

Sermon for Palm Sunday A
Sunday, April 2, 2023
“The Playbook of Holy Week”

Text: Matthew 26:36 – 27:66; Philippians 2:5-11

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Every year I say pretty much the same thing on Palm Sunday, because Palm Sunday begins the most important week of the Christian year. Palm Sunday is like the first scene of the first act of a movie or play. Palm Sunday sets the stage for the events over the coming week, which are an important part of our journey of faith as Christians. The story is meant to be taken seriously.

The story of the Passion that we hear this year is Matthew’s version. Matthew gives quite a detailed account of the events leading up to the Crucifixion. Of course, we know of Judas Iscariot’s role in the events that unfolds; he betrays Jesus to the Jewish religious authorities, but what is notable about St. Matthew’s gospel account is that Judas repents. His repentance seems genuine, as he abandons his thirty pieces of silver, but he does it too late. Jesus is already standing before Pontius Pilate. At first, Judas is all too willing to assist the authorities in arresting Jesus for the right price, but once Jesus has been arrested and abused and his death is imminent, Judas cannot bear the burden, so he hangs himself. Judas cannot follow through on his bargain because he cannot tolerate Jesus’ unmerited suffering, much less his own role in it. What is also notable is that while Judas alone betrays Jesus, all of Jesus’ male disciples abandon him. At the Mount of Olives Jesus tells them, “You will all become deserters because of me this night.” (Matthew 26:31). Like Judas, Peter singles himself out: “Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you” (26:33). In Gethsemane, Peter, James, and John cannot even stay awake to keep Jesus company in his distress (26:40). All the disciples flee, including Peter, when Jesus is arrested (26:56). Peter goes even further and denies knowing Jesus three times—before the cock crows. (26:65-75) Like Judas, the disciples cannot bear Jesus’ fate. They’re probably afraid that they’ll be next to share that fate, and they are not up to the crisis.

Palm Sunday uses the passion narrative to take us on an emotional and spiritual roller coaster. The liturgy begins with the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, the kind of entry given to a king or an emperor, someone of high status with people throwing palm branches in his way and crying “Hosanna, to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” But by the end of the story, Jesus hangs dead on a cross, then buried in a tomb. It seems like all is lost.

The Passion story frames the events of Holy Week and is like a movie trailer as we enter a new season. Palm Sunday marks the beginning of a different season. We’re still in a penitential season, since last Sunday we’ve been in Passiontide when we focus on Jesus’s journey toward Calvary, and today begins Holy Week. The liturgical color is now red, or technically oxblood. Palm Sunday marks Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem, when he was hailed as a king with cries of “Hosanna, to the Son of David.” But over the few days that followed, Jesus did some things that got him into trouble: first, he ran the moneychangers out of the temple, totally disrupting a major source of

income for many. Then he made statements about destroying the temple and rebuilding it in three days. The Jewish authorities, his own people, had it out for him and wanted him dead. Holy week ends with the events that happened next in the gospel story. The high point of this week is the Triduum, which consists of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday—the Three Holy Days. The Triduum is the main event. Without it, the next chapter in the Christian story isn't as magnificent.

I talk about The Triduum in the singular, because it is *one* event. When the mass begins on Maundy Thursday with the opening acclamation, the liturgical event does not end until the dismissal at the First Mass of Easter on Saturday night following the Vigil. One event divided into three parts over three days. If you miss any part of the Triduum it's like watching the first 5 minutes of a movie, going away to do something else, and coming back to watch the last 5 minutes of the movie. The ending won't make sense if you don't stay for the middle and see how the story develops, how the characters develop, and to connect the dots between the beginning and the end. Holy Week is the same. If you experience today and then don't come back until Easter, you'll miss the connection between Palm Sunday and Easter, and you won't fully get why Easter is so wonderful. You can't enjoy the mountaintop that is Easter unless you journey through the valley that is Passion Week. In our liturgical life, the Triduum incorporates some of the oldest and most beautiful and most ancient liturgies of Christianity and links to the core statements of our doctrine and faith. The Triduum is a journey with Jesus Christ from his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, into the Upper Room where he instituted the Holy Eucharist, to the Prætorium of Pontius Pilate, through the streets of Jerusalem with the cross on his back, all the way to Calvary, the place of the skull. You can join in all of the liturgies of the week either here in person or online, as the entire week will be live streamed.

Holy Week is not just something to be talked about or noted on a calendar or forgotten. The reason we live the Triduum is so that we can experience the intense outpouring of love that Jesus had for us, who, as St. Paul told us in his letter to the Philippians, “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” Holy Week is about love. The Triduum is a lesson in what divine love looks like.

God, who became man in the person of Jesus Christ, did not take his divinity lightly, but subjected himself to the most extreme aspects of his humanity, even to the point of horrific torture and death by public execution. God-incarnate experienced human suffering. Holy Week reminds us that God knows suffering, God knows pain, and God knows death. Whatever might be going on in our lives, no matter how bad it gets, God has been there. When we suffer, he walks along with us, just as we walk with him when we walk the Stations of the Cross. He walks with us in the midst of our anxiety, suffering, despair, and grief to give us the strength to keep on keeping on. Jesus walks with us to make us push through it, because he knows first-hand that suffering is

not the end, and death is not the end. There is hope and there is light at the end of each of our tunnels. On Saturday night, the final night of the Triduum, that light will be kindled in a new fire, and that new fire will spread to illuminate the world and remind us that God's ultimate act of love was Christ's resurrection, our relief, our hope, and our salvation. Suffering and death do not have the final say. Easter is on the horizon. Amen.

Resource

Greg Carey, Commentary on Matthew 26:14 – 27:66, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sunday-of-the-passion-palm-sunday/53132>