

4.13.2025 Palm Sunday

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 19:28-40; Luke 23:1-49

“Jesus, remember me”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

The festival we celebrate today has two names: Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday, revealing the two symbols of Holy Week, palms and the cross. With churches around the world we begin Holy Week, waving palms and hearing the cry, “*Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*” and at the same time, hearing the crowd cry, “*Crucify him!*”

The drama of the Passion story includes all of us. No one is excluded: leaders and governments, religious leaders and teachers, crowds and individuals, soldiers and criminals, acquaintances and family, you and me. The drama of the Passion story is about the failure of justice and of “good people” failing to do good. Our true nature is revealed in this story: we can be fickle and unfaithful – offering praise one moment only to reverse ourselves and condemn.

In the drama of the Passion story, Jesus is always in plain view, and yet his identity as the Messiah is hidden from view. Though leaders and the crowd are blind to Jesus’ identity as the Messiah, a condemned criminal looks to him, saying, “*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*” Holy Week challenges us to realize that we have also often failed to see God hidden in suffering, God hidden in our neighbor, God hidden in those unjustly condemned.

Paul’s letter to the Philippians helps us see Jesus’ identity as the suffering servant of God, who comes humbly in peace, riding upon a donkey. He comes to rule not with arrogance, threats, and violence, not with weapons and war, but with God’s self-emptying love for the world.

Paul encourages us to imitate Christ, writing, “*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.*” Paul knew the mind of Christ because he had opposed and persecuted Christ. He had sought to arrest and detain, seeking the death of Christians. Paul was so blinded by pride and a sense of being right that he was blinded to Christ. Yet the risen Christ met Paul on the road to Damascus and changed his mind. Paul wants us also to share in the mind of Christ and his self-emptying love.

As we begin the journey of Holy Week, Paul’s words about Christ are meant to inspire as well as caution us. We are inspired to see Christ as God’s Suffering Servant, whose self-emptying love gives life and hope to a world in darkness. In describing Christ’s *kenosis* of self-emptying in human form, Paul is cautioning against our incessant grasping after power that belongs to God alone. We cannot share the mind of Christ without emptying ourselves of our desire for power, status, wealth and fame. We cannot journey to the cross without carrying the cross for those who are poor, suffering, and outcast – the very ones our aspirations to wealth and power seek to insulate us from.

As we begin Holy Week, I would like to offer brief meditations on the Passion story.

Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing. Please look at the cross on the high altar. On this cross we see God hidden in suffering. We see what Luther called “the love of the cross” – a love so real that it makes the weak, strong; the poor, rich; the arrogant, humble; the hateful, loving; the sinner, forgiven. The cross reminds us that Christ empties himself, becoming a servant, forgiving us with a self-emptying love that fills us to become Christ for others.

*A theme for meditation during Holy Week:* How has Christ’s self-emptying love filled you, helping you to love and forgive someone in your life? How has Jesus’ self-emptying helped you empty yourself, changing your mind about something or someone? Meditate on his cross, and his love will fill you with love for others whom you have found it difficult to love.

Jesus experienced human temptation. Rather than submitting himself to the cross, as Jesus stood before Pilate, Herod, and the crowd, he was tempted to become a powerful worldly king, to perform a sign compelling people to believe in him, and to seek the death Barabbas. Jesus was tempted to use his power as the Messiah to do what many in this world have done: to seize power for his own glory. Yet Jesus stood before power as one wrongly charged, poor and powerless, voiceless and without hope. He humbled himself to death on a cross for each of us, because not one of us is without guilt. We know the good we should do and have failed to help others.

*A theme for meditation:* When have you possessed the power to help someone, yet did not? When have you been silent, instead of speaking out for someone in need?

Jesus was expelled from the city to be crucified. Jesus was taken away by a perversion of justice. Worldly leaders, like Pilate and Herod, were incapable of doing the right thing, of freeing an innocent and unjustly charged man. Pilate knew Jesus was innocent; yet he was bound not to his conscience, but to the power of the crowd – and the crowd prevailed.

*A theme for meditation:* When have you gone against your conscience, hurting someone because you were afraid to go against to “the crowd,” against the social norms of the world?

A foreigner was made to carry Christ’s cross. Jesus must have been exhausted: he had been treated with contempt by the soldiers, spat upon, and mocked; he had been flogged, whipped, and beaten into submission. Simon of Cyrene was made to carry Jesus’ cross because Jesus could no longer carry it alone.

*A theme for meditation:* When did you have other plans, yet God gave you a burden to carry for someone who could not have carried it alone? What is the cross Jesus has given to you to carry over your lifetime for others?

Two criminals were crucified with Jesus. One of the criminals derided Jesus, saying, “*Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!*” tempting Jesus to come down from the cross to save himself and others. Yet Jesus remained obedient to the cross, because only from the cross could he say,

*“Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.”*

*A theme for meditation:* When have you suffered with someone, so they might regain hope for living? When have you suffered alongside someone, so they might not die alone?

The second criminal said, *“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”* This person knew the mind of Christ, emptying himself of pride, saying, *“indeed we have been condemned justly.”* Crucified with Jesus, he believed in Jesus, and Jesus said to him, *“Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”* In a story filled with blindness to sin, only this man saw his sin, and looked to Jesus for hope and life.

*A theme for meditation:* When, in weakness and the acceptance of your own guilt, have you sought Jesus’ help? When have you looked to his cross as the bridge that carries you to Paradise? Look to his cross. Call on his name. Ask him, and he will help you.

*At about noon darkness came over the whole land and the sun’s light failed.* The sun’s failing light is a symbol for the world’s darkness and the blindness of many in this story. Though Jesus is in plain view, nearly everyone was unable to see him. Finally, when Jesus had breathed his last, the centurion praised God, saying, *“Certainly, this man was innocent.”* The centurion had probably seen many suffer death by crucifixion. He had perhaps seen some, who from their cross, spat upon the crowds and railed against those who had condemned them. He had perhaps seen some, who from their crosses, pleaded for their lives. The centurion had probably supervised the nailing of Jesus to the cross, and yet, was so moved by Jesus that he praised God. What changed his mind? I believe he had never heard a voice from the cross say, *“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”* The centurion helps us see with certainty God’s forgiveness in Jesus.

*A theme for meditation:* What do you see when you look at the cross? What do you see when you look at yourself? In your distress, do you entrust yourself to Jesus, saying, *“Jesus, remember me”*?

In a world constantly struggling with darkness and fear, the cross reveals the light of the world whose love is never extinguished.

Where are you in the Passion story? Look to his cross, saying, *“Jesus, remember me.”* Walk with Jesus. Carry the cross. He will help you so that you might help others. Amen.