

Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion March 25

This Sunday is a bit double minded. For many years it was simply “Palm Sunday” and the day marked the beginning of this solemn week of observance in which we remember that Jesus was betrayed, tried, crucified, died, and buried and then on Easter, raised again to life. But people stopped attending the Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services. Easter without Good Friday soon degenerated into a spring festival with bunnies, chocolate, and pretty dresses. It stopped being about the heart of Christianity.

Now, I speak in overly stark terms. It was not that way for most Christians who showed up on their first Easter morning after they had skipped Maundy Thursday or Good Friday services. They could not get off work, their kids had a track meet, or something like that. They did not say, “Let’s just not bother with Holy Week.” They were probably in a bind between their vocation as parents and spouses and their worship habits. They did not forget about Good Friday when they came to Easter morning, they had simply not observed it at church. At least it was that way for them, but when they stopped observing Holy Week, they lost the ability to teach their children why it was important. And if they managed to teach their own children, those children probably were unable to teach their grandchildren. For many of those grandchildren Easter never got deeper than the Easter egg hunt in the park. This took a while, generations; it was/is a slow process.

A number of years ago, about the middle of the twentieth century, when Roman Catholic liturgical scholars were creating the three year pericope system, the liturgical types and the Bishops and the committees in charge of lectionary revision elected to address this need. They essentially moved the entire Holy Week story to this Sunday prior to Easter in order to keep Easter focused where it needs to be. Thus Palm Sunday becomes Passion Sunday as well. The Palm Sunday Gospel was retained, but is designed to be read at the beginning of the service, a processional Gospel now.

What is one to do with this day? My father’s parish, in which I was confirmed, had a tradition of confirming its youth on this day. They did not even have time for Communion after that great celebration, let alone observing the passion beyond the Palm Sunday narrative. My first communion was five days later on Maundy Thursday. It was effective, as the church was full of grandparents and extended family who came to participate with the newly confirmed.

We may not be the best people to ask about this. We preachers will still observe Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. But for many of our parishes these services will be poorly attended.



How will we address the people on Easter morning if they have not heard this material, thought about it, pondered it?

The pastoral reasoning behind the creation of Passion Sunday is sound, but the implementation can be a little ugly. How does one manage a two chapter reading of the Bible in a Sunday worship setting? Most of our people are simply not able to handle listening to someone read that much to them. It may have been a practice the early Christians were familiar with, but we start to zone out if the story gets too much past about 15 verses. These two chapters are even longer than most – 119 total verses!

When we come to the sermon, the preacher today is given a massive text, coupled with Paul's great Christological hymn and the powerful passage from Zechariah in which he foresees the triumphal entry. The preacher can opt for a briefer text, but where does one chop this thing. The creators of the pericope suggest just chapter 15, the chapter with the actual sentencing, scourging, crucifixion and death of Jesus. But that seems to presuppose a bit of knowledge on the part of the congregant. I am not sure that the average person who shows on Sunday can be assumed to have that ability to contextualize this. I know that the young people who sit in my New Testament classes cannot do it.

Here I have commented on none of the readings or the collect, I have written one page, and already the little box at the bottom of my screen tells me that I am at nine pages for this document. Eight of those pages are readings!

Here is what I have done and met with some success, at least some folks thought it was a good idea.

1. Process. Start at the back of Church with the cross, hand out Palms, if you can convince them to do it, have the whole congregation walk with you. I used to have everyone gather outside and we walked the parking lot with our palms while we sang "All Glory Laud and Honor" or some other familiar processional hymn. At least urge the kids to join you in the processional. This is a moment for a little chaos. Make the day kinetic and active for the kids. The readings are long, so let them live the story a little bit. I had a parishioner with a donkey and we laid a purple cloth on it, and it worked well, especially the year the thing started braying as we walked into Church. (The donkey stayed outside and I think was miffed that he did not get to go in.)
2. Skip the sermon. I know this sounds odd, especially coming from the guy who writes a document every week entitled "Sunday Sermon" but come with me a little here. If you are planning to read two chapters of Mark and the passion narrative at that, what does one say after that is read?! Best let the text speak on its own. I know that sounds a little heretical for a Lutheran preacher to say, but this might be a good Sunday to let the feast of the Word suffice for the flock.

