

Preparing for Holy Week

Sermon: March 18, 2018 at St. Peter's Cathedral Helena, Montana

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Good morning!

We are now at the Sunday next before Palm Sunday, the holiest of weeks in our Christian faith. Next week will be very busy from day to day so it has been my practice to preach about Holy Week before it happens. That way we can prepare properly, by having a better understanding of the many events which happen in our Lord's life, as well as in the lives of so many other personalities of the Passion.

In the old worship calendar, which I am old enough to remember, this Sunday began a two-week season known as "Passiontide". So, I am not out of order taking this pulpit time to focus on the whole of Holy Week. Actually, we have only to look at this morning's gospel episode to hear Jesus preparing for his suffering and imminent death. Jesus is in Jerusalem after Palm Sunday and some Greeks want to see him. Jesus teaches them that:

"unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit...I, when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all people to myself."

As Jesus is preparing for His Passion, so must we! In preparing for our Lord's Passion, I want to urge all of you to remember that Holy Week is the holiest week of our faith. It is a time when we should prepare our schedules so that we can be present for one of the services each day, as we walk the way of Jesus' cross. If you are out of town, then find a church to be present for one of the services each day. If you are here and you have a conflict, then I urge you to put these services ahead of another obligation and reschedule other events.

Holy Week is the holiest week of the year for every Christian. For this one week out of the year, it behooves us to schedule our lives around these services and not the other way around.

All right! Let's begin with Palm Sunday. I have had the privilege of celebrating Palm Sunday in Jerusalem four times, and I have learned a great deal about Palm Sunday from being in Jerusalem. As one example, I have had to learn that for the

Eastern Church, beginning with the Greek Church, Palm Sunday begins on Saturday, not Sunday. We must follow the Gospel of John very carefully, from chapter 11 to the Last Supper and the betrayal of Judas in chapter 13. Palm Sunday begins on Saturday night in Bethany where the disciples have been invited to dine at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

Many things are happening at this dinner. Jesus and his disciples will be staying with their friends in Bethany on Saturday night, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday nights. On Thursday, Jesus will be betrayed by Judas in Gethsemane and arrested. Perhaps the disciples who desert Jesus and flee head back to Bethany, but we are not sure.

Lazarus is at this dinner, because Jesus has just raised him from the dead. Because Jesus has just raised Lazarus from the dead, an exchange has happened between Jesus and Lazarus. Jesus is now a marked man with a target on his back. The Jewish authorities are now convinced that Jesus must die. Since Lazarus has gone from death to life, Jesus must go from life to death. Caiaphas, the high priest, has decreed that "It is better that one man die for the people, than the whole nation be destroyed."

Two other crucial things are happening at this dinner. Mary, the sister of Lazarus, anoints Jesus' feet for burial. She is the only one besides Jesus who understands that he is about to die. And then there is Judas, who is indignant that Mary is wasting so much costly ointment on Jesus, when it could have been sold and the money given to the poor. As John reminds us, "not that Judas cared for the poor, but that he was a thief and would steal money from the common purse." The spiritual condition of Judas is far worse. He is contemplating betraying Jesus and will arrange to do so five days later in Gethsemane.

All of this leads up to the next morning, when Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Jesus moves from Bethany to Bethpage where he mounts a donkey and rides an animal of peace into the Holy City. The people sing his praises, but by Friday they will be shouting 'Crucify Him, Crucify Him!'

Being in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday is an unforgettable experience. Thirty thousand Christians walk the way Jesus rode from Bethpage to the top of the Mount of Olives down to the eastern entrance of the Old City. Thirty thousand

people move slowly and peacefully while singing hymns in languages from all over the world.

Much happens to Jesus and the hostile people circling around him from Sunday to Thursday. Here at St. Peter's we will meditate on the Stations of the Cross, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday at 12:15. In other gospel accounts, Jesus turns over the tables of the money changers which will contribute to his arrest and Judas goes to the Jewish authorities to arrange for his arrest late Thursday night.

Holy Thursday is called Maundy Thursday, meaning Command Thursday. This is the day when Jesus, at his Last Supper with his disciples before he was crucified, commanded that we eat bread and drink wine in remembrance of his passion, death and resurrection. At that same Last Supper, Jesus gets up from the table and washes his disciples' feet. Following that act of loving service, Judas leaves the meal and goes to Caiaphas' house in order to lead his soldiers in the dark to Gethsemane. There in the garden at Gethsemane, Jesus is arrested.

But the night is far from over. Jesus would be bound and handed over to Caiaphas where he would be flogged, humiliated and convicted of blasphemy. Three times, Peter would deny knowing Jesus. Finally, Jesus would be imprisoned in a stone pit for the rest of the night, awaiting the morning hours when he would be handed over to Pilate. In our observance of Holy Thursday, we will hear the whole story and walk all the steps of Jesus from his institution of the Last Supper and Foot-washing to Gethsemane, to Caiaphas' house, to the trial, Peter's denial and finally to the pit, where we will recite together Psalm 88. I hope you all will make every effort to be there for the whole commemoration. You may be tired by the time the commemoration is over but none of us will be more exhausted than Jesus.

Holy Friday, the Friday the Church has called 'Good', is the day Jesus was crucified to take away the sins of the world. Because of the devotion of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, Jesus' body is placed in a tomb. We will gather in the evening to hear the Passion narrative from the Gospel of John and pray what are traditionally called the Solemn Collects.

On the morning of Holy Saturday, we will gather to say some prayers largely with the altar guild, who will be there to decorate the church for Easter. It is important to decorate the church with beautiful flowers. And for those of us at home, there

may be Easter eggs to dye or an Easter ham to be prepared for the festive dinner the next day.

But there is much going on during Holy Saturday that we can easily miss or fail to appreciate. Jesus' dead body lies in the tomb. But Jesus' spirit descends into hell. There is an ancient liturgy which we do well to hear.

"Today there is a great silence over the earth, a great silence because the King sleeps; the earth was in terror and was still, because God slept in the flesh and raised up those who were sleeping from the ages. God has died in the flesh, and the underworld has trembled.

Truly he goes to seek out our first parent like a lost sheep; he wishes to visit those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. He goes to free the prisoner Adam and his fellow prisoner Eve from their pains, he who is God and Adam's son.

The Lord goes to them, holding the victorious weapon, his cross...And grasping Adam's hand he raises him up, saying: "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light."

On Holy Saturday, Jesus descends into Hell. The next day he will rise. On Easter Day Jesus rises and declares Victory.

Holy Week, this holiest of weeks is hard to summarize, but it is so important for us to understand. Please find ways to lay aside your busy schedules each day next week and be present for these solemn liturgies. May we join with one another and with the Christian church throughout the world, as we walk the way of the cross from Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem through his arrest, trial and crucifixion to his victory on Easter. AMEN