

Journey through Lent

Palm Sunday • March 28, 2021

Opening Prayer

Light a candle. Open your Bible and set it beside the lit candle. Prepare the room for prayer, even if you are alone. Quiet music can help to settle yourself and others even if it has been a hectic day.

Leader: + In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Jesus said, "Unless you take up your cross and follow me you cannot be my disciples."

All: Help us, Lord, to carry our cross each day.

Leader: Jesus died so that we all might live.

**All: Let us live lives patterned on his.
Amen.**

Insights on the Readings

Rotate around the circle, having each person read a paragraph/bullet point aloud. For each reading, begin with the bullet points and then continue on to reading the passage from a Bible.

First Reading (Isaiah 50:4-7)

- ▶ The first reading for Palm Sunday is the third of the four passages in the book of Isaiah known as the Suffering Servant songs.
- ▶ The unnamed servant is a figure who will restore Israel's covenant with God.
- ▶ The prophet portrays the servant as suffering, abused, and ridiculed for his listening to God and proclaiming God's message.

Second Reading (Philippians 2:6-11)

- ▶ Biblical scholars believe this text is an early Christian hymn composed before the Gospels which describes Jesus' self-emptying of his divine prerogative.
- ▶ For the author of Philippians, Jesus did not cling to his divinity, but as a human being accepted the crucifixion, emptying himself of his own wants and needs for the sake of others.

Gospel Reading (Mark 14:1-15:47)

- ▶ This is the Passion of Jesus according to Mark.

Reflections

Background on the Use of the Word “Passion”

The stories in the four Gospels that narrate the suffering and death of Jesus are known as the passion narratives. The word *passion* in the Gospel of Mark is related to the word passive. The designation suggests that in this section of the story, Jesus is not active but passive; he does not act but is acted upon. He does not “die,” but is killed, does not “rise” but is raised. In the suffering and death of the Son of Man, human beings are the actors on the surface of the narrative, and God is the hidden actor behind the scenes.

Entering Mark’s Passion Story

When reading a Passion narrative, we need to ask ourselves how we would have responded to the agony in the garden, arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus. With which character in the story would we most identify? Could we have been among the disciples who fled from danger, abandoning Jesus? Are there not moments in our own lives when we play the role of Peter, denying Jesus, or even Judas, betraying him? Have we not found ourselves at times like Simon of Cyrene, carrying the cross of Jesus, or like Pontius Pilate, trying to avoid making a decision and washing our hands of the whole affair? Could we have stood among the religious leaders who condemned Jesus or the soldiers who mocked him? Or are there times when we are sheepish about our commitment to Jesus, like Joseph of Arimathea, and need courage to witness to Jesus? In sum, while reading or hearing the Passion narrative, we are constantly asked the question of the hymn: “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?”

The Anointing at Bethany (Mark 14:3-9)

We move now to Bethany, the house of Simon the leper, and a banquet. In Jesus’ time, banquets were only for men. It was a patriarchal society. The unnamed woman who anoints Jesus must have had great courage to violate the male-dominated meal. Her perfumed oil was worth about a year’s wages, showing that her action was both extravagant and generous. In Jesus’ time, it was a common act of hospitality for male hosts to anoint the heads of their guests, a gesture of welcome. Simon did not do this to Jesus his guest. Jesus defends the woman’s actions, and this attests that she both welcomes him and is correct in recognizing who he is, namely the anointed one of God. Because of her actions, the woman will be remembered wherever and whenever the Gospel is proclaimed. Will we also be remembered for the actions we perform as a disciple of Jesus?

When Mark shows Jesus saying, “She has anointed my body beforehand for its burial” (14:8b), we are forced to consider the different meanings of “anointing.” Jesus speaks of anointing here in the context of consecrating the body for death. At the same time, Mark’s readers would have been aware that Jesus was referred to as “messiah,” a Hebrew word that means “the anointed one.” The ancients believed that just as the olive oil used in anointing penetrated the skin of the one being anointed, so did God’s Spirit enter into the person being anointed. In the Bible, the term “messiah” generally referred to someone who was sent to do God’s work, and so it was a title associated with glory. Mark shows Jesus consistently teaching that God’s anointed one should be associated with suffering and even death. This is dramatized by the unnamed woman anointing his body in preparation for burial.

