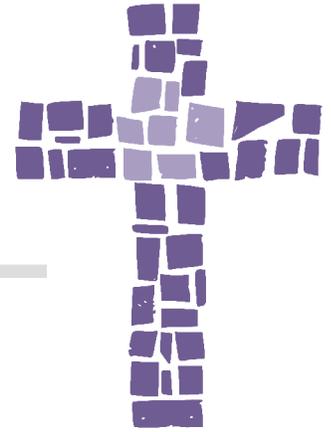


First Sunday of Lent



Welcome and Prayer

- Welcome all participants and do introductions if people have not previously met.
- Ask participants whom or what they wish to pray for this day.
- Pray the opening prayer:

*Good and gracious God,
we pray that, through our observance of these 40 days of Lent,
we may grow in our relationship with Christ your Son
and learn to live as his faithful followers.*

*Help us repent,
transform our minds and hearts,
and resist temptation so that we may
more faithfully live out the promises we made in Baptism.
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Introducing the Theme

The announcement that Jesus makes as he begins his preaching in today's Gospel is echoed on Ash Wednesday at the signing with ashes: "Repent and believe in the gospel." The essence of Jesus' message is an invitation to shift our allegiance. As schoolchildren, we were taught to pledge allegiance to the flag of our country. To live in the Kingdom of God is to pledge allegiance to God—to pledge loyalty and submission to the will of God and to everything that God stands for.

Jesus knew that in our lives we find ourselves tempted to pledge allegiance to many other realities such as power, perfection, popularity, pleasure, possessions, and position, and that's just one letter of the alphabet. When we pledge allegiance to any of these realities, our actions flow from them. To repent, then, is to shift allegiance. When Jesus calls us to repent, he's not asking us to be sorry for a laundry list of momentary lapses in judgment. He's asking us to shift allegiance—to shift our loyalties—to begin on a path to citizenship in the Kingdom of God.

- What does it mean to say that "to repent" is to shift allegiance?
- How is Jesus inviting you personally to shift your allegiance this Lent?

The Word of God

Mark 1:12–15 (*Repent and believe in the Gospel.*)

Silent Reflection

Background on the Gospel Reading

On the first Sunday of Lent, the Gospel reading in each Lectionary cycle is about Jesus' temptation in the desert. This year we read Mark's account of this event. Compared to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, the details in

Mark's narrative are sparse. Mark tells us only that Jesus was led into the desert by the Holy Spirit immediately after his baptism and that for 40 days he was tempted by Satan after which he began his public ministry proclaiming, "This is the time of fulfillment. The reign of God is at hand! Reform your lives and believe in the good news!" To reform our lives—to experience conversion—is a possibility any time we come face-to-face with a new experience and we recognize ourselves as ill-prepared. We can respond either by waiting for the circumstances to conform to our desire, or we can get out of our own minds, put on the mind of Christ, and respond in a new way. Our lives are filled with conversion opportunities, and discipleship is our ongoing commitment to respond to life's challenges from within a new paradigm—within the mind of Christ.

Temptation, on the other hand, offers us a quick fix or a way to anesthetize ourselves from the stress of facing life's crises. Conversion is all about "course correction," away from temptation and toward faithfulness. Conversion is not about beating ourselves up over how lousy we have been. It is the desire to be a better person in light of the merciful God in whose loving presence we stand. Conversion reaches its climax when we can truly say good-bye to a former way of living and being and embrace a new way of living and thriving under the influence of the mind of Christ.

Reflection/Discussion Questions

- The Holy Spirit led Jesus into the desert. When was a time that you felt led by the Holy Spirit?
- What does repentance mean for you personally this Lent?
- What are the temptations that people today are most prone to?
- What helps us resist temptation?
- What specific practices do you plan to begin this week to make a "course correction" in your life?

Silent Reflection

Concluding Prayer (Psalm 25)

Side A: In you, LORD my God, I put my trust. I trust in you; do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me.

Side B: No one who hopes in you will ever be put to shame, but shame will come on those who are treacherous without cause.

Side A: Show me your ways, LORD, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.

