

What is Palm / Passion Sunday?

Palm/Passion Sunday is, by design, a day of drama and paradox, of triumph and tragedy. As the service begins, a crowd gathers, waving branches and shouting “Hosanna” (Hebrew for “save us”), and wanting to crown Jesus as king. But as the story of Christ’s passion unfolds, the shouts of praise turn into demands for his death. Jesus is handed over to be mocked, tortured, and killed; the crown he receives is one of thorns. For a number of reasons, it is important to preserve the paradox of Palm/ Passion Sunday, celebrating this liturgy in its fullness.

- **First**, the service is established on the theological principle that Jesus’ death and resurrection cannot be separated. It insists that we not avoid the cross – God’s way of glory leads through the grave. Indeed, there is a clear path through this service, connecting Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem with his triumphal entry into the new Jerusalem, where the white-robed multitudes will again take up their palms, shouting: “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Rev. 7:9-10).
- **Second**, since many people are unable to attend the midweek worship services of Holy Week, the Palm/Passion liturgy ensures that they will hear the whole story of Jesus’ dying and rising – not skipping from “hosanna” to “hallelujah.”
- **Third**, this pattern of worship at the beginning of Holy Week has ancient origins, dating to at least the fourth century and reflecting the theological, pastoral, and liturgical wisdom of the early church.

Because this is such a full service, it is appropriate to allow the story of scripture to speak for itself; a brief sermon, if any, will suffice. The extended reading of the passion narrative is most effectively presented when it is divided among several readers, perhaps representing major characters in the story. The celebration of the Eucharist is an especially significant part of this service, as it follows from the Gospel reading and embraces the complex themes of the liturgy.

The Passion According to Mark (*Mark 14:1 – 15:47*)

Passion, as used here, refers to Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. Palm Sunday, when it includes the reading of the story of Jesus' crucifixion, can also be called Passion Sunday.

Narrator: It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; for they said,

Choir: "Not during the festival, or there may be a riot
(chief priests, among the people."
scribes)

Narrator: While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. But some were there who said to one another in anger,

People: **"Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred days wages, and the money given to the poor."**

Narrator: And they scolded her. But Jesus said,

Jesus: "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. 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. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

Narrator: Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give him money. So he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to him,

People: **"Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?"**
(disciples)

Narrator: So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them,

Jesus: "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there."

Narrator: So the disciples set out and went to the city, and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.

1. Hymn / Anthem / Special Music (Please remain seated)

Narrator: When it was evening, he came with the twelve. And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said,

Jesus: "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me."

Narrator: They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, "Surely, not I?" He said to them,

Jesus: "It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the bowl with me. For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born."

Narrator: While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said,

Jesus: "Take; this is my body."

Narrator: Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them,

Jesus: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."

2. Hymn / Anthem / Special Music (Please remain seated)

Narrator: When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. And Jesus said to them,

Jesus: "You will all become deserters; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.' But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee."

Narrator: Peter said to him,

People: "Even though all become deserters, I will not."
(Peter)

Jesus: "Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times."

People: "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you."
(Peter)

Narrator: And all of them said the same. They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples,

Jesus: "Sit here while I pray."

Narrator: He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them,

Jesus: "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake."

Narrator: And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said,

Jesus: "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want."

Narrator: He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter,

Jesus: "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

Narrator: And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. He came a third time and said to them,

Jesus: "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand."

Narrator: Immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard." So when he came, he went up to him at once and said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him. Then they laid hands on him and arrested him. But one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to them,

Jesus: "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled."

Narrator: All of them deserted him and fled. A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.

(Continued →)

Narrator: They took Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes were assembled. Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the guards, warming himself at the fire.

Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none. For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree. Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying,

People: **"We heard him say,**
(false
witnesses) **'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands,**
 and in three days I will build another,
 not made with hands.'"

Narrator: But even on this point their testimony did not agree.
Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus,

High Priest: "Have you no answer?
What is it that they testify against you?"

Narrator: But he was silent and did not answer.
Again, the high priest asked him,

High Priest: "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"

Jesus: "I am; and 'you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power,' and 'coming with the clouds of heaven.'"

Narrator: Then the high priest tore his clothes and said,

High Priest: "Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?"

Narrator: All of them condemned him as deserving death. Some began to spit on him, to blindfold him, and to strike him, saying to him, "Prophecy!" The guards also took him over and beat him.

3. Hymn / Anthem / Special Music (Please remain seated)

Narrator: While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came by. When she saw Peter warming himself, she stared at him and said, "You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth." But he denied it, saying,

People: "I do not know or understand what you are talking about."
(Peter)

Narrator: And he went out into the forecourt. Then the cock crowed. And the servant-girl, on seeing him, began again to say to the bystanders, "This man is one of them." But again he denied it. Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, "Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean." But he began to curse, and he swore an oath,

People: "I do not know this man you are talking about."
(Peter)

Narrator: At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, "Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down and wept.

(Silence)

As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. Pilate asked him,

Pilate: "Are you the King of the Jews?"

Jesus: "You say so."

Narrator: Then the chief priests accused him of many things. Pilate asked him again,

Pilate: "Have you no answer?
See how many charges they bring against you."

Narrator: But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed. Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. Then he answered them,

Pilate: "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?"

Narrator: For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. Pilate spoke to them again,

Pilate: "Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?"

People: "Crucify him!"
(*crowd*)

Pilate: "Why, what evil has he done?"

