

Sermon

Today we enter the most holy week in the Christian year, the week when we commemorate the last week of Jesus' life. We begin this week with Palm Sunday and end it with Holy Saturday, the day between the day of the Crucifixion and the day of the Resurrection of our Lord.

I would like to take our time today in remembering some of the events of these days and encouraging you to reflect this week on their meaning in our own lives today. If you were alive in Jesus time and played a part in those Easter events, what part would you have played? Would you have sung Hosana to the great prophet? Would you have sat at his feet as he taught? Would you have run when the soldiers came to arrest him? Would you have stood at the foot of the cross?

We can take time this week to ask ourselves if we had been with Jesus would we have been brave enough not to deny him at the end? Are we brave enough not to deny him today?

May the words of my mouth and the dedication of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord.

Many of us now have the time to invest in really engaging in Holy Week this year. This morning I will be sharing four events from that week that provide the opportunity to deeply participate in the reality of the life and sacrifice of Jesus.

Palm Sunday

The first of these is the event we commemorate on Palm Sunday: the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem in the days preceding Passover. For those of you who are not familiar with the music we heard this morning, the piece is called the Palms. The words to the hymn are triumphal words

**Sing and rejoice, O blest Jerusalem,
Of all thy sons sing the emancipation,
Thro' boundless love, the Christ of Bethlehem
Brings faith the hope to thee forevermore.**

**Join all and sing His name declare,
Let ev'ry voice resound with acclamation,**

**Hosanna! Praised be the Lord!
Bless Him, who cometh to bring us salvation!**

The crowd that met Jesus as he entered Jerusalem several days before the feast of Passover were excited to see him. Matthew tells us in chapter 21:11 that the crowd knew him as a great prophet from Nazareth of Galilee. The words they sang were important. They sang “Hosana” which means “save us”. “Save us.” They also sang “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord”.

This triumphal entry frightened the Jewish leadership. From that time the Jewish leaders of the city were looking for ways to discredit him and finally to kill him. After the entry, Jesus visited the temple and Jesus went with his disciples to stay at Bethany. He spent the next several days teaching through some of his best-known parables and dealing with increasing challenges from the Jewish leadership.

Reflection: how are we asking Jesus to save us now? With the coronavirus we are all facing our own vulnerability and that of those we love and the world. Should we only be asking for physical saving? Jesus as savior came to save us in body, mind and spirit. How will we pray to the Savior of the world?

The Last Supper

On Thursday of Holy Week, Jesus came back into the city of Jerusalem for the feast of Passover. Judas had already agreed to betray him to the high Priests when the group of disciples and Jesus went to celebrate the beginning of the three-day Passover feast together. It is at this evening meal that so much of what is important to us takes place.

Let me read you Matthew 27: 26-28.

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the^[a] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Now, let me read to you what our United church of Christ believes about the sacrament of Holy Communion: Sacraments are ritual actions in worship which, according to Scripture, were instituted by Jesus. In the sacraments of baptism

and communion we ask the Holy Spirit to use water, bread, and wine to make visible the grace, forgiveness, and presence of God in Christ.

The communion meal recalls the table fellowship Jesus shared with his disciples, and in particular the Last Supper on the night before his death as well as his appearances to the disciples during meals following his resurrection.

Throughout its history these Biblical events have been central to the Church's worship life.

In the sacrament of Holy Communion, also called the Lord's Supper or Eucharist, meaning "thanksgiving," Christians hear, taste, touch and receive the grace of God revealed through Jesus Christ in a unique way. Communion is:

a joyous act of thanksgiving for all God has done, is doing, and will do for the redeeming of creation;

a sacred memorial of the crucified and risen Christ, a living and effective sign of Christ's sacrifice in which Christ is truly and rightly present to those who eat and drink;

an earnest prayer for the presence of the Holy Spirit to unite those who partake with the Risen Christ and with each other, and to restore creation, making all things new;

an intimate experience of fellowship in which the whole church in every time and place is present and divisions are overcome;

a hopeful sign of the promised Realm of God marked by justice, love and peace.

The United Church of Christ [Book of Worship](#) reminds us that "the invitation and the call [to the supper] celebrate not only the memory of a meal that is past, but an actual meal with the risen Christ that is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet at which Christ will preside at the end of history." (United Church of Christ website)

Reflection: Do we really understand and accept all of these statements about Communion? Do we recognize the sacredness of the celebration of Communion we share every month? How can we more fully be present to this sacrament?

Denial by Peter

Matthew sets the denial of Jesus by Peter at the Mount Olives where Jesus went to pray after the last Supper. In verse 31-35 we hear: Then Jesus told them, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."

Peter replied, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will."

"Truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times."

But Peter declared, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the other disciples said the same.

Let me continue with verse 69:

Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. "You also were with Jesus of Galilee," she said. But he denied it before them all. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. Then he went out to the gateway, where another servant girl saw him and said to the people there, "This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth." He denied it again, with an oath: "I don't know the man!" After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them; your accent gives you away." Then he began to call down curses, and he swore to them, "I don't know the man!"

Immediately a rooster crowed. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: "Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly.

Reflection: How many times have we denied Jesus is in our lives? Few of us have verbally denied him like Peter did but we often deny him by our actions. As the hymn says, "they will know we are Christians by our love". How many acts in our lives have fallen short of Christian love? How many times have we not been the Christians we have promised Him to be?

Forgiveness of the thief

The final reflection I want to share is about the Crucifixion and forgiveness of the thief.

Of the four descriptions of the crucifixion in the four gospels only Luke tells us about the penitent thief: Luke 23: 39-43

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”

Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.^[a]”

Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Reflection: What a blessing Luke gives to us. Even if the world condemns us to death, Jesus has the power to forgive us our sins and bring us to everlasting life. But do we confess our sins and ask for forgiveness? Do we take the time to review our lives and actions and see where we have fallen? Where we could have done more but chose to look the other way? Are we so satisfied with ourselves that we have no need for true confession and contrition?

Each of these events of Holy Week are doors into a deeper faith and commitment to Jesus. There are so many other verses and events worthy of your time and reflection this week. As we have time, in this period of anxiety and waiting, I urge you to truly experience Holy Week as a gift for your faith journey to the glory of Easter and the resurrection of our Lord.

Amen