)

For, in the end, this story is not about Abraham sacrificing his son Isaac, but about the LORD — the Maker of heaven and earth — sacrificing *his* Son, Jesus Christ our Lord — sacrificing him for us!

So, now, let us return to Gethsemane. This time, the young man is not Isaac, but Jesus. Thirty-three years old — still young, still strong, still with the hopes and dreams natural to a young man. Like Isaac of old, Jesus *could have* run away from this sacrifice.

He certainly *prayed* to escape this sacrifice. Our text says that Jesus withdrew from his disciples about a stone’s cast, and knelt down, and prayed,

Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: (Luke 22:42, KJV)

What young man would not have prayed a similar prayer? Life is sweet. Who wants to lose it, especially if you have been living a good life and you have some friends, maybe even disciples in this world?

So, the instinct of Jesus was to escape his coming death. And if he had wanted to run away, he could have. If young Isaac had tried to run away, who knows? Maybe his old father would have had luck and grabbed hold of the boy before he escaped. But there is no one here in dark Gethsemane to hold Jesus back. He has prayed to escape the cup of suffering! He could just as well have run away from that cup of suffering. But he does not. He ends his prayer as you and I had best end our prayers too:

...nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done. (Luke 22:42,
KJV)

It was not some strong rope that bound Jesus to his cup of suffering — not handcuff, or chains, or even the frail arms of an elderly father. No, it was nothing physical that constrained Jesus. It was love. It was love for you, for me.

We have a hymn in our hymnal about such love: *Blest Be the Tie that Binds* (LBW 370)

Blest be the tie that binds
our hearts in Christian love;
the unity of heart and mind
is like to that above.

A strong man like Samson could break ropes and chains. But the chords of love are a different matter. You know something of those ties that bind. You feel them for your family, for your friends, for your brothers and sisters in the Lord. The chords of love can lead people to do some extraordinary things in life. And so it is that in today's Passion story, those chords of love lead Jesus to accept his cup of suffering, to accept his abandonment and his mocking and his death on the cross, for you, for me.

This Sunday, Passion Sunday, teaches us that we are loved by a powerful Love. Each of us is loved that way. We come to this Palm Sunday liturgy with our mixed histories, with our fair share of success and righteousness, but also with our fair share of failure and sin. We come as we are. But each of us is loved by a powerful Love.

We come soon to the Blessed Sacrament. We come to the Communion rail, kneel if we can, and wait our turn for this same Jesus to draw near to us, to look us in the eye, and to say, "This is my body, this is my blood, given for you." This same Jesus who was in such agony of soul in the Gethsemane comes to you and me now, all these centuries and miles later, and would have us know that he

accepted his cup and drank it to the very dregs because he was thinking of you.
“My body, my blood, for you!”

Fair is fair, my friends. Our life has been purchased for us by the life of a really good Man. Jesus loves us with a love that overwhelmed him, and caused him to spare *nothing* in being good to us. He would have us imitate him in such love. Chords of love bound Jesus to Gethsemane. The soldiers approach, yet Jesus does not run away. Those chords of love kept him, and he would have those chords of love hold us fast too, to the benefit of our neighbors and to the glory of God, Father, ✝ Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.