Narrator: But they shouted all the more,

People: "Crucify him!"
(*crowd*)

Narrator: So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

4. Hymn / Anthem / Special Music (Please remain seated)

Narrator: Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. And they began saluting him,

People: "Hail, King of the Jews!"
(*soldiers*)

Narrator: They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him. They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. The inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying,

People: "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in
(bystanders) **three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!"**

Narrator: In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying,

Choir: "He saved others; he cannot save himself.
(chief priests, scribes) Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe."

Narrator: Those who were crucified with him also taunted him. When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice,

Jesus: "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?"

Narrator: ...which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said,

People: "Listen, he is calling for Elijah."

(bystanders)

Narrator: And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying,

People: "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down."

(bystanders)

Narrator: Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.

(Silence)

Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

(Continued →)

Narrator: When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph.

Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid.



Reader Parts

Narrator *The narrator parts that transition from p. 6 to 7, and from p. 12 to 13 are split over a page break. Also, on pp. 9 and 12 there is a moment of silence within the narrator's part.*

Jesus

High Priest *(see p. 7-8)*

Pilate *(see p. 9-10)*

Choir *(chief priests and scribes, see p. 2, 11)*

People *(disciples, Peter, false witnesses, crowd, soldiers, bystanders)*

Music Selections pages 3, 4, 8, and 10
This outline shows where the music selections occur in the narrative for assisting with choosing music.

Anointing at Bethany

Jesus sends two disciples to prepare the Passover meal

1. Hymn / Anthem

Last Supper

2. Hymn / Anthem

Mount of Olives and Gethsemane

Jesus is Arrested

Jesus' trial before the High Priest

3. Hymn / Anthem

Peter's Denial of Jesus

Jesus' trial before Pilate

4. Hymn / Anthem

The Crucifixion and Burial

What is Palm / Passion Sunday? page 1

Glossary for Palm/Passion Sunday pages 15-16

A Glossary for Palm/Passion Sunday

Addressing several key images and terms in the Palm Sunday and Passion narratives, this short glossary may be especially helpful for leaders of youth, adult studies, and lay readers, to enrich their understanding of these important accounts. While the stories are familiar, many of the terms and concepts can at times lose their meaning through their very familiarity. The list is not alphabetical, as the words are taken in the order that they come in Matthew's account.

donkey/colt - kings and warriors favored large horses for public entries. The humility of a donkey or colt demonstrates the contrast of Jesus' coming as Messiah. Perhaps misunderstanding the poetic parallelism common to Hebrew poetry, Matthew presents an awkward scene as he refers to Zechariah 9:9 and suggests that there were two animals when in fact there would have been only one.

branches - only John mentions "palm" branches. In Jesus' time and later, palms became a symbol used by the Zealots in their opposition to and eventual revolt against Roman occupation.

Hosanna - a Hebrew exclamation, meaning "save us, we pray," that traces back to Psalm 118:25.

thirty pieces of silver - refers to both the compensation to a master for a slave that has been killed (Exodus 31:32) and the wage of a rejected "good shepherd" and a covenant annulled (Zechariah 11:4-14). [see Matt. 26:15 and 27:3-10. In Mark, the text says money, but doesn't specify an amount, see Mark 14:11]

unleavened bread - another name for the meal of Passover. Its name recalls the hasty exit from Egypt, when there was not enough time to allow the bread dough to rise before fleeing (Exodus 12:33-34).

Passover - Jewish festival that commemorated deliverance from Egypt. Its name derived from the "passing over" of those houses marked by the blood of sacrificed lambs (Exodus 12:21-27).

Mount of Olives - a ridge just to the east of Jerusalem, separated from the city by the Kidron valley. One prophetic tradition associates it with God's coming in final victory (Zechariah 14:4).

Gethsemane - a Hebrew word meaning "olive press." Gethsemane was located in the Kidron valley, which was noted for its groves of olives trees.

Caiaphas/high priest - the religious leader of the Jewish temple who also presided over the Sanhedrin. Caiaphas held the office from 18-38 CE in an era when both Temple and Rome benefited from civil order.

Council/Sanhedrin - a Jewish council of 70 elders that presided over religious affairs in Jerusalem. They did not, however, have the power to administer the death sentence.

blaspheme - to curse God or lie about God. Leviticus 24:16 makes it a capital offense.

Pilate/governor - Judea was an imperial Roman province, meaning its governor (also called procurator) was appointed by the emperor rather than the senate. At the time of Jesus, Pontius Pilate held this office.

Barabbas - according to Mark and Luke, Barabbas had been part of an insurrection where murders had taken place. In Hebrew, his name means "Son of the Father" (*bar Abbas*).

crucifixion - a Roman method of execution, favored for slaves or lower-class criminals. The victim would be nailed or tied to a cross and left to die, often essentially drowning in fluids filling the lungs.

hand-washing - a symbolic act of rejecting any "blood" on one's hands for a deed. In Deuteronomy 21:6-8, a ritual of handwashing is prescribed when a murder has taken place and no one knows the guilty party. [see Matthew 27:24, the detail about Pilate washing his hands isn't included in Mark's account]

cohort - A Roman military division consisting of about 600 men (centurions were in charge of units of 100 men within the cohort). The Jerusalem cohort would have stayed in the fortress Antonia.

temple curtain - a large tapestry that separated the sanctuary from the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem temple. Only the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies, and that took place only once a year on the Day of Atonement, as part of a ritual that sought forgiveness for sins of the whole of Israel.

Glossary from *Seasons of the Spirit* Congregational Life Curriculum, Lent, Easter, Year A, p. 68. Author: John Indermark is minister in the United Church of Christ and writer of curriculum resources and spiritual formation books. He and his partner Judy live in Naselle, Washington, USA.