

## **Palm Sunday: Hope in Times of Suffering**

Palm Sunday ushers in the many rituals and customs of Holy Week that call to mind the events of the last week of Jesus' life that fulfilled his ministry. Each Sunday of Lent has revealed different images of Jesus. We have seen him tempted in the desert, transfigured on a lofty mountain, reconciling divided peoples at a well, healing the blind at a sacred pool, and, finally, weeping before raising a friend from death.

In the Passion narratives, these stories are recapitulated. In the Passion, Jesus is confronted by the fear of death, stripped of dignity in a shameful form of capital punishment, rejected by a divided and blind society, abandoned by his friends, and sealed away in the darkness of a tomb. Like the crosses we see in university classrooms, the events of Holy Week and Easter are Jesus' final message; an exclamation point that concludes and defines the gospel story.

In reading the Passion's unfolding we see and understand Jesus as the Incarnate Word. As St. Paul declares in the second reading, Jesus is "in the form of God" (Phil. 2:6), the image or icon of God (as Paul and his followers say elsewhere: 2 Cor. 4:4, Col. 1:15). Yet for our sakes, Jesus emptied himself and became a servant (Phil. 2:7-8), stooping down to enter into solidarity with the poor and the weak of the world (2 Cor. 8:9). Jesus' life of service to the point of death embodies and reveals the self-giving nature of the invisible God. Christ's life and death provide a model for believers to meditate upon and follow. Jesus' entire life was an act of self-offering, not to appease an angry God or an unjust economic system, but to renew the way people relate to each other and the world itself.

Similar to other gospel writers, Matthew's Passion narrative offers unique details that intersect with our lives, challenges us to examine ourselves, and calls us to hope in times of despair. In Matthew, Pilate washes his hands, cowardly refusing to take any responsibility for the actions directly under his power. Matthew frequently alludes to scriptural fulfillments, perhaps reassuring the reader that the divine plan prevails even in chaos.

The signs that accompany Jesus' suffering and death—darkness over the earth, the temple's torn veil, and an earthquake—evoke the images of the mourning and destruction of nature and holy places. Yet at Jesus' death, tombs are opened, and the dead are raised; there is a glimmer of life and hope. The signs at his death foreshadow the apocalyptic unveiling of hope and truth on Easter Sunday.

Mary Magdalene is also a sign of hope during Jesus' death. She was among the few apostles to accompany Jesus through the end and after his burial she sits quietly by the tomb. Many in the world today join her in sitting by the tomb. Though the official liturgies of Holy Week and the Easter Triduum may not occur in public this year, they will be celebrated at home with popular religious traditions. And the stories of the passion are reenacted in daily life. Parents, loved

ones, and medical professionals heed the call to follow the example of Jesus in the work of justice and healing, sometimes at the risk of their own lives.

Like Mary Magdalene, many will accompany others through death and burial.

We know that on the third day, Mary Magdalene will see the stone rolled away and the risen Jesus at the empty tomb. The biblical symbol of three days often represents a period of preparation for a journey or important event. It is a finite period of time, yet it may feel like an unbearable wait. Contemplating and acting upon events of the last week of Jesus' life grounds the founding mission of the university. The suffering of the Word Incarnate reveals the suffering of the world, and the resurrection is a foreshadowing of the restoration and renewal of all creation (Rom. 8:19-25).

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