Worship Resources for April 5th—Palm and Passion Sunday

Revised Common Lectionary:

Palm Sunday: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Matthew 21:1-11

Passion Sunday: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 26:14-27:66 or 27:11-54

Narrative Lectionary: Triumphal Entry or Anointing at Bethany, Mark 11:1-11 or Mark 14:3-9 (Psalm 118:25-29)

For Palm Sunday, the Revised Common Lectionary begins with the traditional reading from Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29, a call to the congregation assembling at the temple and preparing to enter the gates. The psalmist reminds the people that the righteous are the ones who may enter the gates of God’s temple. The psalmist calls upon the people to process up to the altar with branches in celebration. This psalm also refers to the cornerstone that was rejected has become the chief cornerstone, referring to how the people of Israel were rejected by the world, but chosen by God, who has saved them, whose steadfast love endures forever.

Only in Matthew’s account of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem does Jesus ask the disciples to obtain two donkeys—a mother and her colt. The writer of Matthew’s Gospel account didn’t quite understand Hebrew poetry, whereas Luke and Mark correctly understand the prophet Zechariah prophesied of a new king who would be humble and riding upon a donkey as opposed to a warhorse, and the second line in Zechariah 9:9 was meant to echo and emphasize the first. The writer of Matthew was focused on proving that Jesus was the Messiah prophesied in the Hebrew scriptures, to the point of taking Zechariah quite literally. When the people shout as Jesus enters Jerusalem, they proclaim, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” emphasizing Jesus as the new king in the line of David.

For Passion Sunday, the lectionary begins with one of the Suffering Servant passages from Isaiah. In 50:4-9a, the prophet speaks on behalf of the people, who served God even in their suffering, even as they went into exile—they did not strike back against those who struck them. Instead, the prophet assures the people that God will help them, that God is the one who vindicates them.

The psalmist pleads for God’s deliverance in Psalm 31:9-16. The writer has suffered, and everyone has turned against them. They describe themselves as a broken vessel—they are supposed to be filled with life, but they cannot be. All have fled in terror or have betrayed the psalmist, but the psalmist knows that their trust is in God. The psalmist knows they are loved by God, and they call upon God to save them.

Philippians 2:5-11 contains an ancient confession of the church, that Jesus was equal with God, but became one of us. Jesus emptied himself of his power, and humbled himself to die as one of us. Because of this, God raised him, giving him the name above every name. All are called at the name of Jesus to kneel as they would to a king, to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

The first Gospel selection of Matthew 26:14-27:66 contains the full Passion story, from Judas’ betrayal to Jesus’ burial, and the tomb sealed by Pilate’s men the day after Jesus’ death. Matthew’s account has some interesting notes: Barabbas is also known by the name of Jesus, so Pilate presents Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah as the choices of prisoners to be released. Which is the people’s Messiah, the notorious prisoner, or the notorious preacher? Matthew’s account also has the only mention of Pilate’s wife, who had a dream about Jesus that he was innocent. Because Matthew was so concerned about proving that Jesus was the Messiah prophesied in the Hebrew scriptures, the writer and community of Matthew’s account were concerned with being right, with having the correct interpretation of the Scriptures against other Jewish groups at the time. So the term “Jews” is used to refer to those who opposed the Jews who followed Jesus; however, they were still all considered Jews at the time this account was written. It’s important to take note of that, as these passages have often been used to portray Jews in general along with the some of the religious leadership at that time as a united group against the group following Jesus, and that’s not true. There were a variety of groups within first century Judaism, some who followed Jesus while others followed other teachers, and there was no conspiracy among all first-century Jews to stop the movement and kill Jesus. Matthew’s account even goes as far as to plant seeds of discord among readers that it was the Jewish leaders who wanted Jesus’ tomb sealed—that is not in any of the other Gospel accounts.

The abbreviated Gospel lesson in Matthew 27:11-54 narrows its focus from Jesus’ arrest to his death on the cross. This selection still contains Pilate’s wife’s dream, the presentation of Jesus Barabbas and Jesus the Messiah, and the resurrection of the dead at Jesus’ death. Even in Jesus’ death, hope is experienced in the graves already opening, the resurrection already taken place, in Matthew’s account.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on Mark’s account of the entry into Jerusalem in Mark 11:1-11. Mark also focuses on Jesus as the one in the line of David, and the people, who have gathered as Jesus enters the city, proclaim that the kingdom of their ancestor David is coming. He then enters the temple for the first time with his disciples to “take a look at everything.”