3. Break this passion reading up. One effective method I used for that was to break it into paragraphs and have two or three people read it. I tried one year to have a dramatic reading of the text where I assigned one person to be the narrator and another Pilate, another the Pharisees, etc. It did not work very well. I found it better to appoint two or three quality readers, and have them clearly and with solemnity read the text, alternating after about two full paragraphs or so. Look for the logical breaks in the text and switch there.
4. Hymns. Mark is one of the shorter versions of the Passion narrative and so this can work well. I have even combined this with the multiple reader format. I took hymns, usually just a verse or two which went with the story. There are lots of hymns which can work for this. “Go to Dark Gethsemane” “My Song is Love Unknown” “Jesus Refuge of the Weary” “Were You There” and many more. They should be played simply and without a lot of adornment. You don’t need to sing all the verses, just one or two to break up the sections. Think of the hymns and the verses you pick as the sermon today, they are preaching for you. The hymns interspersed give the folks in the pews a moment to reflect and process the heavy material they are reading/hearing.
5. Silence. This is hard for people. We are not used to silence, but leave just a little silence after the hymn verses are sung for this to sink in and for the reading to resume. Don’t rush through this. Let the reading be solemn.
6. Leave something for the Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services, and especially for the Vigil if you have one of those. Those nights often give one the chance to reflect on this better than this Sunday with procession and Passion Narrative.

I will supply some ideas for a brief sermon. It seems like the best bet is actually the Epistle reading, it has encapsulated this story for us, but the OT lesson is also replete with some possibilities. The Gospel reading itself is just too massive, the preacher will have to choose a small portion of it.

Consider some interesting things to communicate this. The drama of Holy Week, the Greatest Story ever told, begs for us to do something more than simply talking about it. We need to live it, this is not an event which we experience as a dispassionate experience, observing from the comfortable distance of two thousand years. The mystery of worship transports us to the events. We carry a palm, not because we are simply trying to be cute, but because we join those crowds. We see these scenes through the eyes of the Gospel writers, and in standing in their shoes, we relive it. We might sit for a Seder meal with Jesus disciples; we might join the crowds in shouting: Crucify Him! We will get up early for Sunrise services to join the women as they grope along the path in the dark toward the tomb. We are trying to bring our people to these events, and these events to our people. We cross the two thousand years and half a globe that separate us from the events of the first Holy Week. We are there.

This is not a new concept. There is only one Lord's Supper that has ever been celebrated. We come to this table again and again but it is all only one Lord's Supper. If we could peer with some theological telescope to the other end of the altar rail, we would find our Lord and the twelve sitting in that upper room.

We will be re-enacting these scenes in various ways in our parishes, this has given us some freedom to do things a little differently. Those who are preaching this week might think about moving the sermon before the passion reading, not trying to connect the OT or Epistle, or Processional Gospel across the power and potency of the Passion reading.

We wondered what makes this so attractive that churches will be full, often with people who will not be here otherwise. They are not here because the preacher is so great, we know that, and besides, if they were there for the preacher, they would be there next week too and the weeks which follow Easter.

What about that Easter Egg hunt or the other things we do at Easter? Do we squash it? No, it seems incongruous, but the joy of children looking for a treasure in the grass may not seem solemn enough for us crabby adults, but Jesus welcomed the children and he rejoices in their joy. The Easter breakfast and the other goofy things we might do are all places where people get to express their common joy. I think that actually we don't do enough of this, sometimes.

Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, You sent Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, to take upon Himself our flesh and to suffer death upon the cross. Mercifully grant that we may follow the example of His great humility and patience and be made partakers of His resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

The prayer notices that Jesus has taken on our flesh and suffered death on the cross. Now we ask God to give us to follow his example of patience and humility and to be made partakers of the resurrection. It is a prayer to make Holy Week our week. The Jews still begin the Passover meal and its retelling of the Exodus story with the words, "When we were in Egypt..." We are in the crowds of people waving the palm fronds this day. If you give them out, that is the point. We are with them watching Jesus today. This is our holy season, this is the time when worship transports us across centuries and space to the dusty streets of Jerusalem when Pilate was Rome's governor and the temple still stood and Jesus came to town to turn them both on their heads.

