



March 16, 2008

Focus scripture
Matthew 26:14—

27:66 or

Matthew 27:11–54

Additional scriptures

Liturgy of the Passion

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Psalms 31:9–16

Philippians 2:5–11

Liturgy of the Palms

Matthew 21:1–11

Psalms 118:1–2, 19–29

Hold us close in your loving arms, Holy God, when our questions threaten to overwhelm us. Steady us with your constant grace, that we may reach out to those who also need the hope of your love. Amen.

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To the Cross

Questions. Doubt. Belief. The readings for Holy Week hold these in tension, even as God holds us. God hears our voices and tends to our needs along this journey to the cross, as we shout "Hosanna" and cry out "Why?" Even when there are no words to express our wondering, God invites our trust. We are safe in God, whose hands hold all our times.

Focus Scripture: Matthew 26:14—27:66

On this Sunday, some churches will focus on Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (**Matthew 21:1–11**) in a celebration of Palm Sunday. However, it is the voice of lament that pervades this focus passage for what many churches observe as Passion Sunday. Matthew's account of Jesus' last days of earthly life include Jesus' cry: "My God, my God, why...?" (27:46). These words are more than Jesus' cry from the cross. These are our words as we encounter Judas's betrayal, the disciples' desertion, and the women's faithful vigil at the cross and the tomb in this reading.

It seems that Matthew portrays Jesus' twelve disciples in a harshly revealing light. Though Jesus asks them to keep watch with him in prayer (26:36), they fall asleep repeatedly. When Jesus is arrested, they flee into the night (26:56). These disciples are not at the cross or the tomb as the women disciples keep vigil.

Matthew treats the religious and civil authorities involved in these events in an equally frank manner. Some have judged Matthew and the other gospel writers to be anti-Semitic because of the language they use in the passion narratives. In Matthew's account, the problem is not the religious beliefs of the leaders involved – the problem is leaders who are driven by fear and rush to judgment. The difficulties arise because of the choices made by certain leaders.

Pilate chooses to "go along to get along." In doing so, he reduces hand washing from the powerful symbol described in Deuteronomy 21:1–9 to an empty gesture. Matthew's Jewish readers would have recognized this symbol and in it heard Pilate's declaration of Jesus' innocence. Matthew strives to show how Jesus' words or life fulfill the Hebrew Scriptures. For example, the tearing of the temple curtain in 27:51

heralds the end of the old temple system and the saints rising from the tombs in 27:52–53 hearken back to Ezekiel's dry bones.

Matthew uses several titles for Jesus. "Son of Man" is the title that Jesus uses most often. Jesus is declared to be the "one who comes in the name of God" in the account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem in **Matthew 21:1–11**. The title "Son of God" is used in the High Priest's questioning of Jesus (26:63–64). Jesus' answer – which does not deny this identity – sparks the capital charge of blasphemy. "King" or "Messiah" (*christos* in Greek, meaning "anointed one") takes precedence in the trial before Pilate (27:11), because a "king" represented a political threat to Roman authority. "Son of God" is the confession by the Roman guards and centurion (27:54).

In spite of all that death can strip away, God's people declare with the psalmist in **Psalms 31:9–16** that "my times are in your hand." The acclamation, "The Lord God helps me," is spoken twice in **Isaiah 50:4–9a**, a statement of extraordinary trust when made in the midst of insults and physical abuse.

Philippians 2:5–11 declares that Jesus' death is not a loss of hope. Jesus chooses God's way over all. Jesus' life is lived in love and obedience to God.



Today, on Palm Sunday, we shout our praises before quieting our voices to enter into the passion of our God. This Holy Week, as we reflect on Jesus' journey to the cross, God continues to hear our praise, our lament, and our wondering. God's presence can be trusted along this way. What words of praise and lament do you long to release from the depths of your heart this week?