Prophecy of Betrayal (14:17-21)

Jesus does not identify by name who it is that will betray him. There may be two reasons for this. First, his announcement is a sobering admonition for the other disciples, causing each of them to search their hearts and discern whether there is any bitter root inside that could eventually lead them to such a heinous act. It is as if they need an examination of conscience to be prepared to receive the unfathomable gift Jesus is about to give them. Distressed by his words, the disciples ask him one by one, "Surely it is not I?" Each disciple must humbly recognize the evil of which he or she is capable if left to his own devices. Jesus accents the pain of the betrayal by reaffirming that the betrayer will be one of the Twelve dipping into the dish with him, perhaps the dish into which herbs were dipped during the Passover ceremony. The other disciples present at the meal, and dipping into the dish, seem to have had no suspicions about the betrayer. The point here is that no one is excluded from Jesus' table fellowship, not even his betrayer who dips bread into the common dish.

The Last Supper (14:12-25)

To better understand Mark's succinct account of Jesus' last meal, it is important to read it in light of its setting as a Passover supper (see verses 12–16). A Passover supper would include the traditional elements: a blessing by the head of the household, the ceremonial foods and wine, the retelling of the story of the Exodus, and the singing of hymns. Jesus' initial actions are typical of the host at a Jewish Passover and are identical to what he had done in the two miracles of the loaves (6:41; 8:6): he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. The customary blessing was a prayer of thanksgiving to God for having provided for his people. The sharing of one loaf was a sign of fellowship that the guests and host were enjoying each other.

"Take, this is my body." (14:22)

According to custom, the Passover host relates each of the ceremonial foods to the Exodus from Egypt. Jesus' interpretation, however, goes far beyond the Passover and brings the meal to an entirely new level of meaning: Take, this is my body. With these simple words, the Last Supper becomes a prophecy in gesture, anticipating and interpreting the passion that is to occur the next day. Jesus identifies the broken bread with his own body about to be broken on the cross. Jesus is revealing that his death will be a gift of himself to them. By asking them to "take," that is, to eat the bread that is his body, he is inviting the disciples to receive this gift of himself into the depth of their being.

Just as the Passover was not complete without eating the paschal lamb, Jesus' sacrifice is complete only when his disciples consume his body and blood. By inviting them to share the one bread that is his body, Jesus is drawing the disciples into a union with himself and one another that is far deeper than any earthly table fellowship.

"Then he took the cup." (14:23)

Then he took the cup. Jesus invites the disciples to drink from the cup before giving its explanation. The verb for "give thanks" (*eucharisteo*) is the origin of the church's name for the sacrament commemorating the Last Supper, the Eucharist. Like a shared loaf, wine from a shared cup was a sign of fellowship. Wine is also a symbol of joy, festivity, and abundance (Ps 4:8; Isa 62:9), and of divine life (Mark 2:22). But Mark suggests an additional level of meaning: the cup that Jesus will drink is his passion and death which he willingly accepts (Mark 14:36). In the Greco-Roman world, accepting one's "cup" was a metaphor for accepting death and one's eternal destiny.

“This is my blood of the covenant.” (14:24)

The “blood of the covenant” was the phrase used at the moment when God established his covenant with Israel at Sinai (Exodus 24:1–8). Nearly all ancient covenants were sealed in blood, since a covenant was the forging of a kinship bond, and kinship is constituted by blood. The Sinai covenant was ratified by the blood of sacrificed bulls. Some of the blood was sprinkled on the altar, representing God, and some on the people. The covenant, too, was consummated in a sacred meal (Exodus 24:9–11). Jesus’ declaration that now his blood is the blood of the covenant means that the covenant is now being definitively renewed, just as Jeremiah had prophesied (Jer 31:31–32). Now there is a kinship bond purveyed by Jesus between God and his people that can never be broken.