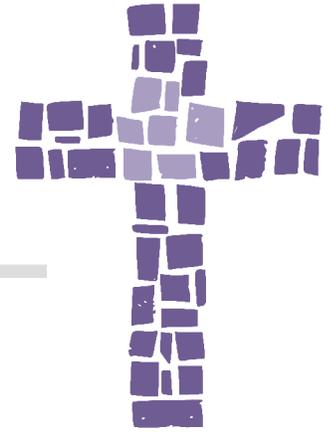
Side B: Remember, LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you, LORD, are good.

Side A: Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways.

Side B: He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.

All: Amen

Second Sunday of Lent



Welcome and Prayer

- Welcome all participants and do introductions if people have not previously met.
- Ask participants whom or what they wish to pray for this day.
- Pray the opening prayer:

*Good and gracious God,
you told us to listen to your beloved Son, Jesus.
Help us listen with our hearts
to all the ways Jesus is calling us to grow closer to you,
and open our eyes so that we might behold your glory in our midst.
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Introducing the Theme

Each of us has moments of insight when we come to see ourselves, another person, or life in a new light. This is how it was with the disciples' experience of Jesus' Transfiguration when they came to recognize his true identity as the Son of God—the Christ, the Messiah. No longer did they see him as simply an extraordinary man, but as God's beloved Son, the long-awaited divine presence in their midst. To dispel any lingering confusion, a voice from heaven affirmed, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." This is the same Jesus who continues to be in our midst, bringing the nearness of God to us when we need him most.

- When did you have a moment of insight that changed how you saw yourself, another person, or life in general?
- Who in this world (or in your life) most needs to hear the good news of the nearness of God?

The Word of God

Mark 9:2–10 (Jesus is transfigured in the presence of Peter, James, and John.)

Silent Reflection

Background on the Gospel Reading

Throughout all human history, humankind has had a desire to see God's "face" and experience God's nearness. God knew that the best way for that encounter to happen was in the flesh. Jesus Christ is God in the flesh. He is the face of God. The story of the Transfiguration is a story of how Peter, James, and John came to recognize Jesus' true identity as God's beloved Son.

When Jesus spoke about the Kingdom of God and people asked him to show them the king, he said, in essence, "Look at me. I am the face of God. I am God in the flesh." To look at Jesus Christ is to stare directly at the embodiment of the Kingdom of God. Entrance into the alternate reality that we call the Kingdom of God occurs in and through a relationship with Jesus Christ. Friendships do that; they call us into a new reality.

When we come to recognize God's nearness to us in our lives through Jesus his beloved Son, we can't help but become more aware of our own sinfulness. An encounter with Jesus makes us realize we are sinners, but at the same time it leads us to recognize a way out of sinfulness. It is as if Jesus helps us declare bankruptcy, which provides us with protection and then guides us to reorganize our lives so that we might emerge stronger. In our quest to follow Jesus, we experience moments of insight that invite us to ever-deepening levels of commitment. At each level, we become overwhelmed with the goodness of God and more cognizant of our own imperfections which, instead of hiding, we are encouraged to bring to the Lord. The result is not just a change of mind but a transformation of that heart, which leads to a transformation of the way we see. That is the essence of conversion: a recognition of the nearness of God through Jesus that calls us to experience a transformed heart and a new way seeing. What follows is new life as a disciple of Christ, capable of recognizing the presence of the Kingdom of God in our daily lives.

Reflection/Discussion Questions

- When was a time when you experienced the nearness of God in your life?
- Why is it so important to us as Catholics to insist that Jesus is no ordinary man but that he is "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, consubstantial with the Father"?
- Describe how a relationship in your life called you into a new reality. How does a relationship with Jesus call us into a new reality?
- What new reality is your relationship with Jesus calling you into?
- What can you do in the coming week to remind yourself of God's nearness and to bring that nearness to others who need it most?

Silent Reflection

Concluding Prayer (Psalm 116)

Side A: I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living.

Side B: *I trusted in the LORD when I said, "I am greatly afflicted"; in my alarm I said, Everyone is a liar.*

Side A: What shall I return to the LORD for all his goodness to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD.

