God Doesn't Get Much Closer Than This
Palm Sunday, Year A
April 17, 2011
Lenten Series – God is Closer Than You Think

This Lenten season we have been looking at John Ortberg's book, *God is Closer Than You Think* and I want to continue looking at his work today. Today is also Palm Sunday – the beginning of the most significant time in our Liturgical Calendar – it is Holy Week; a week of lessons and liturgies recounting Christ's Passion. The events we celebrate this coming week are the reasons we call ourselves Christian. Would you be surprised to learn that these two subjects are closely related? I want to review what we have learned these past weeks and show you how much everything we have learned is reflected in the week ahead.

We started this series by looking at the purpose of our creation. Remember Michelangelo's painting from the Sistine Chapel? God and man are reaching out to each other; their fingers separated by a small little gap. God is doing all he can to reach Adam, but Adam seems to be holding back – not sure what will happen when the connection is made, when the gap is closed. We are the ones with the choice of whether to close the gap or not; God's not going anywhere.

But sometimes it is hard to remember God is so close to us, especially in our busy lives. And we do seem to be busier these days. Do you remember my Piometer? I have one here – the colorful pie chart that helps us remember how close God is to us each day. Sometimes it seems we are sitting at the feet of God and then on other days we don't want anything to do with God. Then there are the days when God seems to be hiding from us so we can work out the problem on our own and then the very next day it seems as if God created that day just for you, it was so good. And of course there are the times we are on autopilot and we hardly notice how hard God is trying to get our attention. Or finally there are those times when God is able to poke through the chaos of our lives and we have that glimpse of His love and attention.

We also considered the different pathways where we might hear God's voice. Ortberg lists these pathways as intellectual, relational, serving, worship, activist, contemplative and creation. Plus we talked about other pathways – through prayer, knitting prayer shawls, and playing with squirrels. We each have our own avenues that enable us to hear God's voice.

God wants to be close to us. It is our choice. And this week we have many opportunities to discover those pathways that connect us to God and we can experience the Real Presence of Christ in so many ways. We can hear Him in all of the Liturgies.

Today we started with a celebration – our Lord was treated like a king coming into Jerusalem; the way paved with palm branches and our cloaks. Many believed he was the long-expected Messiah – sent to bring about a united kingdom once again. We also walked in the celebration processing with our palms and singing Hosanna! And then quite quickly we are thrown into the trauma of the last days of Christ's humanity. We witness Christ's arrest and trial. Our wonderful celebration is now a scene of chaos, cruelty and confusion. What do we do now?

Doesn't that reflect our life with God? One day we are having this rainbow moment with God and the next we are wondering with Jesus why God has abandoned us. We are learning we are not alone – that God is with us even though it seems He is not. Today is just the start of a week filled with times we will encounter God in unexpected and meaningful moments. Think – what moment touched you deeply?

On Thursday we have the Maundy Thursday Service. It is a service that remembers Jesus' last meal with his followers. At that meal Jesus instituted the Holy Eucharist, which we repeat and remember every Sunday. For those who experience God through worship – this is the ultimate liturgy for worship – the institution of the Holy Eucharist. Most churches that do not have the Eucharist as a regular part of their worship will have a Eucharist on this night to remember Christ's actions. We will be joining throngs of others on Thursday as we come together at the altar and experience the real presence of Christ.

But that isn't all we do that night. At that service we reenact the time when Jesus demonstrated his special leadership style as that of a **servant** by washing the feet of His disciples. Most people won't come to this service because of the foot washing, which is unfortunate. Please note that no one is required to have their feet washed. And while I admit it is not my favorite part – it could be very meaningful for those of you who feel empowered by God by serving. If you come – you can be right there with Jesus as we wash each other's feet.

But that isn't all we do that night. My favorite part is when the Altar Guild very reverently and very quietly come and remove everything that makes this place a church – a place where we worship Jesus Christ. They take away the altar linens, the candles, the icon, the kneelers, the cross and torches, the banners, the crosses on the walls. Everything is gone. This room becomes just another room where we could make a hop-scotch game out of tape on the floor. The altar becomes just a table – which is a good height for arm wrestling or maybe a game of tidally winks. Does that shock you as being sacrilegious? Good, it should. Because without Jesus – all of this means nothing; this is just another room. For me, that realization is a mountain top experience – a time of sitting at the feet of Jesus. [That's purple on the Piometer].

If prayer is one of your pathways to get close to Christ – there will be a prayer vigil with the Blessed Bread and Wine – as if we are praying with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. The vigil goes all night until noon on Friday and we will have books and bibles to facilitate your prayer time.

On Good Friday we have two services. The one at noon will go through the fourteen Stations of the Cross. We will pause at each station to listen to the Lord's voice and respond with a prayer of our own. We will take Communion from the sacrament that was consecrated on Thursday night. This is a powerful service that puts us along the same pathway with Jesus as He walked toward his death. [The church is vacant with only a cross and a crown of thorns to remind us that we are here for Him.]

In the Evening on Friday we will have the Passion Drama. The Passion Story that was read today will be re-enacted by members of St. Stephen's. It is a powerful presentation of Christ's last moments of His humanity. It will move you to tears. We will also have a time to venerate the cross. This is a time to sit at the feet of the cross and really open our hearts to all that God has done for us. This silence is a perfect time to hear from the Lord. Also you may bring your crosses from home to this service and we will bless them. This is worship at its deepest as we leave the dark and empty church in silence.

Then on Saturday we have the gift of the Easter Vigil, the first service of Easter. We start outside and the church is in darkness. A new fire is lit – this fire is the spark of Christ's divinity that he carried to the dead in his death. You may have noticed we had those interminably long gospel readings. What you may not have noticed is that in each one – each one, John mentions that Christ is the light of the world. Now this new fire lights the Paschal candle and we are reminded again that Christ is the light of the world. It is a festive service and when all the lights come on – we celebrate the Resurrection of the Lord. One of the more memorable parts of this service is the readings from scripture that recount all the times God displayed His mercy and saved his people: the last time being the Resurrection of Jesus – God with us.

We have had six weeks of learning to listen to God and to begin to recognize His presence in all aspects of our life. To fully understand and appreciate the Resurrection, you have to experience the Crucifixion. Attending one or more of the services this week would be a perfect way to complete our Lenten discipline of getting closer to God. This week, Holy Week, provides us with many opportunities to reach out and close the gap between ourselves and God. After all, it is up to us to raise our hand. But God is right there – just waiting for us – more than willing to enter into a stronger and deeper relationship that will last for eternity. *Amen.*