The second reading of the Narrative Lectionary is the story of Jesus’ anointing at Bethany. In Mark’s account, Jesus went to the home of Simon the Leper in Mark 14:3-9, and a woman comes in with a costly jar of ointment. Others were angry that she seemed to waste it on Jesus, when that expensive jar could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Jesus questions them on their motives—this woman has done nothing wrong. She has shown kindness to him. Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 15:11 that because there will always be poor among them, they need to open their hands to all who are in need in their land. This woman has done what she could for Jesus while he is with them. Jesus concludes that wherever the good news is proclaimed in the land, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.

This portion of Psalm 118:25-29 is the call for the congregation to approach the altar, waving branches, and calling upon God to save them. The psalmist proclaims blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, and calls upon the people to give thanks to God, whose steadfast love endures forever.

We are entering Holy Week in the midst of a COVID-19 outbreak in our world, most of us at home rather than in our churches. How do we welcome Christ into our homes in this time? How do we prepare for the One who Reigns in our hearts? We remember that the kingdom of God is not of this world. We remember that God is present with us no matter where we are. As the residents of Jerusalem long ago came out to welcome Jesus, the hope of a new king while they were being oppressed by the Roman Empire seemed far-fetched, with Pilate in town to make sure there were no revolts during the Passover. Yet they dared to hope. We dare to hope for the reign of God to be present in our lives now while we remain in isolation—or for those who are essential workers, while they risk their lives to make our lives continue on through necessary services. We all, together in spirit though separated by physical space, dare to hope for the reign of God.

Call to Worship (from Psalm 118:1, 26-27a, 28-29)

**O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good,**

**God’s steadfast love endures forever.**

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

**We bless you from the house of the Lord.**

**The Lord is our God, and God has given us light.**

**You are my God, and I will give thanks to You.**

**You are my God, and I will extol you.**

**O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good,**

**God’s steadfast love endures forever.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

We confess O God that we are broken. We are not together physically. We are struggling and suffering in this world, in this time of isolation. However, we confess, O God, that You are our healer. You are the one who unites, who binds us together. We confess that we feel lost, in an unfamiliar time, with an unknown future. But we also confess, O God, that we have an opportunity to learn the needs of our neighbors more clearly, to listen to one another more deeply. We confess, O God, that at times we are finding more spaces to rest. We confess that we are also exhausted. We confess all the ways that we are distressed, ill at ease, where we struggle with the space we are in; we also confess the simple pleasures we have found in activities we have more time for. In all this weirdness, O God, help us to find You, to welcome You in our lives, to know that Your reign is not of this world. Remind us that this will be temporary, but Your reign is eternal. In the name of Christ, who knows our isolation, who knows what it is like to struggle to find rest, who knows our needs in this time, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

God’s steadfast love endures forever. No matter what you are going through, no matter what difficulties you face, know that you are loved deeply by God. You matter to God. The hairs on your head are accounted for. Breathe deeply into the Spirit of Life, give thanks for your life, and bless one another. Care for one another. Love one another. Know that God’s steadfast love will endure beyond what we are going through now. God’s steadfast love endures forever. Amen.

Prayer

Hosanna! Save us, O God. Save us from temptation. Save us from our tempers, our short fuses and bad moods. Save us from despair. Save us from hopelessness. Hosanna! Save us, O God. Save us from giving up. Save us from not planning ahead. Save us from worry. Save us from fear. Hosanna! Save us, O God. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed are you, Lord Jesus, who came into our world as one of us, who died as one of us, and who lives again. May we seek Your reign on earth as it is in heaven. Hosanna in the Highest! Amen.

Ideas for celebrating Palm Sunday at home:

-Find coloring pages online of palms to send to families (please check copyright info before printing and sharing). Cut out the palms and tape them in your windows.

-Find green leafy branches or ferns from outside and place them in vases.

-Make a banner that reads “Hosanna!” to place in your home until isolation/stay at home orders are lifted (Hosanna means “Save Us”)

-Go for a walk and take notice of all the green in your neighborhood. Where do you see signs of God’s reign in the world?