

CALL TO WORSHIP:

Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, "Hosanna!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!"

"Hosanna in the highest!"

(Mark 11.9-10)

Let us worship God.

HYMN: All glory, laud, and honor ...

PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:

Eternal and almighty God:

On this Palm Sunday, we join with the followers of Jesus in acclaiming him as the one who comes in your name. We celebrate his coming into the world as they celebrated his coming to Jerusalem. At the same time, though, we acknowledge the forces of evil that were arrayed against him, which were able to turn even good, godly people against him.

As we begin our worship, then, we confess that forces of evil continue to be present in the world around us, and even within us ourselves, causing people — including ourselves — to act out of fear, mistrust, and ignorance; to hurt rather than help; and to tear down rather than build up.

In other words, we acknowledge that we have sinned, and we therefore ask for your forgiveness. Through the influence and power of the Holy Spirit, enable us to make ourselves receptive to you once again; to embrace what is true, good, and loving; and to follow the example of Jesus more and more closely in our everyday living.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our Savior; and we pray together, now, as he taught us:

Our Father, which art in heaven:

Hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come.

Thy will be done in earth,

as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts,

as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil;

for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,

for ever. Amen.

(Matthew 6.9-13, KJV)

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Hear this good news from the scriptures:

This is a trustworthy saying,

which deserves full acceptance:

“Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners.”

(1 Timothy 1.15)

*In him we have redemption, through his blood —
the forgiveness of sins —*

in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.

(Ephesians 1 7)

So, if we have confessed our sin to God sincerely,
let us be assured that God will forgive us.

INTRODUCTION TO THE READINGS:

The readings prescribed by the lectionary for today include the entire Passion Narrative from the Gospel of Mark, which consists of all of Chapters 14 and 15.

Normally on this Sunday, though, I focus only on the account of Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem, which, in Mark, is found in Chapter 11. However, because we’re not having a Maundy Thursday service this year, I’ve decided to include as well three passages from Chapter 14 that we would otherwise have read *on* Maundy Thursday. So, instead of a full-length sermon, I’ve decided to give a short reflection on each of the four readings. Each reflection will be followed by a hymn.

Although we commemorate Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem on a *Sunday*, none of the Gospel accounts says specifically that it happened *on* a Sunday. Nevertheless, Jesus’ ministry in Jerusalem was probably quite brief, lasting for only a few days before he was arrested and put to death.

Today’s readings are all from the Gospel of Mark; so if there are details in the story that don’t sound quite the way you remember them, keep in mind that each of the four Gospel writers tells the story a bit differently than the others. Mark’s and Matthew’s accounts are much alike; Luke’s is a bit different, and John’s, of course, is quite different — nevertheless, they all tell the same story.

FIRST READING: Mark 11.1-11 - Jesus arrives in Jerusalem

REFLECTION:

It’s important to remember that Jesus and his disciples went to Jerusalem ostensibly to celebrate the annual Passover festival. In that festival, the Israelites celebrated their ancestors’ liberation from slavery in Egypt at the time of Moses. Jews from all over the ancient world traveled to Jerusalem for this festival every year, so probably Jesus and his disciples weren’t making the pilgrimage just by themselves. They were likely part of a much larger group of people

traveling south from Galilee; and chances are that the group included people who had come from much further away, as well. These Passover pilgrims traveled mostly on foot, and would likely have camped overnight at various locations along the way.

What we call the Palm Sunday procession was very much an impromptu, spur-of-the-moment kind of thing, with no one other than Jesus knowing ahead of time that it was going to happen. Indeed, Jesus demonstrates his foreknowledge by sending a couple of disciples ahead to fetch the colt — the donkey.

I can't help but wonder what the others in the crowd knew about Jesus as they made their final approach to Jerusalem. Had they heard him teach along the way? Had they witnessed any of his miraculous healings? Did they believe he was the Messiah? Whatever the case, they give him a modest "red carpet" treatment as they come within sight of the city, by spreading their cloaks on the road in front of the donkey that Jesus is riding, along with branches cut in the fields. Only John's account specifies that the branches were "palm" branches, though.

