Worship Resources for March 25, 2018—Palm/Passion Sunday

Revised Common Lectionary: Palm Sunday

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Mark 11:1-11 or John 12:12-16

Revised Common Lectionary: Passion Sunday

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 14:1-15:47 or Mark 15:1-39 (40-47)

Narrative Lectionary: The Crucified Messiah, John 19:16b-22 or Triumphal Entry, John 12:12-27; Psalm 24

Resources for Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Vigil and Easter Sunday can be found here.

The readings for Palm Sunday begin with the triumphal call to temple worship in Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29. God has chosen the people who were rejected, and they are now the chief cornerstone. The righteous are called to enter the gates of the temple of God; and blessed is the one who comes in the name of God.

Mark’s account of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem in 11:1-11 begins with Jesus sending two of his disciples to find a colt that had never been ridden before. They find the colt where he says it will be, and they repeat Jesus’ promise to return it. The disciples place their cloaks on the colt and the bystanders spread their cloaks, along with leafy branches, creating a processional into Jerusalem. They cry out, “Hosanna,” which means, “Save us!” They also shout, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord,” echoing the call to the temple in the psalms, reminiscent of the entrance of David. In Mark’s account, this is the first time Jesus has ever been to the temple, so he takes some time to look around at everything before nightfall. Jesus does not enter Jerusalem on a war horse, but on a colt, reminiscent of Zechariah 9:9, that the new king promised by God will not come as the conquering kings of the empires have come to Jerusalem. Instead, this is a king from the people.

John’s account of Jesus’ entry in 12:12-16 adds palm branches, and declares Jesus the King of Israel. This declaration is not found in the other Gospel accounts. John’s account also directly quotes Zechariah (as does Matthew’s account). The writer of John also reminds the reader that the disciples didn’t understand what was happening at the time, but they did after the resurrection. John is also the only account in which this is not Jesus’ first time to Jerusalem or the temple.

The readings for Passion Sunday start with the prophet Isaiah, in 50:4-9a, with a reading from the Suffering Servant passages. While Christians have often interpreted these passages as referring to the Messiah, in Isaiah’s context, these referred to the people of Israel as the Suffering Servant, for they had suffered much in their conquest and exile, and God was now vindicating them in their return. It is easy to see resemblances of Christ’ suffering in these passages, but we must always be aware of the Jewish context, and that they were written in a time when the people were suffering, not thinking of a messianic figure several hundred years into the future. But we can see Jesus’ experience in these passages, of not resisting the violence against him, of knowing that God was with him, as God was with the people when they suffered.

In Psalm 31:9-16, the psalmist is suffering terribly. Enemies are plotting to take the psalmist’s life. The writer is scorned and ridiculed and physically suffering; yet the psalmist trusts in God, and knows God will deliver them, saving them in God’s steadfast love.

The ancient church confession of Christ being equal with God, but being humble as a servant, emptying himself to the point of death on the cross, is part of Philippians 2:5-11. Whether this originated with Paul, or more likely was a common confession of the early church, Paul uses this confession to write to the church in Philippi to be like Christ: to know God’s love, and yet be humble like Christ, willing to lay down one’s life for others. For Christ has now been raised, lifted up by God, and everyone should know Christ is Lord.

In Mark’s full account of Jesus’ Passion, we begin two days before the Passover, at the home of Simon the Leper—in other words, an outcast. Jesus is anointed by another outcast—a woman who wastes an expensive jar of nard to pour it on Jesus’ head. The disciples are outraged at the waste, but Jesus tells them that she has done a good service for him. He then says, “For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish, but you will not always have me.” Jesus doesn’t release the disciples from the call to care for the poor, but that we always have the opportunity to do so. But don’t scold the poor person who chooses to use what they have in an act of kindness for someone else.

The second scene takes place on the first day of Passover, after Judas has gone to the chief priests to betray Jesus. Jesus celebrates the Passover with the disciples, and warns that one will betray him. When Jesus also declares that they will all desert him, Peter denies that he will vehemently—almost as vehemently as he denies he knows Jesus just a short time later.

The third scene is in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus prays, but Peter, James and John all fall asleep instead of staying awake with him. Jesus is then betrayed by Judas with a kiss. One of Jesus’ own disciples strikes back with the sword, but Jesus addresses the crowd that came to arrest him as if he was a bandit. They are treating him like he was hurting others, when he was teaching among them every day and they did nothing then. Jesus is arrested and handed over to the priests, as all the rest of the disciples flee.

(Fun fact: in Mark’s account, a “certain young man was following them” and apparently was only wearing a linen cloth and ends up running off naked. Some scholars suggest that the reason for anonymity is that this is the author of Mark himself. This scene is not found in the other Gospel accounts).