We notice his humility and patience and beg God that we might join him in them and the resurrection. Humility is serving and loving and being with those beneath us. Patience is not getting what we want but what others need. Jesus comes to breathe our poisoned air and die for our rebellion and sin. He does not eschew our earthly frame and decree something from heaven's throne, but in mercy and love he comes to live and die a human being. That is humility. He could, as one Gospel writer notes, call down legions of angels to enforce his will. This is not

Jesus the powerless who is caught up in Rome's machinery. This is Jesus the willing victim, the sacrifice of choice. He puts aside what he wants that he may achieve what is best for another, for you and me. That is patience. And that is the way he overcomes death. We want to join him in that humility and patience, to take up our cross and follow.

We know where this path leads, it might go through deep shadows and dark days, but it leads to life. We pray to walk with him up Calvary's mournful mountain.

Readings

Processional Gospel: John 12:12-19

¹²The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" ¹⁴And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written,

¹⁵"Fear not, daughter of Zion;
behold, your king is coming,
sitting on a donkey's colt!"

¹⁶His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him. ¹⁷The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. ¹⁸The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign. ¹⁹So the Pharisees said to one another, "You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him."

If I was preaching on this day, I think I would use this text, and preach a brief homily at the beginning of the service. If we met outside, I might do it there. I would focus on this text and ask why Jesus is coming to Jerusalem today. I would prepare the reader to hear the passion narrative. Christ comes for you. This whole story is for the sinners of this world, even you and even every man or woman whom you know and will ever meet.

Notice the way John uses the quote from Zechariah we will hear. "Fear not..." John admits that many came out for the wrong reasons, but they all saw the right deed. Jesus had come to save sinners, humbly, gently, but he had demonstrated his power and authority in the resurrection of Lazarus.

Zechariah 9:9-12 (The Messiah comes riding in on a donkey)

⁹Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your king is coming to you;
righteous and having salvation is he,
humble and mounted on a donkey,

on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

¹⁰ I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the war horse from Jerusalem;
and the battle bow shall be cut off,
and he shall speak peace to the nations;
his rule shall be from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

¹¹ As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you,
I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.

¹² Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope;
today I declare that I will restore to you double.

¹³ *For I have bent Judah as my bow;*

I have made Ephraim its arrow.

I will stir up your sons, O Zion,

against your sons, O Greece,

and wield you like a warrior's sword.

I have included the thirteenth verse because I think the preacher misses this at his peril. Judah is the bow, Israel the arrow aimed right at the heart of Greece. We have often so spiritualized these texts we forget that they are embedding stark political and other realities not that different from our own.

Of course, this is the passage the Gospel writers have in mind when they make sure to tell us that Jesus rides in on a donkey. Zechariah was speaking of a hope for his people and it remains a hope for us as well. We have seen the Messiah ride in that donkey but we still wait for the battle bow to be cut off and his rule to spread from sea to sea. Or have we seen it? Is not the gracious rule of Christ proclaimed in every nation this morning? Do not God's children gather to hear his pronouncement of forgiveness, the authoritative act of the kingdom of God?

Does not the forgiveness we preach stop the conflict? Is the kingdom of God actually spreading one conversion at a time, not in some political act but in the loving transformation of sinners into saints? His rule is from sea to sea – no nation in the world does not have a Christian numbered among its people. Every people counts among its citizens a man or woman or thousands or millions who have been released from the waterless pit of sin and death.

We are prisoners of hope. There is a great sermon in that little phrase. We are imprisoned yes, just as Paul was when he wrote the letter to the Philippians, but we have not lost hope. But we are also, in another sense, captive or imprisoned by our hope. These are sweet chains. For we look to God to restore to us double for what was lost. Eden twice over again! Can we ever return to the shallow and meaningless hope which the world offers us? Eat right, exercise and you can live ten years longer. Save enough and you can have a comfortable retirement. Do well in school

so you can attend the right sort of college. Is that really all there is to life? Is that all I have to look forward to? Jesus offers us so much more.

Psalm 118:19-29

- ¹⁹ Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the LORD.
- ²⁰ This is the gate of the LORD;
the righteous shall enter through it.
- ²¹ I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.
- ²² The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone.
- ²³ This is the LORD's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.
- ²⁴ This is the day that the LORD has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
- ²⁵ Save us, we pray, O LORD!
O LORD, we pray, give us success!
- ²⁶ Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!
We bless you from the house of the LORD.
- ²⁷ The LORD is God,
and he has made his light to shine upon us.
Bind the festal sacrifice with cords,
up to the horns of the altar!
- ²⁸ You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God; I will extol you.
- ²⁹ Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever!

