

UNDERSTANDING THIS WEEK

March 25, 2018

Palm Sunday

[Psalm 118:19-25](#)

[John 12:12-19](#)

(prayer)

Welcome to Holy Week (or Passion Week).

Palm Sunday to Easter.

//

Traditionally, this is the most significant week within the church year, although I must say that it doesn't quite match *Christmas* when it comes to popularity within the wider society.

In fairness, Holy Week is a little messier than Christmas... as long as you avoid that *let's kill all the baby boys* part of the story until January 6th.

//

//

Some Key Events of Holy Week

- As John tells it, things really started the day before Palm Sunday, when Jesus shared the Sabbath meal at the Bethany home of his friend, Lazareth. That is where the fourth gospel inserts a story that is also found in Matthew, Mark and Luke: *a woman anoints Jesus with expensive perfume - an act that is called out for being wasteful. Jesus defends the woman, saying she has offered him a valuable, worthy tribute.* As I said, chronologically, John puts this story on **Saturday**. Matthew and Mark place it a few days later... regardless, 3 of the 4 gospels include *the anointing of Jesus* as a "holy week" event.
- **Sunday** - the first day of a week - Jesus (and his group of Galilean pilgrims) travelled the two and a half kilometres from Bethany to Jerusalem to visit the temple and begin enjoying the festival activities of the passover week.
 - Curiously, Jesus makes the trip riding a donkey. As the story was told in the years that followed, gospel writers would see parallels in a passage from the book of Zechariah: *Rejoice and shout for joy, people of Jerusalem! Your king is coming to you - triumphant and victorious - humble and riding on a donkey.* (Zech9:9)
 - It seems that this performance (and Jesus' Palm Sunday was for show; I doubt that Jesus had a sprained ankle) was a deliberate mocking of Pontius Pilate... who was also in town at the time of the festival. Some preachers (including me a couple of years ago) enjoy speculating that Pilate was parading in at one end of town, on a grand war horse with a ceremonial guard; while, at the other hand, Jesus held this other parade on a humble donkey. Jesus' disciples (who were in on the joke) probably really enjoyed whipping up the crowd to shout praises at Jesus, all the while thinking "I wonder what Pilate would think of this!"
 - While the parade was a parody for Jesus and his disciples, I do believe that there was genuine appreciation among the branch waving crowds as this northern rabbi with the good reputation as a preacher and healer arrived. I believe that the joyous *hosannas* were genuine.
 - Along with other pilgrims, the **jesus-group** ended the day by setting up camp on the Mount of Olives hillside on the outskirts of the city. That would be their home base for the week.

Rev. T. Blaine Gregg

- **Monday** - The mood begins to change.
 - Jesus and his disciples go to the temple again (as they would each day). It was busy with crowds of out of town visitors. Many of the pilgrims had come to take part in certain rituals that were unique to the temple - acts of faith that they couldn't experience in their local synagogues: special offerings, sacrificial gifts, etc.
 - Some of these rituals required gifts of money or animal offerings, like small birds, sheep. It was not always practical for pilgrims to have travelled with those animals from home.
 - The temple managers had adjusted to that over the years, by giving people the chance to purchase doves or lambs in the temple court yard.
 - The temple also provided currency exchange booths, so that people could convert their local money into temple currency for those purchases or for alms giving or for cash offerings.
 - These practical services were intended to increase people's ability to participate in the specialness of temple experiences.
 - The day after Palm Sunday, Jesus flipped out about all of this commercial activity: *My temple should be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves.* // Now, Jesus probably didn't sing it like [Ted Neely](#); he simply quoted lines from Isaiah and Jeremiah as he knocked over tables and herded the animals out with a whip.
 - Why did Jesus act out this time? Jesus had been to the temple before. In fact, he was there the day before and... presumably in years past. This could not have been the first time that Jesus had seen the merchants and money changers during a Passover week. Why make a scene this time?
 - In his 1989 book, *Last Chance*, Jim Taylor suggests that when it came to that week, Jesus stopped *telling* parables and started *acting* them out instead.
 - What might have been Jesus trying to teach by turning over the tables at the temple? It could have been literally what the text says, Jesus was bothered by the commercialism... or perhaps he was observing price gouging or unfair exchange rates and was reacting to corruption.
 - Typically, when Jesus *told* parables, it was the second layer of meaning where the lesson was found.
 - As a metaphoric parable, the cleansing of the temple could have been a statement of warning... a warning against becoming *too* comfortable in our faith and practice. It was convenient and comfortable to fill the courtyard with goods; it made it easy for the temple to accommodate the crowds. But it was a distraction. It took away opportunities to experience the discipline of preparing for acts of faith.
 - 19th century journalist and humorist, Finley Peter Dunne, famously wrote that "*The job of the newspaper is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.*"
 - Jesus may have been saying something similar as he acted out a parable in the temple courtyard: *you people are too comfortable, let me afflict you for a bit.* Faith is to be alive, transformative, dynamic... not complacent.
 - But, in making this point, Jesus was upsetting the Jerusalem economy... at least for part of one day.
- **Through out the week**, it sounds like Jesus visited the temple every day. No word on how he or the money changers reacted when Jesus made his way into the temple.
- Once in the main open area, Jesus and his disciples would find a place to gather. A place

