

PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION

March 28, 2021 B

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Father, we once again prepare to celebrate the holiest week in our Church year, the celebration of Jesus' passion, death and Resurrection. Through his blood you established a new covenant with your people. May your Holy Spirit give us new and fresh insight and appreciation of those events in your Son's life. Bring us one day to the glory of his resurrection.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: This weekend we begin Holy Week, the holiest week of our Church year. We recall and enter into the central events in the life of Jesus, his suffering, death and Resurrection. The readings for Passion Sunday revolve around the two meanings of the word "passion." Paul's letter to the Philippians illustrates how these meanings intertwine. Christ felt such passion (love) for humanity that he took on our human condition and endured the most extreme passion (suffering) we can imagine as the servant of God.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm, and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 50:4-7

This is the third of four "suffering servant songs" found in the book of Isaiah. As the early Christians read these passages, they see in them images of Jesus, the Suffering Servant of God.

As we listen to this reading, we can see why it is chosen for today's liturgy. The servant speaks of himself as a preacher of God's Word. God opens his servant's ear everyday to receive the Word, and he has been faithful in proclaiming it to others.

However, those to whom he proclaims the Word have often not responded with gratitude. He has been beaten, spat upon, and his beard plucked. Despite this abuse, however, he remains steadfast, relying on God as his strength. "*The Lord is my help. I will not be disgraced.*" The phrase "*set my face like flint*" refers to the servant's determination to be faithful to God.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 22

This is a prayer of lament describing the suffering of the psalmist and his deliverance. Jesus on the Cross makes this psalm his own.

SECOND READING: Philippians 2:6-11

Writing from prison, Paul addresses a community with proud and independent ways who often argue among themselves. Paul admonishes the people to set aside their bickering and to live in harmony. He holds up to them as a model "the attitude of Christ" who "emptied himself" and became a slave. Notice in this beautiful and well-structured hymn a *downward* and *upward* movement. Jesus taking on our human status is the downward movement. Though equal to God, Jesus does not cling to his divinity for his own ends. Without losing his godlike status, he takes on the likeness of human beings. He experiences humiliation and debasement that few humans suffer. Having experienced the depths of human suffering and having been totally faithful to his mission, God "*exalts*" him and bestows on him a name above every other name. (This is the upward movement in the hymn.) The entire universe is brought under his lordship and all bend down before him. Like the servant in the first reading, God comes to the help of Jesus, the servant *par excellence*, and gives him the name "Lord" – a name given only to God in the Old Testament. In and through his weakness, obedience, and servant-like attitude. Jesus achieves greatness and lordship.

**PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:
Mark 14:1-15:47**

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

**THE PASSION OF JESUS ACCORDING TO
MARK—14:1-15:47**

The suffering and death of Jesus is the centerpiece of Mark's Gospel. Hints of the Passion are found already in chapters 1-2, and by chapter 3, a plot against Jesus is being planned. Halfway through the Gospel, Mark has Jesus predicting three times the details of his Passion. In chapter 11, Jesus arrives in Jerusalem for the events which this Sunday's liturgy enacts ritually. Six of the 16 chapters of Mark are devoted exclusively to the last week of Jesus' life. This has led scholars to call Mark's Gospel a "Passion narrative with an extended introduction." Two central themes to watch for in Mark's Gospel are:

- The contrast between *Jesus' fidelity* to God and his mission no matter what the cost, and the *infidelity* of the disciples and crowds. Jesus has no desire to die. He prays three times that God would spare him, but if fidelity to God and his mission involves embracing the Cross and death, he is willing to do that. This fidelity is expressed in his wonderful prayer of surrender, "*Not my will but your will be done.*" In stark contrast, we notice weakness and infidelity in the disciples. They fall asleep when Jesus needs their support in the garden. Peter, the leader, denies Jesus. Judas betrays him. At the time of his arrest, they "*all fled and left him.*" At the time of his trial, the crowds who have previously sung his praises now chant "*Crucify him! Crucify him!*" But not all are unfaithful. A few women remain faithful. One anoints him; others keep watch as he dies on the Cross.
- Mark's Passion presents us with a very *human* picture of Jesus. In the garden, he begs the Father three times to free him from dying. We can *feel* Jesus' disappointment when he finds his beloved disciples asleep not just once but three times. What

must he have felt when all his disciples "fled and left him"? How painful it must have been for Jesus to hear the crowds call for the release of the criminal Barabbas and call for Jesus' crucifixion. Then consider the scourging of his body, the crowning with thorns, the crucifixion and, most of all, the sense of his Father abandoning him: "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" This is a cry of one steeped in human agony. Jesus pays the ultimate price for fidelity to his call.

**AN EXTENDED COMMENTARY ON MARK'S
PASSION**

A Woman and a Betrayer

Mark's Passion opens with a beautiful story of a woman showing tender love for Jesus. This story is sandwiched or bracketed by two ugly scenes: the chief priests looking for a way to arrest Jesus and Judas plotting with them for a way to hand Jesus over to his enemies. There is a strong contrast between the two scenes. The woman's extravagant act of love anticipates Jesus' extravagant act of love on the Cross.

Betrayal within the Eucharist.

Using his characteristic bracketing technique, Mark places a conversation about betrayal in between the Preparation for the Last Supper and the actual Last Supper.

