

Many can recall their childhood days of playing cowboys and Indians with cap guns and suction-tipped arrows... or maybe battlefield scenarios, whether it's outside, inside building scenes with toy soldiers, tanks, ships and airplanes. And then there's kitchen sets with all the things you need to bake cakes and cookies...and have tea parties...

The wonderful aspect about imagining ourselves in the midst of adult life... is that we didn't really get mortally wounded... we really didn't have to clean the house, do the wash, and make the meals all while caring for our babies and young children... and the tea parties are not heavy with worry about bills to pay, unexpected health issues, or worse yet the death of loved ones.

But as we grew up we all had “what if” days — “What if” I'd just reacted faster, seen the car coming, or the child chasing the ball towards the street... “What if” I'd chosen a different way home, or a different career path...Where would I be today? “Would of... Could of...should of” scenarios can haunt us and leave us wondering “What if”...

I could easily share countless personal experiences along those lines... as no doubt each one of you could as well — experiences that were life changing, maybe career changing... and quite likely faith changing as well. And is from that perspective — one of faith changing — I ask you to ponder this week... both how your faith has changed over the years to where it is at this very moment... and to ponder how actually being in Mark's gospel account — being physically present during this week in Jerusalem — being there with Jesus... And then I ask you one more thing this morning... to give thoughtful consideration to join us here on Good Friday for John's account of Jesus' final days — his betrayal... to his being nailed to that wooden cross... and then leave the nail that you've been carrying during Lent at the foot of the cross.

Following a disabling car accident — rear-ended by someone driving 45-50mph... surviving a lightning strike a few months later... and then nearly 7 hours of back surgery... I found myself in one of those “What if” scenarios... spending time with many — several pastors of various denominations, and yes, a former Catholic priest, VA advisors and doctors... contemplating possible life paths... In seminary I would discover a professor, Dr. Rod Hutton, who had travelled the gravel road through our family farm and worshipped at St. Sebald Lutheran Church — just a couple miles from our farm — where Sarah and I were members. Rod had married a small-town girl from Strawberry Point, Iowa! Indeed, “It's a small, small world after all” as the song goes!

Early on in seminary, when Dr. Hutton was being queried by curious seminarians, he said, “If we just had a time machine...we could travel back to see and experience what really happened — who was really there, what were they thinking... how come this or that happened the way it did...” And many a time during that first class... and in later classes, his comment would come up, “If we just had a time machine...”

Today's gospel is a sort of time machine — an opportunity to peer into and yes, experience not only Jesus' final days and those around him... but also a time for us to become as children... who once imagined with toy soldiers and tea sets... only now an opportunity to imagine as actual living people there in Jerusalem... there in the upper room... there in the Garden of Gethsemane...there before Pilot...and there along the way to Golgotha when the soldier looked at you as a passerby, instead of Simon of Cyrene, and said, "Carry it"... and you pick up the cross Jesus is struggling to carry...

And for a few brief moments Jesus' divine love is on your back...

Palm Sunday is filled with rich and powerful imagery... and yet it is a very conflicted day in the life of the church — a day that begins with hosannas, palms, and praise... and ends with silence and the cross. Each year we hear the story of Jesus' last week of earthly life – in flesh and blood... and begin the journey that passes through Maundy Thursday... into Good Friday... and the deafening silence of Holy Saturday. We enter the week – today – by waving our palm branches and shouting "Hosanna!" ...and then our shouts of "Hosanna!" our suddenly changed to loud shouts of "Crucify him!"

Mark's gospel is overflowing with imagery... that calls us to ponder where we are in each part of the story...as children positioning their soldiers on the battlefield, their dolls and tea sets to be just right... where are we in Simon the leper's house? Are you the woman ***with an alabaster flask of ointment...*** who ***broke the flask and poured it over his head?*** And at the Passover table as Jesus says, ***"Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me."***¹⁹ ***They began to be sorrowful and to say to him one after another, "Is it I?"*** Did you look at Jesus and ask, "Is it I?"

Where are you as Mark's imagery comes to life in your being? Do Jesus' words cause you to pause eating. And then as you continue eating... Jesus ***took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them*** – gives it to you – ***and said, "Take; this is my body."***²³ ***And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it.***²⁴ ***And he said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.*** What are your thoughts?

Where are you with the disciples and others following Jesus during that ninth hour as ***Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?"*** ... ***"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"***³⁵ ***And some of the bystanders hearing it said, "Behold, he is calling Elijah."***³⁶ ***And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink...*** Is that you giving Jesus a drink?

Are you with ***the women looking on from a distance...*** or are you there at the foot of the cross with the centurion?

Holy Week confronts us with profound questions, but none may be more pressing, more difficult, than the one that asks, "Where are you in this story with Jesus? Where

do you stand? Are you walking with Jesus on his journey?" Are you staying with him, and bearing witness?

In our busy and often complicated lives... it can be tempting to flee... to deny or even betray... and all too often perhaps the most overused path we take is to just keep silent and / or ignore. Mark challenges us to go deeper and truly experience Jesus personally as his followers did... during this most Holy Week overflowing with "What if's" and a "would of, could of, should of" roller coaster of emotions... And when we do that we encounter God's grace and love so amazing and so divine... that it demands our souls, our lives, our all and all, for God so desires each one of us to be a part of his eternal kingdom... where we no longer need imagine our part in the story... for we are in his story of redemption and salvation – the greatest story ever told of love and sacrifice.

Earlier in Mark's gospel, as Jesus began his journey to Jerusalem, after he made his first prediction of what would happen when he got there, he told his disciples, ***"If you want to become my followers, take up your cross and follow me."***

When we do that, we like Simon of Cyrene, are blessed to embrace and carry Jesus' divine love embodied in the cross on our journey with Jesus into the heart of our loving heavenly Father who responds to the most provoking "What if" of all time – What if I send my Son? We are most blessed to be the recipients of his what if – ***For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*** Peter heard the rooster crow, have you in your life?

It is in faithfully following Jesus to the cross... and standing near the cross that we encounter Emmanuel – God with us in Jesus the Christ. We experience the miracle of transformation that Mark describes in his writing of Jesus' final days... of suffering and death... of the soldier, a Roman Centurion, at the foot of the cross who proclaimed: ***"Truly this man was the Son of God!"*** Only you know where you are along your life's path. I pray that this Holy Week may be an opportunity for you to truly encounter and experience all that Mark shares with us — that your Holy Week experience may be both motivating and transformational for you faithful walk with Jesus as your savior and your lifelong shepherd... and that you not only sing, but live out the words of John Newton in verse 5 of his hymn *How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds*:

O Jesus, shepherd, guardian, friend,
My Prophet, Priest and King,
My Lord, my Life, my way, my end,
Accept the praise I bring.

Amen