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THIS IS OUR STORY

Imagine for a moment what your future is going to be,

- what will your life be like in the next five years?
- While we may be thinking about this, unless you have special information or you are a psychic,
  - the future you hope for will be fairly similar to what it was five years ago.

It's difficult to imagine a future that is all that different from the past, though five years ago, we were on the other side of a pandemic that has changed a number of things for us.

- Nevertheless, most are living in the same home, doing the same things we were five years ago.
  - We tend to get stuck in, even cling to patterns of behavior so that we eventually come to believe that our past isn't simply a predictor of our future, but rather a guarantee.

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The past isn't simply the past; it's our interpreted past.

- It's the story we've told ourselves about the past.
- It's about how we remember it, which is not necessarily how it really was.
  - That's why, for example, two siblings can have an alcoholic parent and yet interpret that fact and their similar past quite differently,
    - and thereby walk into distinctly different futures.

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Today, I want us to think about story, and to enter the story of our past and our future,

- but to do this in a much larger way.
  - And I think a good place to start is with JESUS' story.

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There's a lot about JESUS' story we don't know.

- We know about HIS birth, HIS family fleeing to Egypt, and then going to live in Nazareth.
  - And other than that occasion at 12 years old when HE was in the Temple in Jerusalem talking with the rabbis while HIS parents thought HE was lost,
    - we don't know anything about HIS life until HIS baptism and the beginning of HIS adult ministry when HE was 30.

Then for three years, HE traveled around with a group of followers, teaching them, performing miracles, and upsetting the religious leaders.

- HIS message was that of GOD's unconditional love for all people, and GOD's desire to be in relationship with all of us.

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That story reaches its dramatic climax in the coming days as we follow JESUS through the last week of HIS earthly life.

- Today, we hear of HIS triumphal entry into Jerusalem with the crowds cheering and proclaiming HIM KING.
- Obviously, the disciples must have seen a future of importance with JESUS as ruler and them as HIS aides.
  - That future was indeed true, but in a very different way from what they could have imagined on the day they entered Jerusalem.

- Before that future came, though, JESUS would several times speak of HIS imminent death.
  - The disciples would see HIM arrested, tried, convicted, and executed.
    - Imagine what you would feel at each moment of that week's journey.
      - Processional entry.
      - Last Supper.
      - Arrest in the Garden.
      - Trial where HE is falsely accused.
      - Conviction before Pilate.
      - Carrying the cross through the street.
      - Nailed to that same cross.
      - Death.
      - Burial.

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Many churches have combined all these details into one service today on what is now called Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion.

- Because so few come to the Holy Week services, what is called The Three Days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter, churches now read the entire passion of JESUS on this one day so that you hear it all, because it is important
  - People seem to like triumph followed by more triumph, glory, and more glory, without the inclusion of tragedy.

Yet, is there really that final triumph and glory without the anguish of the cross?

- Honestly, there is no resurrection without a crucifixion.
- So, today, here, we relive the triumph of the procession and encourage coming to hear the heartbreak of trial and crucifixion because it makes the Easter celebration even more glorious.

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But while this is JESUS' story, it is important to realize that it is not primarily one of triumph, tragedy, and triumph again.

- No, it is most of all the story of JESUS' faithfulness to the will of GOD wherever it leads.
  - "Not MY will, FATHER, but THY will be done."
- And because it is JESUS' story of faithfulness to the will of GOD, it is also GOD's story.

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GOD's story from the beginning of time has been that of GOD's desire to be in relationship with us.

- From the Garden of Eden to the covenant with Abraham to the Exodus from slavery and the journey to the Promised Land, GOD tells us that everyone has infinite value to GOD.
- GOD says, "I will be your GOD and you will be MY people."
  - That's what the sacraments are all about.
    - In Holy Baptism, GOD says, "You are MINE."
    - In Holy Communion, GOD says, "I am yours."

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And this means that we are part of GOD's story, too, as we hear that we are so precious to GOD and so loved by GOD that GOD will give GODSELF for us.

- GOD will become one of us and die for us to say to us, "This is how much I love you!"
  - "This is how far I will go to have this relationship."
    - "You may have thought you had to fear ME, but no more."
    - "You may have thought that you had to meet MY standards, but no more."
    - "You may have thought your life would be one of trying to earn MY love, but no more.
      - MY love is already yours."
    - "For GOD so loved the world that GOD gave GOD's only begotten SON that whoever believes in HIM should not perish but have eternal life" with GOD.

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The Bible is not just some mythology about a deity who did some things in the presence of human beings.

- It can only be understood fully when we see ourselves in the midst of the story.
  - This is the story of GOD wanting to be in relationship with us faithfully, intimately, and eternally.
  - GOD's story and JESUS' story are the stories of a love relationship with us, and that makes those stories our story.

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This story allows us to understand who we are in light of GOD and JESUS.

- What GOD does, what JESUS does, defines who we are and who we can be.
- THEIR stories tell us the reality of our story, both present and future.

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JESUS suffers so that when we are suffering,

- we can know that GOD understands and cares for us.

JESUS is utterly alone at the end of the story so that when we feel alone,

- we can know that GOD knows and is with us.

JESUS cries out with despair so that when we feel hopeless and ready to give up,

- we can know that GOD understands and holds on to us.

JESUS dies so that when we fear death,

- we can know that GOD understands death and reminds us that death does not have the last word.

In our most difficult and our most joyful moments, JESUS is there because GOD understands our situation and comes to be with us.

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This is our story, but it is not a story about what went wrong this past week.

- Rather, it is about what might go right in the week to come.

It is not a story about what we lack.

- Instead, it is about all that we have been given.

It is not a story that exposes our problems or shortcomings.

- No, it lifts up our gifts and blessings.

It is the story of GOD's passionate and relentless quest to redeem each of us and all of us in love.

- It is JESUS' story; it is GOD's story; and it is our story.