public enough so other pilgrims could come by, listen to Jesus teach; take part in the discussions.

- Gospel accounts detail a number of times that Jesus had combative debates with various people who disagreed with his theology: scribes, sadducees, lawyers, herodians... they all tried to discredit Jesus. // Jesus was upsetting the religious order of Jerusalem.
- Jesus also ad libed some situational teaching: *Seeing rich people putting their gifts into the treasury and a poor widow putting in two small copper coins. Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, this woman has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty.'* // Jesus was upsetting the social order of Jerusalem.
- The **Thursday** after Palm Sunday that year must have been the 15th day of the hebrew month of Nissan as the gospel writers describe Jesus and his disciples eating the [Passover](#) meal that day. Instead of eating around their Mount of Olives campfire, they secured a room to have dinner together. The traditional site of the *upper room* in thought to be in the Essene Quarter in the SE corner of the city.
 - The Passover meal had a history that went back more than a thousand years by the time of Jesus. Passover commemorated the final plague that ultimately convinced the Egyptian pharaoh to let the Israelite people go.
 - Moses convinced the people they would be allowed to leave in the morning, so he instructed the people to rush through a meal: *kill and roast a lamb big enough for only one meal; don't leave any leftovers; if you have to share a meal with your neighbour. And there won't be time to let the dough rise, so eat unleaven bread. And, before you go to bed, pack your belongings for a trip and mark you house's door posts with blood from the lamb you prepared for supper.*
 - The story goes: that night a plague of death swept over all of pharaoh's kingdom, but it *passed over* the marked homes. Utterly grief-stricken and defeated, the next morning, pharaoh released the Hebrew people from slavery and Moses led them as they made the long trek to Jacob's ancestral homeland.
 - That passover Thursday after Palm Sunday, Jesus and his disciples sat relaxed and shared a lamb feast - a lamb they had taken to the temple to be slaughtered and blessed. They ate unleaven bread and other special food rich in symbolic meaning to remind them of God's liberating acts. They blessed and drank several glasses of wine as they recounted the stories of Moses and the exodus.
 - They did what had been done for generations. But that year, Jesus added a new layer of meaning for his closest followers. As they passed around the bread, Jesus said: **this is my body**. And while drinking their cups of blessing, he said: **this is my blood. When you eat and drink like this, know that God redeems you and... also remember me and all that we have done and learned together**. Another acted-out parable?
 - After the meal, I imagine that, while the group treasurer settled accounts with the homeowner for the room rental, the rest of the group went back to their campsite on the Mount of Olives. Judas would be along later.
- With the sun having set, it was officially **Friday**. A few of them joined Jesus in a nearby garden to end the day with prayer.
 - At some point, Jesus wanted a bit more privacy, so he went on a little further on his own. Jesus was gone over an hour, so we can't be surprised that (with their beliefs and