Or Psalm 31:9-16

- ⁹ Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress;
my eye is wasted from grief;
my soul and my body also.
- ¹⁰ For my life is spent with sorrow,
and my years with sighing;

my strength fails because of my iniquity,
and my bones waste away.

¹¹ Because of all my adversaries I have become a reproach,
especially to my neighbors,
and an object of dread to my acquaintances;
those who see me in the street flee from me.

¹² I have been forgotten like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel.

Philippians 2:5-11 (Paul's great Christological hymn)

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, ² complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

As in the OT reading, the context is important. Paul exhorts his audience to humility. Christ has displaced the ego, it has long since ceased really to be about me, but it is about him.

If you are bound and determined to preach this day, this is the text you will want. Here Paul outlines the whole passion narrative in a format you can access. In fact, if you look closely enough at it, you will notice it is almost the same outline as the second article of the Apostle's Creed.

The humility of which Paul speaks here would have been quite counter cultural to the Roman mind. They did not think this way at all. The Roman conceived of success as beating out the opponent, rising to the top at the expense of your neighbor. Alliances were purely for convenience and the goal was always the promotion of self. Paul's exhortation to have Christ's mind in us must have sounded just odd to the people of that time, as it does to us, but for slightly different reasons.

Our culture at least still pays some lip-service to humility. The Romans really thought it was for weaklings, a sign of a basic character flaw. Real men are not meek, they would say. They are proud and aware of their accomplishments and would that you be aware as well.

Our culture has at least told us that humility is a good thing, even if we reward the haughty and vain athletes and starlets who grace the pages of our tabloids. True Christian humility is not in fact walking about pretending we are invertebrates of some kind or another. That in fact is another form of pride. "See how bad I am? I bet I am worse than you are!" It is just the same competition strangely inverted.

True Christian humility involves also acknowledging the work of Christ in our lives. It is not saying how bad I am, except to say how great Christ is, and how wonderful his work in my life has been. We have already joined him in that ascent to heavenly glory, a good work begun in us which he will bring to completion on the last day. We have much to rejoice and exult in, but none of it belongs to us by right, all of it is ours by gift, the gift of the Father to the undeserving and fallen world.

Mark 14:1-15:47 or Mark 15:1-47

14 It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him, ² for they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people."

³ And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. ⁴ There were some who said to themselves indignantly, "Why was the ointment wasted like that? ⁵ For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor." And they scolded her. ⁶ But Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. ⁷ For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me. ⁸ She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial. ⁹ And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."

¹⁰ Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. ¹¹ And when they heard it, they were glad and promised to give him money. And he sought an opportunity to betray him.

¹² And on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb, his disciples said to him, "Where will you have us go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?"

¹³ And he sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him, ¹⁴ and wherever he enters, say to the master of the house, 'The Teacher says, Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' ¹⁵ And he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready; there prepare for us." ¹⁶ And the disciples set out and went to the city and found it just as he had told them, and they prepared the Passover.

¹⁷ And when it was evening, he came with the twelve. ¹⁸ And as they were reclining at table and eating, Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.”

¹⁹ They began to be sorrowful and to say to him one after another, “Is it I?” ²⁰ He said to them, “It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the dish with me. ²¹ For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.”

²² And as they were eating, he took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, “Take; this is my body.” ²³ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. ²⁴ And he said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. ²⁵ Truly, I say to you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”

²⁶ And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. ²⁷ And Jesus said to them, “You will all fall away, for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’ ²⁸ But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.” ²⁹ Peter said to him, “Even though they all fall away, I will not.” ³⁰ And Jesus said to him, “Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.” ³¹ But he said emphatically, “If I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And they all said the same.

³² And they went to a place called Gethsemane. And he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” ³³ And he took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. ³⁴ And he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch.” ³⁵ And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. ³⁶ And he said, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” ³⁷ And he came and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour? ³⁸ Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” ³⁹ And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. ⁴⁰ And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy, and they did not know what to answer him. ⁴¹ And he came the third time and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough; the hour has come. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴² Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand.”

⁴³ And immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders. ⁴⁴ Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I will kiss is the man. Seize him and lead him away under guard.” ⁴⁵ And when he came, he went up to him at once and said, “Rabbi!” And he kissed him. ⁴⁶ And they laid hands on him and seized him. ⁴⁷ But one of those who stood by drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear. ⁴⁸ And Jesus said to them, “Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? ⁴⁹ Day after day I

was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. But let the Scriptures be fulfilled.”⁵⁰ And they all left him and fled.