Side B: *I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people. Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful servants.*

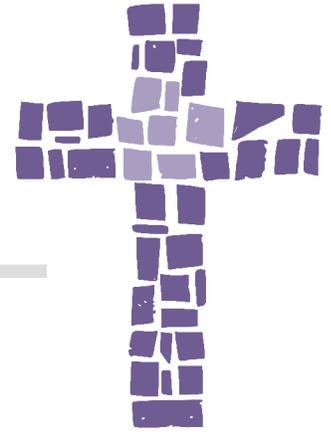
Side A: Truly, I am your servant, LORD; I serve you just as my mother did; you have freed me from my chains.

Side B: *I will sacrifice a thank offering to you and call on the name of the LORD.*

Side A: I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people,

Side B: *in the courts of the house of the LORD, in your midst, Jerusalem. Praise the LORD.*

Third Sunday of Lent



Welcome and Prayer

- Welcome all participants and do introductions if people have not previously met.
- Ask participants whom or what they wish to pray for this day.
- Pray the opening prayer:

*Good and gracious God,
you call us to worship your presence
not in a temple of stone, but in hearts made of love.
Cleave the temples of our hearts so that we may worship you
through acts of charity, mercy, and compassion toward others.
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Introducing the Theme

While the story of Jesus' cleansing of the Temple is recorded in all four Gospels, in John's Gospel, it appears at the beginning of Jesus' ministry rather than right before his arrest and crucifixion. John wants to emphasize the fact that it was one of the expectations of the Messiah that he would cleanse the Temple that had been desecrated by the occupying forces, restoring it to its rightful place as the symbol of God's presence in the midst of his people and the locus for the proper worship of God. Jesus indeed cleanses the Temple, but not in the way that was expected. His actions signal the arrival of a new focus for recognizing God's presence—not in a temple made of stone but in hearts filled with selfless love.

- Who has been an example of selfless love in your life?
- What does it mean to you to think of your heart as a temple of God's presence?

The Word of God

John 2:13–25 (Jesus drives out the money changers from the Temple and says that he will destroy the temple and raise it up again in three days)

Silent Reflection

Background on the Gospel Reading

The expectation that the Messiah would "cleanse the Temple" was not that he would come along with a mop, clean up some cobwebs, and tidy things up a bit after years of neglect. To "cleanse primarily, the worship of other gods—and to restore pure worship to the Temple.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, he headed straight for the Temple, formed a whip out of cords, and overturned the tables of the money changers, claiming that his Father's "house" had been turned into a "den of thieves." This act is referred to as the "cleansing of the Temple." However, it was not directed solely at the money changers, nor was it primarily about dishonest business practices or the impropriety of money-changing in the shadows of the Holy of Holies. Jesus' dramatic act was intended to send a stinging message to the people of Israel that they were the "den

of thieves” occupying the Temple. Jesus was announcing that it was an abomination to think that Temple worship (for us, “going to church”) was a sufficient safeguard for the Jews that granted them license to behave in contradictory fashion elsewhere and at other times.

The cleansing of the Temple was no impulsive fit of anger on Jesus’ part. It was his signal that this particular messianic function was being fulfilled and that the Kingdom of God was in full bloom. Disrupting the money changers was not Jesus’ equivalent of the Better Business Bureau sweeping in to expose dishonest practices or even irreverent behavior taking place in the Temple foyer. It was Jesus’ signal that this form of worship was at an end. Without the money changers, the worshipers could not proceed with their sacrifices. The focus of God’s presence was no longer to be found in a building made of stone, but in Jesus himself and in his acts of selfless love.

Reflection/Discussion Questions

- What “abominations” tend to creep into our lives, causing us to worship (turn our attention to) distractions instead of God?
- What does it mean to say that going to church on Sunday is not a safeguard for how we behave the other six days of the week?
- What does Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple say to us about our worship and where it is that we should expect to encounter God?
- What does Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple teach us about the connection between celebrating the Eucharist and living lives of charity and justice?
- How can you bring God’s presence to others in the week ahead?
- What can you do this week to practice true worship—i.e., love of God and love of neighbor?

Silent Reflection

Concluding Prayer (Psalm 19)

Side A: The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart.

Side B: The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.

Side A: The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever.

Side B: The decrees of the LORD are firm, and all of them are righteous.