In their shouts, the crowd quotes lines from Psalm 118, which we'll read in a few minutes — *Hosanna!*, which means "Save us!", and *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!* (Mark 11.9; Psalm 118.25-26). They also shout, *Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father, David!* (Mark 11.10); but interestingly, they don't refer to Jesus as "the Son of David", as they do in Matthew's account (21.9), or "the King", as they do in Luke (19.38), or "the King of Israel", as they do in John (12.13). Also, it's significant that those who take part in the procession are those who have been traveling with Jesus, not the people of Jerusalem. In Mark, as well as in Matthew and Luke, this is Jesus' only visit to Jerusalem during his ministry, so the people of Jerusalem probably know nothing about him at this point.

Notice that Jesus himself doesn't say anything in this passage, besides giving the instructions for fetching the donkey. How must he have felt? Certainly it must have felt nice to be affirmed by the crowd the way he was; but he knew something they didn't know: He was heading to Jerusalem to die. Was he anxious? Nervous? Gloomy? Fearful? Confident? We can only guess.

We wonder why Jesus would've chosen to approach Jerusalem in such an attention-grabbing way, since it was not his style to draw attention to himself. Matthew and John both say that he did this in fulfillment of a prophecy in the Old Testament book of Zechariah, but Mark doesn't mention that prophecy at all. The people's joyful praises were quite appropriate, however, even if they didn't understand exactly whom and what they were celebrating.

HYMN: Filled with excitement ...

RESPONSIVE PSALM: Psalm 118 - "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good!"

Psalm 118 is a psalm of thanksgiving for victory in battle.

There are at least three speakers in this psalm, one of whom is an unnamed king of Israel,

who goes to the temple in Jerusalem to give thanks to God for saving him and his people from the enemy.

We read this psalm on Palm Sunday because the words “Hosanna” and “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”, which we hear in the Palm Sunday story, come from this psalm — from verses 25 and 26. “Hosanna” means “save us”, and is translated as such in most English versions of the Bible.

SECOND READING: Mark 14.12-26 - The Passover meal

REFLECTION:

By this time in the Gospel story, Jesus and his disciples have been in Jerusalem for a few days, during which Jesus has been teaching in the courtyards of the temple.

The meal that Jesus and his disciples have together is the traditional Passover meal, with which the people of Israel celebrated the outcome of the tenth and final plague on Egypt at the time of Moses — the death of the firstborn sons — the plague that finally convinced the Pharaoh of Egypt to free the Israelites and allow them to leave the country. The meal consisted of lamb, unleavened bread, bitter herbs that symbolized the Israelites’ suffering during their enslavement in Egypt, and other symbolic foods. The lambs were ritually slaughtered at the temple in the afternoon, and the meat taken home for each family’s Passover meal in the evening.

The Passover meal was a happy, family-centered celebration, not unlike our traditional Thanksgiving dinner. We wonder, then, at the contradictory feelings that Jesus must have had at this particular meal, knowing what was going to happen to him later that evening, and on the following day. Indeed, Jesus drops a bombshell on the disciples when he announces, *One of you will betray me — one who is eating with me* (Mark 14.18). The disciples are understandably shocked and dismayed. But rather than asking, “Who is it?”, they all ask, *Surely you don’t mean me?* (Mark 14.19). Perhaps they all realize that, given the right circumstances, *any* of them is capable of betraying Jesus in some way. Their response also shows that they don’t suspect anyone.

Significantly, Jesus doesn’t identify the traitor in Mark’s account. But, earlier in the chapter, we’re told that Judas Iscariot had gone to the chief priests, and offered to hand Jesus over to them. In exchange for this, they promised to pay him — although it’s only Matthew’s account that says the payment was *thirty pieces of silver* (Matthew 26.15). What was Judas’ motive? Here in Mark, none is given, aside possibly from the money. Even at that, Judas didn’t *ask* for money when he approached the chief priests; rather, they promised to pay him only after he offered to turn Jesus over to them.