⁵¹ And a young man followed him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body. And they seized him,⁵² but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked.

⁵³ And they led Jesus to the high priest. And all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes came together.⁵⁴ And Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. And he was sitting with the guards and warming himself at the fire.⁵⁵ Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none.⁵⁶ For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree.⁵⁷ And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying,⁵⁸ “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.’”⁵⁹ Yet even about this their testimony did not agree.⁶⁰ And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, “Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?”⁶¹ But he remained silent and made no answer. Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?”⁶² And Jesus said, “I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.”⁶³ And the high priest tore his garments and said, “What further witnesses do we need?”⁶⁴ You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?” And they all condemned him as deserving death.⁶⁵ And some began to spit on him and to cover his face and to strike him, saying to him, “Prophecy!” And the guards received him with blows.

⁶⁶ And as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came,⁶⁷ and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, “You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus.”⁶⁸ But he denied it, saying, “I neither know nor understand what you mean.” And he went out into the gateway and the rooster crowed.⁶⁹ And the servant girl saw him and began again to say to the bystanders, “This man is one of them.”⁷⁰ But again he denied it. And after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, “Certainly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.”⁷¹ But he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, “I do not know this man of whom you speak.”⁷² And immediately the rooster crowed a second time. And Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, “Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.” And he broke down and wept.

15 And as soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. And they bound Jesus and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate.² And Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” And he answered him, “You have said so.”³ And the chief priests accused him of many things.⁴ And Pilate again asked him, “Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you.”⁵ But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed.

⁶ Now at the feast he used to release for them one prisoner for whom they asked.⁷ And among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called

Barabbas. ⁸ And the crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do as he usually did for them.

⁹ And he answered them, saying, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?"

¹⁰ For he perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up. ¹¹ But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead. ¹² And Pilate again said to them, "Then what shall I do with the man you call the King of the Jews?" ¹³ And they cried out again, "Crucify him." ¹⁴ And Pilate said to them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him." ¹⁵ So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified.

¹⁶ And the soldiers led him away inside the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters), and they called together the whole battalion. ¹⁷ And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on him. ¹⁸ And they began to salute him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" ¹⁹ And they were striking his head with a reed and spitting on him and kneeling down in homage to him. ²⁰ And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. And they led him out to crucify him.

²¹ And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross. ²² And they brought him to the place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull). ²³ And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. ²⁴ And they crucified him and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take. ²⁵ And it was the third hour when they crucified him. ²⁶ And the inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." ²⁷ And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left. ²⁹ And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, ³⁰ save yourself, and come down from the cross!" ³¹ So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. ³² Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.

³³ And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. ³⁴ And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ³⁵ And some of the bystanders hearing it said, "Behold, he is calling Elijah." ³⁶ And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." ³⁷ And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. ³⁸ And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. ³⁹ And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

⁴⁰ There were also women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. ⁴¹ When he was in Galilee, they followed him and ministered to him, and there were also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem.

⁴² And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, ⁴³ Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁴⁴ Pilate was surprised to hear that he should have already died. And summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead. ⁴⁵ And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the corpse to Joseph. ⁴⁶ And Joseph bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock. And he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. ⁴⁷ Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus saw where he was laid.

Atonement – there is a significant movement in modern Christianity which is struggling with the entire notion of atonement, the idea that Jesus’ death on a cross somehow paid for my sins. They struggle to see how the cruel, tortuous death of an individual like Jesus can in any way pay for sins committed by me. They think this is barbarous, cruel, and some would reject any sort of a God who would operate this way. They envision a pure and powerful God who can do whatever he wants and surely he could have saved humanity through a means less gruesome and cruel. Many will suggest that the way of Jesus’ death is incidental. Jesus could have died an old man in his bed and the same result would have been achieved. To focus on the cross is perverse. The real goal is simply to live in community. The problem is our behavior and not our very nature.

Of course this is not at all congruent with historical and received Christianity. Atonement has been a central idea for centuries. However, if your elderly members head home to dinner with their grandchildren and start using atonement language they may find themselves in a very interesting and confusing conversation. We should probably be ready to equip them. Some things need to be said here:

The problems with atonement language in scripture seem to be born of several things.

