

v.17 *“Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.”*

Two, four, six, eight, ten... what's next? Twelve. You know the pattern. The even numbers starting at two. Up, down, up. Up, down... of course, the next direction is up. The pattern was given, and you know what's next just by following it.

The church lives in a very specific pattern. It starts with an up in December with the prophecy and birth of Jesus. We move quickly to His Baptism and His rising popularity through His life of teaching, miracles, and preaching. But then things go downhill. In Lent we watch as opposition to Jesus grows, especially by the religious leaders. Soon it's Good Friday, the darkest, lowest day- betrayal, beating, mockery. It's the end of His life. His head drops down, lifeless as He hangs on the cross. But all of a sudden, we're back up again- resurrection! Jesus is alive and showing Himself to His disciples. Forty days later He ascends into heaven and the rest of the year, from May through November, we joyously focus on how the risen Savior is present in and among His church in Word and Sacraments. We live this pattern, this up, down, up, this birth, struggle and death, resurrection, year after year after year.

But it's not just the church year; it's also the last week of Jesus' life that has this up, down, up pattern. Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week is an up. Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey. He knows what lies ahead. He knows what's coming. But His face is set toward that holy city. A mission that has taken hold of Him. He will die for His people. He will bring salvation to all nations.

And the people respond- at first. Shouts of Hosanna. Palm branches and cloaks. A triumphant parade. The week begins on a high note. But all too soon opposition appears, and it's quickly downhill. Jesus stands up for what is right and cleans out the Temple of the money changers. The religious leaders plot His arrest and execution. The crowds that had so enthusiastically welcomed Him into Jerusalem will soon yell, “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!”

By Thursday night the mission Jesus had so focused on, that had so taken hold of Him, is in full swing. The Last Supper is eaten. Final prayers are said in the Garden of Gethsemane. Soldiers arrest Him. The trial is fixed. By Friday He's on a cross. The mission is nearly complete. Jesus is dying for His people, bringing salvation to us all. Yet Friday night, Saturday, and early Sunday He's in the tomb, and His followers are down- grieving, depressed, hurt, disappointed.

But Sunday morning is coming. Suddenly the up has returned.

Resurrection Day! Easter joy! He's alive again!

Do you see the pattern? A mission takes hold of Jesus. It starts with celebration. The middle is filled with opposition and pain. But the end, the end is *glorious*. Up, down, up. For us in the church that's the pattern.

What's more, we are called to *live* in that same pattern. The beginning takes hold of us. For most of us it was at a baptismal font. Jesus reached down into our lives and took hold of us. He claimed us as His people. For some of you that beginning with Jesus came later in life. Faith was born as you talked with a friend or pastor about Jesus, as you read the Bible, as you attended church, as you came to Sunday school or Catechism instruction. But somehow Jesus took hold of you. You became His.

And that day is one of celebration! No day is more special. No day is more significant. The day you entered God's family, the church, is the day of loud hosannas for you. If you want to pick a day to have a parade- take the day Jesus took you to be one of His holy people.

We also know the end. We know there's more to life than just what happens each day. There's definitely more to life than what we've been going through this year, 2020! There's a resurrection from the dead waiting for us! New bodies. Glorified bodies. A citizenship in heaven that can never be taken away from us. The end, the end is glorious.

The beginning is up, one of celebration. The end is up, wonderful beyond imagination. The middle, however, is not so pleasant. You know the pattern. Opposition and pain. Rejection and hurt. There's just something about Jesus that makes the pattern hold true in the middle. Maybe you've been teased before for your faith in Christ. Maybe you have even been met with flat out rejection from a family member or friend for talking about or giving evidence of your faith in Christ, like going to church on Sunday, giving thanks before a meal, or just living your life that's not in step with how the rest of the world lives.

As Christians living in America, it is getting more and more difficult to talk about our faith in public or even show evidence of faith in God. In last week's edition of the journal "First Things", man named Charles Chaput wrote about how 'if you're the kind of a Christian who seeks to discipline your life around your Christian beliefs regarding marriage and family, religious freedom, ... and abortion, you are liable to be labeled as a religious "nut" ' This is currently what is happening to Supreme Court Justice nominee, Amy Coney Barret.' Chaput continues: "What's been playing out in Senate confirmation hearings and public debates over judicial nominees is a certain sign of future attacks on

the Church itself and on any Christian who holds to the long-standing moral witness of the church.” <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2020/09/when-the-dogma-lives-loudly>

Thankfully though, the challenges we face today in our country pale in comparison with the severe persecution going on against a significant portion of Christians around the world in places like Asia, the Middle East, the former Soviet Union, and in Africa.

In fact, atrocities against Christians in Africa have been occurring at an alarming rate in recent months and it still continues. For example, less than three weeks ago, “Voice of the Martyrs International” reported on September 17th that in Mozambique, Islamic insurgents are currently seeking to establish a caliphate in East Africa, rendering life in the northern coastal regions impossible and severely affecting Christians. Witnesses close to Voice of the Martyrs International report beheadings and incinerated churches; schools, clinics and police stations have also been destroyed. We must pray for organizations like Voice of the Martyrs who bring humanitarian aid, as well as God’s Word of encouragement to persecuted believers. We pray that this violence will stop. <https://www.icommittopray.com/request/2082/displaced-christians/>

Yes, the middle of the pattern of the Christian life is not an easy part to live no matter where you are in the world. There’s just something about Jesus that brings rejection, ridicule, resistance, pain. That's why in our Epistle reading Paul encourages us to live according to the pattern given us and then tells us to pay attention to those who are doing so. You see, we learn in different ways. Some things you can learn from a book. Other things just by listening to what others tell you to do or not to do. But here Paul tells us to learn by watching others, by taking note of those who are living according to the pattern.

We’ll start with Peter and John. The pattern is the same. They start out with Jesus and things go well. They end in glory, faithful unto death. In between, it was rough. In between Palm Sunday and Easter, they were afraid and hurt, feeling the rejection, the ridicule. Living the agony of Jesus’ death. But they couldn’t stay away. Peter watches as Jesus is beaten and condemned. John is at the cross, standing there with Mary. When Easter comes, they run to the tomb to see that it’s empty. Do you see what they did? Do you see the pattern? In the toughest moments of living in the middle, they went to the cross and ran to the empty tomb.

Look at Paul himself. He starts out great. He has one of the most dramatic conversion experiences ever on the road to Damascus. Jesus appears to him in all His resurrection glory. He finishes with the same joyous experience- going to be with Jesus in heaven. In between, it was rough. He was beaten, arrested,

ridiculed, rejected, slandered, attacked. Yet listen to what he says: "I want to know the power of Christ's resurrection. I want to know the fellowship of sharing in Christ's suffering." Do you see the pattern? In the toughest moments of living in the middle, he went to the cross and ran to the empty tomb.

Do you see the pattern? In the toughest moments of living in the middle, you go to the cross and run to the empty tomb. You stick with Jesus.

It's a good pattern to follow. Because when we go to the cross and run to His empty tomb, He takes hold and brings us into life everlasting. And He keeps hold of us during the tough times in between. Yes, it's a good pattern to follow.

Of course, it only works because of Jesus. It only works because He's already lived the pattern for us. Pay close attention to the last week of His life. Jesus starts out with an up- a parade and a mission that has taken hold of Him to bring salvation to us all. The middle of the week gets mighty tough. It's a down, but He goes to the cross so that we always will have that cross to go to during our rough times. And the end of the week is glorious- an empty tomb for us to run to when the middle of our lives are not going so well. Yes, it's a good pattern to follow, a very good pattern indeed. Amen