In the final portion of this reading, Jesus institutes a new symbolic meal, which we call the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Using bread and wine that were already on hand for the Passover meal, Jesus gives them new significance as symbolizing his body and blood — symboliz-

ing in turn his death on the cross, which would take place the very next day. In saying that his blood *is poured out for many* (Mark 14.24), Jesus hints that his death will be for the benefit of others.

The “words of institution” that we normally use in the sacrament actually come from Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, not from any of the Gospel accounts. This is because First Corinthians was written long before any of the Gospels were written, and therefore presumably contains a more accurate recollection of Jesus’ actual words.

The “hymn” that Jesus and the disciples sing before leaving the upper room was probably Psalm 118, the last of the five psalms that were traditionally sung during the Passover meal. The others were Psalms 114 to 117. The hymn that we’re going to sing now, though, is a paraphrase of Jesus’ words and actions in instituting the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.

HYMN: ’Twas on that night ...

THIRD READING: Mark 14.32-52 - In Gethsemane

REFLECTION:

Jesus and his disciples have left Jerusalem, crossed the Kidron Valley on the east side of the city, and climbed the Mount of Olives. Rather than spending the night in the village of Bethany, as they had on other occasions, they go to a place on the mountainside called Gethsemane. We generally refer to it as “the *garden* of Gethsemane”, but only John’s Gospel says it was a garden; and only Mark and Matthew mention the name “Gethsemane”.

If we imagine that Jesus and his disciples had that whole mountainside to themselves that evening, we’d be mistaken. It would’ve been covered with groups of other Passover pilgrims, who didn’t have anywhere else to spend the night, all sitting around their campfires, and finishing their Passover meal.

For the first time, Jesus shows that he’s troubled and anxious about what is about to happen to him. Taking Peter, James, and John with him — the inner group of his disciples — he puts a bit of distance between himself and the rest of the disciples, so he can pray.

As I’ve mentioned already in this season of Lent, this is a temptation story. However, rather than being tempted to turn stones into bread, Jesus is being tempted to avoid the cross. As in his forty days of being tempted in the wilderness, what is being tested is his commitment to God and to the ministry he has embarked on. We can certainly appreciate his reluctance to undergo the ordeal of crucifixion. Who would willingly go through it if there were a way of avoiding it? In John’s Gospel, as we saw last Sunday, Jesus scoffs at the idea of asking the Father to save him from that ordeal; but here in Mark, as well as in Matthew and Luke, Jesus does pray that the Father would spare him. He says, *Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup away from me* (Mark 14.36). The word “cup” recalls an image often used by the Old Testament prophets: the cup of God’s anger that God forces people to drink because of their disobedience

— symbolizing some kind of punishment for their sin. Here, the word cup refers to the suffering and death that are in store for Jesus. Nevertheless, in spite of his distress, Jesus manages to add, *Yet, not what I want, but what you want* (Mark 14.36). In spite of his prayer for deliverance, Jesus chooses to stay the course, and to face whatever ordeal awaits him.

In the meantime, Jesus’ “star” disciples, Peter, James, and John, have fallen asleep — not just once, but three times, oblivious to Jesus’ distress.

No sooner has Jesus finished praying than Judas shows up, accompanied by guards sent by the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem. In the darkness, the guards can’t see which of the men standing there is Jesus, so Judas points him out by going up to him and kissing him. It’s an extremely ironic action: a gesture of affection marks Jesus for death, and a horrible death at that.

The incident in which one of the disciples attacks the slave of the high priest and cuts off his ear is told very briefly by Mark, with no followup comment or action by Jesus. The other three Gospel writers all add more detail to this incident. Jesus’ response to the arrest is a gentle rebuke to his captors, beginning with the words, *Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me?* (Mark 14.48). Nevertheless, he does not resist arrest, but submits to his captors. His disciples, however, panicking, run for their lives. Judas has betrayed him; the other eleven disciples now abandon him. Jesus is now very much alone.