- 1. We are far removed from death in our society. People who regularly experience death and the slaughter of animals or the death of people don’t usually have a problem with atonement. Death as part of God’s instrument of salvation makes sense to them in some primordial way.*
- 2. We have all drunk deeply in the west of the poisonous well of individualism. We believe that the real action happens in our will, our decision, and our actions which flow out of that. We cannot conceive of the idea that our very nature is corrupt. We have problems but they are largely cosmetic. Many would say that I don’t need atonement, I need therapy.*
- 3. We have this strange idea that we can balance scales. I may make some poor decisions, but a few hours at the food bank volunteering more or less balances those scales. This is also the attraction many feel to the eastern idea of karma, or at least karma-lite, which passes for the cafeteria Buddhism to which many Americans subscribe.*

If we would speak of atonement, we need to root atonement language in the theology which speaks of our utter brokenness after the fall. Even our will, even our very self is shattered in that fall. The idea that if Jesus would simply come and help us live together better this would somehow equate with salvation needs to be distant from this language. Our broken society is merely symptom of the much deeper problem we have, a God sized problem. The problem for the little old lady in your parish who encounters her grandchildren will likely be that they do not share that fundamental understanding of the human being as broken. A few weeks working in a slaughter house would likely help this. A trip to India to see karma at work would also be a good idea.

Sermon Ideas

1. The Dramatic Swing: That the Holy Spirit would prepare the hearer to observe and believe the events of Christ's Passion, Death, and Resurrection are for him/her.

The crowds who cheer on Sunday will be replaced by another crowd on Friday who will chant "Crucify, Crucify!" All this is by Jesus design. He rides to his death and our salvation. Zechariah sees from a far that Jesus comes today. We, from another distance, see him riding into the city of Jerusalem, and we heed Zechariah's urging to rejoice, not in the fact of Jesus' death, but in its fruit. He dies for my sins, that pains me, but he comes, noble in his humility, because he loves us. When he ascends that cruel hill with the cross's hard wood weighing down his beaten back, he dies with me on my mind. This week becomes the pivot point of all my history. Everything revolves around these deeds, just as I go back to see them today, they come forward to change this time. Now everything, every hurt, every sin, every joy, every success, every failure, is seen in the light of that cross. He has redeemed it all. Where are we this week? That Friday that changes everything comes inexorably toward us. Shall we not join the crowds and shout Hosanna! Shall we stand there on the side, stroking our chins with the Pharisees and judging what happens? Shall we glower at the unkempt and crude barbarians with the Romans who know ever so much more and yet are blind to truth? (Pilate's question) Where are you this week? Shall we walk with grieving women to a tomb? Shall we flee with frightened disciples? Where will you be? Maundy Thursday invites you to come to an upper room and from there to a Garden. Good Friday has us following to a judgment hall, toward a hill and crucifixion and his death. We conclude in a new cut tomb, in which no one had been laid but him, but as the hymnwriter says, it was our tomb in which he was laid.

Easter morning you may grope your way in darkness toward a tomb, to do a friendly deed, but be surprised by bright messengers and unbelievably good news.

You can be there. Please come!

2. Jesus in Control – (That the Spirit of God would move the hearer to wondrous awe and solemn worship before God’s love displayed in Holy Week.)

The Gospel writers are all very careful to portray Jesus as the master of the situation. Jesus has the colt all picked out, he makes a really important statement in riding on that donkey. The kings of Israel used to ride donkeys, the crowd recognizes this, this is a messianic event. Jesus is, indeed, quoting the Zechariah text. Jesus is riding in not as the victim of the Roman imperial machine, but as the master of the events. He will push the buttons, he will pull the strings, so that on Friday, because that is where he intends to be, he will be hanging from a cross to die for the sins of the whole world.

3. “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David” – (That the Spirit of God would call to mind the loving kingdom of God every time the hearer comes to this place to be forgiven, to be restored, to be refreshed in God’s love.)

Jesus comes to usher in a kingdom, he comes to usher in a new power/rule for this world, the expression of divine authority. Look here at the second part of the Zechariah text, which describes the kingdom he ushers in. He will wear a crown of thorns when ascends to that throne, he will suffer and die for the sins the whole world.