Jesus singing "songs of praise" the night before he was to die a criminal's death is extraordinary. Perhaps it says to us that as we spend our lives for Jesus, we also should sing God's praises.

Gethsemane

After the Last Supper, Jesus goes out to Gethsemane with Peter, James and John. Peter has just said how he will stand by Jesus no matter what. Earlier in the Gospel, James and John assert that they can "drink the cup of suffering" with Jesus. Now we see the vast difference between words and actions. They fall asleep when Jesus most needs their support. Later, they will all flee and Peter will deny Jesus. In contrast, Jesus remains faithful to God but not without a struggle. He hopes against hope for a way other than the way of the Cross. In the end, he surrenders to God's will ("*Not my will but your will*"). In John 4:34, the apostles offer Jesus food, to which he responds: "*My food is to do the will of Him who sent me.*" In the Passion event, it is important for us to remember that God is not demanding that Jesus die a cruel death. Rather, he

wants Jesus to be faithful to his mission even if it means a cruel death. It is the truth the sin of humanity that brought about Jesus' suffering and death.

The Arrest of Jesus

In this scene, we witness further the abandonment of Jesus. We just read how Jesus is abandoned through the human weakness of Peter, James and John. Now, we have the betrayal of Jesus by Judas. He treats Jesus as a friend by kissing him and at the same time plants the kiss to point Jesus out to the authorities. Then Mark tells us, "*All left him and fled.*" The young man who runs away naked is symbolic of us who may, in a time of crisis and fear, run away from Jesus, leaving behind our baptismal identity. Jesus is now left alone with his enemies. Not one of his friends shows faithful discipleship. In contrast, Jesus shows himself to be fearless and speaks up with dignity to those who come to arrest him.

Peter's Denial and the Trail of Jesus

The trial of Jesus is a farce. Trials are not allowed at night. False witnesses fail to agree with each other. During his trial, Jesus continues to show himself to be courageous and confident. When he declares himself to be the Christ, the Blessed One, he knows he is signing his own death sentence and yet he does it. Then follows the threefold denial of Peter. These two stories are another example of *contrast* so strong in Mark's Passion. As two examples of behavior under pressure, Jesus shows us what to do and Peter shows us what *not* to do. Jesus exemplifies courage, Peter cowardice. Jesus, while losing his life through steadfast witness, ultimately saves it; Peter, trying to save himself, in fact, condemns himself. Readers are called to follow Jesus. We notice that during his trial, Jesus affirms that he is the "*Christ, the Son of the Blessed One.*"

Jesus before Pilate

Jesus is then brought before the Jewish and Roman authorities. Both share in the brutal humiliation of Jesus. Pilate believes Jesus to be innocent but he is too much of a crowd-pleaser to let him go free. He shows himself to be a coward just as Jesus shows himself to be fearless and strong, the innocent sufferer who identifies with all who are unjustly and falsely accused. The crowds also fail Jesus, choosing a criminal over him.

The Crucifixion

Jesus is led away to Golgotha to be crucified. A stranger named Simeon is forced to help Jesus carry his Cross. After Jesus is crucified, the bystanders mock and verbally abuse him. Darkness covers the land for three hours. In this time of darkness, Jesus even feels abandoned by God ("*My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?*"). Sin separates us from God. Having taken the weight of the sin of humanity upon his shoulders, Jesus experiences separation from God.

"The veil of the temple is torn in two from top to bottom." This is the veil that separates people from the Holy of Holies into which no one is allowed to enter except the High Priest. The veil is torn back and the way to God is now wide open to all and not just to the High Priest. Then a Gentile soldier, a most unlikely one, recognizes the true identity of Jesus: "*Truly this man is the Son of God.*" We notice the presence of the women who continue to follow Jesus after all his make disciples have fled.

The Burial

In the early days of Christianity, some may have claimed that Jesus never really died. So it is important for Mark to include an account of Jesus' burial so that people will know that Jesus really died. Dying is an essential dimension of being a human person. Joseph of Arimathea, a devout Jew and a member of the Council, shows himself to be an admirer of Jesus by asking Pilate for his body so that he can give it a proper burial.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. In the second reading, Paul speaks about the 'self-emptying' of Christ, something that is required of all of us if we are to be 'filled' with Christ. Concretely, what does this self-emptying process involve? Can you give some examples of it from your life or the lives of others?
3. Which scene in the Passion stirs you the most? Why?

4. Jesus' apostles and friends fall asleep and abandon Jesus when he needs them most. How does this happen today? Do you even wonder how you would have acted if you had been in the disciples' place 2,000 years ago?

5. In Mark's passion story, Jesus feels abandoned by his Father. Have you ever felt that way? When? If you never felt that way, what might cause you to feel that way?

6. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING

Having listened to God's Word and listened to others' reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Father, deepen our appreciation of the great sacrifice Jesus made on our behalf.*

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestion: Be a Simeon to someone carrying a cross. Reflect on what "self-emptying" needs to occur in you so that you will be more filled with Christ.

CONCLUDING PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we need to pray? Pray especially for all who are suffering in body, mind or spirit, and for their caregivers. Pray that many people will participate in our Holy Week services.

CLOSING PRAYER (Together)

*Merciful God,
You call us to follow your son,
Jesus Christ, and to live as his disciples.
Help us to hear the voice of Jesus today
and like him surrender to your will.
Give us the courage to act upon what
we hear no matter the cost.
Amen.*