Side A: They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold;

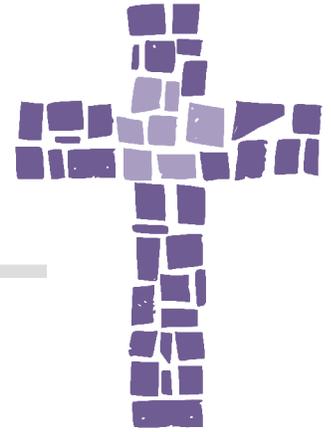
Side B: they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb.

Side A: By them your servant is warned;

Side B: in keeping them there is great reward.

All: Amen

Fourth Sunday of Lent



Welcome and Prayer

- Welcome all participants and do introductions if people have not previously met.
- Ask participants whom or what they wish to pray for this day.
- Pray the opening prayer:

*Good and gracious God,
we are powerless over sin and death,
but you sent us your only Son, Jesus, so that we might look upon him and live.
Thank you for the gift of your Son and grant that we may
follow him to the Cross, which leads to new life in his Resurrection.
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Introducing the Theme

In today's Gospel, we hear perhaps one of the most quoted passages in Scripture: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish, but might have eternal life." (John 3:16) You may have seen someone holding a sign with John 3:16 on it at a football game or baseball game. In a sense, this verse is the Gospel in a nutshell, expressing the central belief of Christianity: Jesus is God's Son; Salvation is God's initiative; in Jesus, we attain eternal life or life with God. God must love us immeasurably to have sent his only Son to become one of us. To follow Jesus is to awaken to the notion that God is uniquely interested in each one of us. Today's Gospel, however, reminds us of just how Salvation is achieved: through the cross. Jesus says that he must be "lifted up" as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert.

- What makes John 3:16 such a powerful tool for evangelization?
- How might wearing a cross be seen as the "Catholic version" of displaying John 3:16?

The Word of God

John 3:14–1 (Jesus tells Nicodemus that the Son of Man will be raised up so that those who believe in him will have eternal life.)

Silent Reflection

Background on the Gospel Reading

There is a lot of discussion today about vaccinations and which ones people should or should not have. Vaccinations are counterintuitive; we inject a healthy person with a vaccine that contains elements of the very disease we are trying to prevent. In essence, most vaccines contain a small amount of the disease germ in a weakened or dead state. When this small amount of the germ enters the body, it stimulates the body to create a defense. The antibodies created by the vaccine remember how to fight off the germ should the real germ enter the body. The result is immunity.

Interestingly enough, we can find this counterintuitive logic way back in the Old Testament when the Israelites, who were wandering the desert, were dropping like flies as a result of snakebites. When Moses asked God for help, God told him to make a bronze image of a snake and lift it up on a pole so that those who had been bitten could look upon it will recover. (Numbers 21:4–9) They were told to come eyeball to eyeball with that which threatened them and be healed by it. In a sense, the Israelites were “vaccinated” by the bronze image of the serpent.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus says that, in the same way, he must be lifted up so that we might look upon that which threatens us—death and defeat—and be healed. The Cross of Jesus vaccinates us against the deadly virus of sin, of which death is the ultimate consequence. In order to defeat the virus of sin and death, Jesus had to take it upon himself. Sin and death are still with us, but in a weakened, defeated state—the Cross is what defeated sin and death. It is no wonder that we Christians seek to look upon the Cross and have it lead us wherever we go: it has defeated that which we ourselves are powerless against.

Reflection/Discussion Questions

- What does it mean to say that the Israelites were “vaccinated” by looking upon the bronze image of the serpent?
- As followers of Christ, how are “vaccinated” from sin and death by looking upon the Cross?
- What are some of the symptoms of the virus of sin in our society?
- To “look upon” the cross means more than to take a glance at it. What does it mean for us as Catholics to “look upon” the cross?
- Displaying John 3:16 is an open profession of personal faith in Christ. What can you do in the week ahead to make an open profession of your personal faith in Christ?
- How might we see prayer, fasting, and almsgiving as “booster shots” when it comes to fighting off the temptation to sin?

Silent Reflection

Concluding Prayer (Psalm 137)

Side A: By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.