This kingdom is expressed not in power of tanks and armies and bombs, but in the far greater force of God’s love, His forgiveness which transforms hatred into the brotherhood and which puts us at peace with God and the world. Jesus rules this day and every day in the simply acts of forgiveness, in the life which is lived in his humility and peace. Jesus gives his life willingly for a world in rebellion, but it is not a plan gone awry, it is instead the revelation of the very heart of God. His kingdom

4. Hosanna – (That the Spirit of God would move the hearer to remember and rejoice that Christ has born his sins on this cross and in this Sacrament we are connected to this Gift of Jesus.)

These are the words we sing in the Sanctus just before we partake of the Lord’s Supper, the broken body of Jesus and his blood shed on that cross. We sing those words because every time we come to this altar with our hand extended, we are welcoming this same Jesus into this dusty corner of his world, just as he rode into Jerusalem on that day so long ago. He is really showing up here, just as he did there, to save, to save the world on the cross, to save this little corner of his creation called “me.”

That same body of which we partake in the sacrament rode that donkey, hung from that cross, was relinquished to life by the grave on Easter morning. That body comes to us, as it changed everything on that Friday we call Good and that Sunday we call Easter, so too it changes this sinner whom He enters. This is my death he dies, this is his life he gives to me. With all Christians everywhere I can say “Hosanna!”

5. Prelude (That the hearer would be prepared to hear the reading of the passion)

This sermon would be preached before reading of the passion. It intends to set the stage and equip the hearer to listen attentively and carefully to the reading which follows the sermon.

- a. Jesus is no helpless victim but a willing victim. He goes to this cross fully aware of what will transpire. He goes anyway, driven by his love.
 - b. This is a deep spiritual experience. Let your mind and heart go. Lots of questions will arise, do not let this distract you from your vision of Christ. This will deepen and strengthen your faith. The Holy Spirit will be at work in us. Let the words simply be.
 - c. The final product, for all the gore, torture, death, and suffering which we will hear, is our joyful gratitude. We will praise the one who hangs on the tree, looking to him for our very salvation (John 3:14-15).
6. Fulfillment (That the hearer would come to the reading of the passion as the fulfillment of the whole season of Lent – the end of this journey.

This sermon would ask the hearer to remember the past weeks of Lent and see them as fulfilled in the passion we are about hear. These texts have challenged us, convicted us, comforted us, and compelled us to this place. We stand now among the followers of Jesus. we come to an upper room, a garden, a trial, a cruel hill, and a tomb. But before we go there listen again to what Jesus has said about this.

- a. Jesus conquers our foe
 - b. Jesus victory has a cross shape and invited us into it.
 - c. Jesus cleared the temple – Ephesians 2:19ff we are the true temple of God
 - d. Jesus spoke to Nicodemus about faith – urging all to lift their eyes to see the one who was suspended between heaven and earth. This is our salvation.
 - e. Despite its appearances, this is the revelation of the very potent kingdom of God. It works!
7. For us and for our salvation (Epistle: that the hearer would experience the Passion of Christ as “for me.”)

This sermon, which also might be preached immediately prior to the reading of the Passion narrative or after it, picks up the words of the Epistle reading and focuses the attention of the hearer on this singular fact. All that transpires in this passion narrative is for us.

We could base this on the line in the Nicene Creed in which we assert that Jesus’ entire incarnation was driven by God desire to save us. We confess this regularly, let it remind the hearer of this sermon.

The great Christological hymn of Paul in Philippians two lets us see the whole story, not only the passion, but the source of Jesus. But it also tells us the rest of the story, that crucified, died and buried, he also rose and ascended and sits at the right hand of the Father, receiving the worship of the cosmos itself.

If Jesus had remained in a grave, he would have simply been another victim of the Roman Imperial machine. But he did not stay dead. He was raised on the third day, seated at the right hand. This makes all that happens in this text meaningful for me. The one who sits on that throne is the same one who died in my place. The one who judges me has holes in his hands and feet where he shed his life blood to pay for my sins.

This gruesome story addresses our gruesomely broken human nature. Jesus understood this. He gets it that we are not just people who need a little better education or a better rules, or a visit to our therapist. He knows us for who we are and he also knows how far we have fallen. He was there at our creation remember. This problem is not a small problem, it is a big problem, it will take nothing less than this death.

But we also get to see past this today. For Easter comes. The Devils are undone, death must yield its victims, sin's power is broken in this font and table and word. Christ lives and has empowered not our therapy, but our resurrection. He has not come to put a bandage on our sins, but to raise the dead. First he must contend with death and it is that bitter struggle we witness today, confident because we know its outcome.