“Will be poured out for many.” (14:24)

That Jesus’ blood will be poured out for many signifies a violent death. His supreme gift of self, offered on the cross, is now available to all. That it will be shed for many means that Jesus’ death is more than martyrdom. It is an efficacious sacrifice, providing the total forgiveness of sin that was only foreshadowed in the animal sacrifices of the old covenant. The phrase “for many” also recalls Isaiah’s prophecy of the suffering servant who through his suffering, would “justify many” and “take away the sins of many” (Isa 53:11–12).

Though the words “poured out for many” affirm that Jesus’ death will benefit “the many,” there is no suggestion that his death is a payment for the sins of many. This is not a debt Jesus owes to God, but rather a free will choice on his part.

Jesus at Prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:26-52)

Once the supper is over, the scene shifts to Jesus at prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus takes with him Peter, James, and John, those who were with him at the raising of Jairus’ daughter and the Transfiguration. The only thing Jesus asks of his disciples is to sit, wait, and keep watch while he prays. An anguished Jesus prays: “Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me.” The word “Abba” is a term of endearment and intimacy and could almost be translated “Daddy.” Jesus concludes his prayer by submitting his will to God’s: “Yet not what I want but what you want.” In our own prayer life do we pray for what God wants of us as Jesus did?

The Disciples and Peter

Three times Jesus discovers the disciples sleeping. Even Peter, who said he would die with Jesus if he had to, was sleeping. Through prayer, Jesus is now prepared to face betrayal, arrest, suffering, and death. The disciples, on the other hand, who failed to keep vigil and presumably did not pray, will flee in fear and abandon Jesus.

Then there is Peter, Jesus’ closest associate who had earlier in the Gospel of Mark proclaimed: “You are the Messiah!” (Mark 8:29). Hours before, Peter had boasted: “Even though I should have to die with you, I will not deny you.” Peter now denies any knowledge of Jesus when questioned by a servant girl, “I neither know nor understand what you are talking about.” (Mark 14:68)

Jesus faces his accusers all alone: the chief priests and the Sanhedrin (Jewish Council) at night, Pilate and the soldiers by day. Nowhere to be seen are those who once followed him. When Pilate brings Jesus and Barabbas before the crowd, the people choose the rebel–murderer for release. Ironically, the name Barabbas means “son of the father,” and the people fail to see the real “Son of the Father” who is

Jesus. Only Simon of Cyrene, a passerby, gives a helping hand, and he is coerced into doing it.

The Mocking and Crucifixion of Jesus

On the cross, Jesus is mocked by an entire entourage. First by people passing by, then by priests and scribes, and finally by others who are being crucified with him. Beneath this experience is Jesus' numbing sense of total abandonment by God. Now we meet the moment of Jesus' greatest anguish as Mark's Jesus speaks only once from the cross. It is a final, piercing cry and a last breath: "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani" ("My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"). This is prayer, for Jesus is quoting Psalm 22. The death of Jesus, abandoned and alone, is a horrifying death, a terrible end.

Jesus entered into this powerlessness and abandonment totally. We are to do likewise. In Jesus' passion, we are reminded that no matter how black the darkness, how strong the forces of death, or how desperate our cries, there is a power stronger than death.

Signs of Hope

Even in this profoundly sad story of the passion we see signs of hope. Hope springs up in a veil being torn in two from top to bottom, that veil in the Temple that restricted access to God. And who was the first to step through that opening? A Roman centurion, an outsider, a Gentile, was the one who spoke the first true words to all who would listen: "Truly this man was the Son of God." This is the ultimate profession of our Lenten faith.

For Reflection

1. Were you there when Jesus was crucified?
2. Have you ever betrayed, denied, or abandoned Jesus?
3. With which character(s) in the passion narrative do you most identify? Why?
4. What does it mean for you to believe that Jesus was the son of God?

Closing Prayer

Leader: Were you there when they crucified the Lord?

All: Yes we were.

Leader: Did you help him carry the cross?

All: Yes we did freely.

Leader: Are you willing to take up your own cross daily and follow Jesus?

All: Yes we are.

Pray together the Our Father, then exchange a gesture of peace with all who are present.

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