Side B: There the poplars we hung our harps,

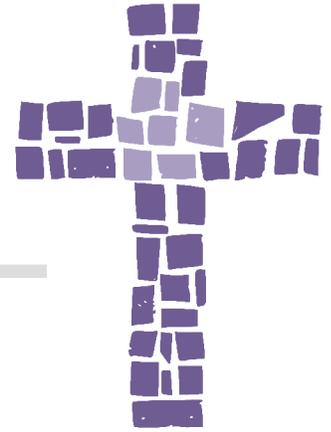
Side A: For there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

Side B: How can we sing the song of the LORD in a foreign land? If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill.

Side A: May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you,

Side B: if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.

Fifth Sunday of Lent



Welcome and Prayer

- Welcome all participants and do introductions if people have not previously met.
- Ask participants whom or what they wish to pray for this day.
- Pray the opening prayer:

*Good and gracious God,
you sent your Son, Jesus, to teach us to lose our lives in order to gain the Kingdom.
Inspire us to practice good habits so that we may put aside our sinful ways
and prepare to celebrate the glorious Resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ.
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Introducing the Theme

Did you know that if your car is overheating on a hot day the best way to cool it down is to turn on your heater to full blast? That seems counterintuitive, but it works by drawing heat from the engine and blowing it into the passenger area where, with the windows open, it can escape. We do other things that seem counterintuitive: setting controlled fires to put out raging wildfires, swimming parallel to the shore instead of toward it to escape an undertow, or speaking quietly to get the attention of a noisy crowd. In today's Gospel, Jesus reminds us that the way to gain eternal life requires us to "lose" the life we presently have. The Cross is the ultimate symbol of this counterintuitive strategy, and we prepare to celebrate Easter knowing that there is no getting around the Cross.

- What does it mean for you personally to "lose your life" for the sake of the Kingdom?
- What does it mean to say that "there is no getting around the Cross" when it comes to preparing to celebrate Easter?

The Word of God

John 12:20–33 (Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.)

Silent Reflection

Background on the Gospel Reading

At the heart of Christianity is the paradox of the Cross. There is no getting around it. In order to live, we must die. In order to gain our life, we must lose it. The core of the Good News that Jesus proclaimed—the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God—is counterintuitive. Human intuition does not lead one to turn the other cheek, love one's enemies, pray for one's persecutors, wash others' feet, or die in order to gain new life. The Cross of Jesus embodies the counterintuitiveness that is Jesus.

In order to live this counterintuitive message of Jesus, we need some strategies to break old habits and develop new ones. Sin is a habit that needs to be replaced, and the weapon of choice, according to Jesus, is the Cross, an instrument that we need to employ each day to slay our sinful habits so that new ones may replace them. The best

way to do this, according to author Charles Duhigg, is to develop “keystone habits” that act as dominos, dislodging and remaking old patterns of living in favor of new ones. In other words, when people develop a keystone habit such as exercising daily, it tends to result in better sleeping habits, better eating habits, and so on.

The Church has always considered prayer, fasting, and almsgiving as “keystone habits,” which is precisely why we practice them during Lent. Through prayer, we dislodge the habit of only talking to ourselves and develop the habit of talking to God. Through fasting, we interrupt the pattern of fulfilling our own needs so that we might be more sensitive to the needs of others. Through almsgiving, we interrupt the pattern of self-centeredness and develop the habit of generosity toward others. Each of these three habits requires us to “lose” ourselves so that we might gain something more—life in the Kingdom.

Reflection/Discussion Questions

- What are some examples of Jesus speaking or acting in a counterintuitive manner?
- What is a “keystone” habit that you practice daily (i.e., a good habit that fosters other good habits in your life)?
- What does it mean to say that “the Cross is the weapon of choice” when it comes to defeating sin?
- Why can prayer, fasting, and almsgiving be considered “keystone” habits? What other good habits do these three practices lead to?
- What bad habits do we as a society have that need to be dislodged by the keystone habits of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving?
- What can you do in the week ahead to come to “lose” your own life in order to gain the Kingdom?

Silent Reflection

Concluding Prayer (Psalm 51)

Side A: Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love;

Side B: according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions.