The fourth scene is Jesus before the high priest, with Peter hanging around in the courtyard. False testimony is given in the priestly court, but when the high priest asks if Jesus is the Messiah, the “Son of the Blessed One,” Jesus says he is, and that he will be “seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven.” The high priest considers this blasphemy, and decides he deserves death. Meanwhile, Peter denies that he knows Jesus, but when the rooster crows, Peter weeps, recognizing that he couldn’t stay faithful for even a day.

The fifth scene is before Pilate, where the priests have handed him over because they were unable to put anyone to death during the Passover. However, Jesus refused to answer Pilate’s questions. Pilate announces the custom of releasing a prisoner on the holy festival, but the crowds shout for Barabbas, an insurrectionist convicted of murder. Pilate asks what they want with the King of the Jews, and the people shout, “Crucify him!” Pilate then has him flogged, and turned over to be crucified.

The sixth scene is in the courtyard of the palace, where Jesus is stripped, beaten, dressed in purple and a crown of thorns. As they leave the courtyard, the soldiers compel Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross for Jesus’ crucifixion.

The seventh scene is Golgotha, the Place of the Skull, and Jesus is nailed to the cross, crucified with other bandits. The soldiers cast lots for his clothes. Darkness covers the land at three in the afternoon, and Jesus cries out with the first line of Psalm 22, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Once Jesus is dead, Pilate grants the request of Joseph of Arimathea (who was a member of the council) to take Jesus’ body and have it laid in the tomb, and Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of Joses observe his burial.

The shorter passage for the Passion is 15:1-39 (or through 47) which includes only the events of Good Friday—being brought before Pilate, his condemnation, and his crucifixion. In these scenes, Jesus is silent, except for crying out on the cross. He does not resist the violence against him, does not resist the darkness that comes, and does not resist death. Those who loved him, who weren’t counted among the twelve disciples, are the ones who are there in the end: the two Mary’s, and Joseph of Arimathea.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on the Crucified Messiah in John 19:16b-22. In John’s account, there is an inscription added to the cross, in Hebrew, Greek and Latin, that read, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” The chief priests argue with Pilate to have it say, “this man said,” but Pilate leaves it as he tells it.

The other option is Jesus’ triumphal entry in John 12:12-27. Jesus enters Jerusalem and the crowds, who have been with him since he raised Lazarus from the dead, call him the King of Israel. After he enters Jerusalem, some Greeks wish to see Jesus, and it is in this moment that Jesus declares the hour has come. The Messiah is being revealed to the world again in a new way, and Jesus eludes to his own death as the way of revelation.

Psalm 24 praises God as the King of Glory. A psalm of entry, of triumph for God as a warrior king, the psalmist reminds the people that the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it. Only those who are pure and clean may enter the holy place of God, and instead of a worldly king, the psalmist declares that the King of Glory will now enter the gates.

In all the accounts, from Jesus’ entry to Jerusalem to his death at Golgotha, Jesus does not resist what happens. Jesus does not resist the pageantry of riding on a donkey into Jerusalem, and does not resist the violence of the people at the cross. Instead, Jesus lays down his life, modeling the love that God has for all of us, and how we ought to love one another, in his humbleness. Christ’s reign is not of this world, not made by human hands, nor can it be taken away by worldly rulers. God’s love endures forever, and Christ exemplifies this love in his life, death, and resurrection.

Call to Worship

Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

 **Hosanna in the highest!**

Hosanna! Blessed is the coming reign of God!

 **Hosanna in the highest!**

Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in humility and righteousness!

 **Hosanna in the highest!**

Hosanna! Save us, O God!

 **Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!**

 **Save us, O God, and fill our hearts in this time of worship.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Holy One, we confess that we continue to deny and betray You, for we serve the world’s interests instead of You. We confess that we allow fear to rule in our hearts, and we turn away, instead of holding fast to trust and love. We confess that we seek our own gain instead of seeking to serve You by loving our neighbor as ourselves. Forgive us for our faults. Forgive us for failing You. Call us into Your ways of righteousness, of justice and peace. Grant us wisdom and courage, faith and love, to live into Your ways. In the name of Christ, who though he was betrayed and denied, did not waiver; in the name of Jesus, who was abandoned by his friends, never abandoned the great love he has for us. It is in the strong name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

God’s steadfast love endures forever. There is nothing you can do, no place you can go, where God’s love will not find you. God has given us light and love, hope and peace, and nothing can take that away. Know that God loves you, God is with you, and God will always be found in your heart. Amen.

Prayer

Creator God, You made us in Your image, and then came to us as one of us. You know our lives, our pain and our struggles, our challenges and dreams. You know our greatest hopes and desires, as You know the hairs on our head. May we know Your love more fully by loving one another. May we know Your care for us by caring for the needs of others and for this one Earth, one home that You have made and given us, and called us to take care of. In Your name we pray. Amen.