HYMN: Go to dark Gethsemane

FOURTH READING: Mark 14.53-65 - A hasty trial

REFLECTION:

Finally we come to the so-called “trial” before the Sanhedrin, the council of Israel’s religious leaders, which consisted of chief priests, elders, teachers of the law, and Pharisees.

The religious leaders in Jerusalem have had it in for Jesus ever since he disrupted the business of the temple by driving out the merchants selling sacrificial animals and the people exchanging Roman currency for Jewish currency. He did that shortly after his arrival in Jerusalem. They want Jesus gone, and to accomplish their goal, they need the help of the Roman authorities. The Romans certainly wouldn’t put him to death for what he had done in the temple, though. So they need a charge against Jesus that the Romans will consider serious enough to warrant the death penalty; and they need that charge to stick.

A meeting of the Sanhedrin is hastily convened once Jesus has been arrested. Keep in mind that it is late in the evening, in the middle of an important religious festival. And note that the meeting is held not at the temple, but at the high priest’s private residence. It is extremely unlikely, then, that the entire membership of the Sanhedrin would’ve been able to attend on such short notice.

I generally avoid calling this event a “trial”, because it hardly seems like a proper trial. There

seems to be no due process; only an improvised attempt to frame Jesus with a charge that the Sanhedrin can present to the Romans the following morning. People testify against Jesus — falsely, Mark says. In order to be taken seriously, though, a charge needs to be backed up by the testimony of two or more witnesses. In this case, no two witnesses can be found whose testimony agrees.

Notice how passive Jesus becomes. He doesn't defend himself; he doesn't protest his innocence; he doesn't challenge the legality of the proceedings; indeed, he refuses to say anything. He simply allows events to run their course.

Finally, the high priest asks him the 64,000-dollar question: *Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One* [meaning the Son of God]? (Mark 14.61). This time, Jesus does answer, and in doing so, he gives the Sanhedrin the evidence they need to make a charge against him stick. *I am*, he answers simply; and adds, *And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One, and coming on the clouds of heaven* (Mark 14.62).

The high priest doesn't believe him, of course, and accuses him of blasphemy — that is, of speaking disrespectfully of God, by claiming to be God's Son. More importantly, though, they now have a basis for bringing a charge against him to the Romans. Since he has admitted to being the Messiah, they can claim that he is plotting a rebellion against Roman rule in Israel — a charge the Romans will take with the utmost seriousness; a charge that, if proved, would merit the death penalty. The Sanhedrin — or the members of the Sanhedrin who are present — now have what they've been looking for.

The Passion Narrative — the account of Jesus' suffering and death — is full of irony. One of the greatest ironies is the fact that Jesus is rejected and grossly mistreated by the very people who should have accepted him and recognized the truth and validity of his message.

HYMN: Ride on, ride on in majesty

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE: *[by Charlie Clifford]*

Heavenly Father, Your hands created the heavens and the earth. You breathed upon Adam and gave him life. Everything that was created was created through Your Son, Jesus Christ. The trees, the earth, the waters, and the creatures clap their hands in praise to You. This is the day that You have made! We will rejoice and be glad in it, as we shout Your name to the heavens! Our hearts rejoice in Your presence this morning! To your ears, Lord, we pray that our singing will be a joyful noise. Your grace is amazing. You are our all in all, we worship and adore You. Lean down Your ear to us as we sing about Your love for how great thou Art, Lord! How great thou art!

Lord, we know You hear our voices when we pray to You! You are our strength and our shield. When our hearts trust in You, we are overjoyed. You give us courage to meet the challenges of the day. You give us strength to do the tasks You have set before us. You build us

up, raise us to new heights, and lead us to places we would never have dreamed were possible. You are the friend who will never leave us, the guide who walks before us. With You in our lives, the possibilities are limitless.

Like the widow, Lord, we sometimes feel so alone, and so we put our trust in You. We come to You this morning, crying to You for help — financially, spiritually, emotionally, relationally, physically. We are in desperate need of You, our one and only source of hope! Our hope today is on things unseen, remedies that You will bring to pass. As we rely on You, continue to feed our faith.