- livers full) Peter, John and James fell asleep.
- When Jesus woke them up, he retold them some version of one of his favorite parables: **The kingdom of heaven is like ten bridesmaids who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and didn't bring any extra oil with them. When the bridegroom was delayed, they all fell asleep. But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! The bridegroom is coming, let's go out to meet him." But the foolish bridesmaid's lamps had burned out and they had to rush home to get more oil. They ended up missing the banquet.** (Mt25:1-10)
 - Jesus went back for more prayer. When he returned again to snoring disciples, he told them the parable one more time: **....stay awake, for you do not know the day or the hour when the Son of Man is coming.** (Mt24:43-44) I bet that Peter, James and John never forgot that parable, even after they fell asleep for a third time.
 - When Jesus came back after his third prayer, he found a fourth disciple with Peter, James and John. Judas was now there and he was with a group of temple guards. Judas kissed Jesus (as a way of pointing him out to the soldiers). After a brief scuffle, Jesus was arrested and taken away. The civic authorities had definitely taken notice of Jesus' acted-out parables... and they were none too pleased.
 - Over the rest of the night and into the day, Jesus was bounced around between religious and political leaders, who tried to figure out what to do with him.
 - Even some of his disciples were feeling the heat: not sure whether there would be more arrests. They were cautious about letting on they were one of Jesus' followers.
 - In the end, Jesus found himself in front of Pontius Pilate's judgment seat. Jesus had subtly mocked the governor's authority a few days earlier, but this time Pilate held Jesus' life in his hands. The official charge was *treason against Rome*. Word had reached Pilate's ears that Jesus was being hailed as a king, greater than [Emperor Tiberius](#). Jesus wasn't a realistic threat, but public order must be maintained... the people demanded it. Pilate sentenced Jesus to death by crucifixion.
 - There is even a story that the fickle crowds had so turned against Jesus since Palm Sunday that they preferred clemency for a known bandit over the rabbi from Nazareth.
 - Crucifixion was common in the Roman Empire of the first century. In fact, on the day that Jesus was nailed to a cross, there were at least two other executions in Jerusalem at the same time.
 - Crucifixion could take days to kill its victim. Death came - not from the superficial nail wounds - but from slow asphyxiation: brought on by raised and outstretched arms. A person could hold off the worst of it as long as their legs were strong enough to push the body up a bit. This was intentional. It made the condemned suffer longer, allowing crowds to taunt them over and over. As a deterrent to would-be criminals, the crucifixion posts were displayed in high traffic areas for maximum exposure.
 - Among Jesus' final acts were:
 - to offer comfort and hope to one of his co-condemned and
 - to ask his closest friend to look after his mother.
 - Even after a day of betrayal, accusations, denials and torture, Jesus still glowed with a compassionate heart. I don't know if he intended that to be his final living parable, but... it was.
 - Jesus had been flogged and beaten so badly, that he breathed his last breath after only six hours... from 9am to 3pm.

Rev. T. Blaine Gregg

- This was perhaps to only fortunate part of the day: that Jesus died after a relatively short time. To check to see if he was dead yet, they stabbed his side - how fortunate that Jesus did not feel that added pain.
- This time also allowed his followers to remove the corpse and place it in a tomb before the Sabbath began at sunset. The gospel accounts differ as to whether they temporarily laid Jesus in a nearby empty tomb or whether one of Jesus' wealthy benefactors donated the burial site.
- The gospels also differ on how much of the body-preparation rituals the disciples had time to complete before the sun set. But, I think we can assume that Jesus' followers had to leave him sooner that would have liked.
- The **Saturday**, just six days after Palm Sunday, was a day of *forced waiting* and *deep grief*. The Sabbath rules restricted Jesus' disciples from visiting the tomb or finishing the anointing rituals.
- That would have to wait for **Sunday's** first light.

//
//

Let us pray:

Loving God, as we wave high our palms, prepare us for what is to come. May we be faithful through it all. Amen.

#127VU (tune #20VU) "Ride On, Ride On In Majesty "