Side A: Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

Side B: For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.

Side A: Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight;

Side B: so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge.

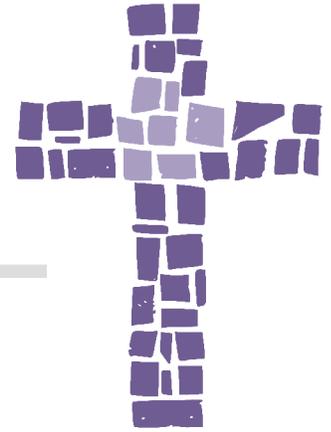
Side A: Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

Side B: Do not cast me from your presence take your Holy Spirit from me.

Side A: Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me.

Side B: Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you.

Sixth Sunday of Lent



Welcome and Prayer

- Welcome all participants and do introductions if people have not previously met.
- Ask participants whom or what they wish to pray for this day.
- Pray the opening prayer:

*Good and gracious God,
increase our faith as we place our hope in you.
Graciously hear our prayers as we call to you during this Holy Week.
As we hold high our branches to hail Jesus in his triumph,
may we be inspired to perform good deeds in his name.
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Introducing the Theme

This Sunday, we enter into Holy Week to celebrate the liturgies that define us as Christians and identify us as followers of the crucified and risen Christ. Jesus' experience in Jerusalem is not where things "went wrong" for him. The events in Jerusalem can be fully understood only in relation to the Gospel that Jesus had been proclaiming for three years. The Cross is not a "stand-alone" event as though the only important things to know about Jesus are that he was born and that he died/rose from the dead, and the three years of his teaching and preaching sandwiched in between are just creamy filling. The Cross was not an unfortunate interruption of Jesus' ministry but the very culmination of his mission.

- What does it mean to say that our celebration of the events of Holy Week "define" us?
- Why is it important to see the events of Holy Week in relation to the Gospel that Jesus preached for three years?

The Word of God

Mark 11:1–10 (Jesus enters Jerusalem as the crowds shout "Hosanna!")

Silent Reflection

Background on the Gospel Reading

Too often, Jesus' triumphant entrance into Jerusalem is seen as almost accidental, as if Jesus and his Apostles were just on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem when they were suddenly met by throngs of adoring fans. No. This was a completely choreographed event—a "campaign stop," if you will—along Jesus' route that led to his ultimate destination, Jerusalem.

By entering Jerusalem, the holy city, on a donkey (as prophesied in Zechariah 9:9), Jesus was proclaiming himself as the long-awaited king, an act that the crowds loved because, by cheering for this self-proclaimed king, they could stick it to the Romans whom they disdained. So they responded by greeting Jesus as a king: spreading their cloaks

on the road (a sign of loyalty), waving palm branches (an expression of acclamation), and singing royal hymns invoking King David (the word “Hosanna” being not only an expression of praise but also of urgent need: “Please, save us!”).

“Palm Sunday,” as we have come to call it, was no accident; it was Jesus’ “coming out party”! This Sunday, as we wave palms and sing “Hosanna!” we are proclaiming Jesus as our king and calling on him to save us. Then we hear exactly how Jesus did that through the ultimate act of selflessness—dying on the cross.

Reflection/Discussion Questions

- In what ways was Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem similar to a modern-day “campaign stop” or a “coming out party”?
- Why do we wave palm branches and shout “Hosanna!” on Palm Sunday as we begin Holy Week?
- What are we asking Jesus to save us from?
- What does it mean for you personally to call Jesus your king?
- What will you do during Holy Week to make the week truly “holy”—a time set apart for God’s purposes?

Silent Reflection

Concluding Prayer (Psalm 22)

Side A: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Side B: Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?

Side A: All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me.

Side B: They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.

Side A: But you, LORD, do not be far from me! You are my strength, come quickly to help me.

Side B: Deliver me from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dogs.

Side A: Rescue me from the mouths of the lions; save me from the horns of the wild oxen.

Side B: I will declare your name to my people; in the assembly I will praise you.

Side A: You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob, honor him!

Side B: Revere him, all you descendants of Israel! For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one;

Side A: he has not hidden his face from him

Side B: but has listened to his cry for help.

All: Amen.