Healing God, we are reaching out our hands to You this morning knowing that if we can just touch the hem of Your garment, You will make us whole. We envision You before us. We see the compassion in Your eyes. We know that You love us and that nothing is impossible for You. Fill us with Your love. Give us Your healing touch this morning.

Christ, our God, Prince of Peace, who on this day did enter the rebellious city midst shouts of "Hosanna", enter our hearts and subdue them entirely unto You. Rule over us in all the concerns and circumstances of our lives: the work of our hands and the whims of our hearts; the ambitions of our dreams and the sins of our desires: the experience of our friendships and our secret thoughts towards others. Save us from the hypocrisy that sings "Hosanna" in the temple, and cries "Crucify Him" in the marketplace of daily business. Save us from the sham that praises with the lips but betrays You in our deeds. Save us from the treason that boasts loyalty in the upper room and then makes cowardly denial in the judgment hall. Lord, grant that as You look over us this moment You will not weep as You did riding into Jerusalem on that momentous day. Grant that every person in this place of worship and those participating via other means will want You as King of their lives, as sovereign monarch in every relationship. May each of us in reverence and adoration truly say, "Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" We pray that the day will speedily arrive when, at Your glorious return, every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that You are Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Lord, help us to speak only words that are true, noble, just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous, excellent, or praiseworthy. Help us to always be able to give the reason for the hope that is within us. Help us to speak the truth in love. Fill us with Your love so that it flows from us in the words we speak. May every word we speak bring life and encouragement and positive reinforcement to all who hear us. Help us to speak of Your goodness to everyone.

In this week, deepen our faith by Your matchless grace. Deepen the measure of our gratitude and Christian obedience. Move us, who have so much, to share with others, who have so little. Uphold us when we summon our courage to speak out for those long denied dignity and freedom.

Father, with "Holy Week" being a holiday for our school children as well, we pray that You will give journeying mercies and protection to all those who are travelling and finding other things to do. We look forward to "Holy Week" and have prepared ourselves through the sea-

son of Lent, so that we may accept all the events of “Holy Week” with reverence and understanding. We join in the triumphant entry into Jerusalem with loud “Hosannas”. We notice that at the height of His triumph, all that Jesus wanted was to rest in that quiet, loving circle of friendship, all the while knowing what awaited Him. God of supreme but gentle power, we open our hearts to You, so that You may enter and be at home with us, Your friends.

Merciful God, we are mindful of First Church and Knox Church Neepawa and their congregations. We seek Your guidance and direction in their deliberations. We ask You to meet the needs of each and every one. We thank You for the many blessings we are partakers of each and every day. In silent prayer we bring our special request to You: _____.
Lord, hear our prayers!

Father, we bring before You the school systems and all the men and women in positions of authority within the school systems. Give them godly wisdom in every decision they face, Lord, and make knowledge pleasant to them. We thank You for all the extra things that they do to keep our schools running during this time of COVID-19. We know how stressful their work can be, and we ask You to give them energy and peace.

Providing God, as Spring has arrived and we look forward to the new growth and the season of planting, we ask You to provide the necessary moisture and warmth to help our crops grow. You know what we need and when we need it and so we leave this in Your hands.

All-knowing God, we thank You for the progress that has been made in terms of dealing with the pandemic. We thank You for the vaccine, and we look forward to the time when COVID-19 will no longer be a concern. We thank You for watching over us as we’ve gone through these trying times of the pandemic. We pray for those who have lost loved ones to the virus; grant them peace.

Father, we would ask You to go with us now as we leave this time of worship. Help us to lead lives that will declare the One who brought us joy, peace, and salvation. Bless us, and make us a blessing to others, and we will be careful to give You the honour and the glory. For we ask these things in the precious name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

HYMN: My song is love unknown

COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:

Brothers and sisters in Christ:
Go into the week ahead now,
in peace,
and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,
to continue following Jesus
in the ongoing work of fulfilling God’s loving purposes
for humanity and the entire creation.

And may God bless you:
May he continue to guide, strengthen, and encourage you;
in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.