

Sunday, April 9, 2017
Passion Sunday
Reflections by Juel Pierce

Processional Gospel

Matthew 21:1-11

Jesus enters Jerusalem

¹When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.”

⁴This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

⁵“Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” ¹¹The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Reflection

This is the Gospel for the Procession with palms. What does Jesus do before he enters Jerusalem? (verses 1-2) Why does Matthew say he does this? (verses 4-5) How does Jesus enter Jerusalem? (verses 6-7) How does the crowd react to this entrance? (verses 8-10) The notes in the Lutheran Bible remind us that this procession was a dangerous political act. (See verse 10) What do you think of their opinion about this procession? Whose “politics” was it endangering? Who do you think was asking, “Who is this?” Who identified Jesus to those who were asking? (verse 11) Do you think you would have joined in this procession? Why or why not?

First Reading

Isaiah 50:4-9a

The servant of the Lord expresses absolute confidence in his final vindication, despite the fact that he has been struck and spit upon. This characteristic of the servant played an important role in the early church’s understanding of the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

⁴The Lord GOD has given me
the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.
Morning by morning he awakens—
awakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.

⁵The Lord GOD has opened my ear,

and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backward.
⁶I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.
⁷The Lord GOD helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
⁸he who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.
Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.
^{9a}It is the Lord GOD who helps me;
who will declare me guilty?

Reflection

This text is from another of Isaiah's "Servant Songs." As you read or hear this text, what is the task of the Servant/prophet? (verse 4) From whom does he receive this task? (verses 4-5) What is the response of many who heard this Servant? (verse 6) What was the Servant's response to the task given by God? (verses 4-5) How does the Servant survive the abuse he receives? (verses 7-8) What does the conflict he encounters do to his faith? Who might the Servant have been in Isaiah's time? How do we Christians understand this text? Who else do you know or have you heard about who might be seen as servants in this mold? How do their stories energize or frighten you?

PSALM 31:9-16

⁹Have mercy on me, O LORD, for I | am in trouble;
my eye is consumed with sorrow, and also my throat | and my belly.
¹⁰**For my life is wasted with grief, and my | years with sighing;**
my strength fails me because of affliction, and my
bones | are consumed.
¹¹I am the scorn of my enemies, a disgrace to my neighbors, a
dismay to | my acquaintances;
when they see me in the street | they avoid me.
¹²**Like the dead I am forgotten, | out of mind;**
I am as useless as a | broken pot.
¹³For I have heard the whispering of the crowd; fear is | all around;
they put their heads together against me; they plot to | take my life.
¹⁴**But as for me, I have trusted in | you, O LORD.**
I have said, "You | are my God.
¹⁵My times are | in your hand;
rescue me from the hand of my enemies, and from those
who | persecute me.
¹⁶**Let your face shine up- | on your servant;**
save me in your | steadfast love."

Reflection

What is the plight of this psalmist? (verses 9-13) This reminds us of the Servant in our Isaiah text, and also of Jesus in his Passion. Who else have you seen or do you know like this, in pain and isolation? What is the psalmist's response to his situation? What is his prayer? When in your life of faith and struggle has this psalm (or could this psalm) be of help to you? As you reflect this week on the suffering and death of Jesus, how will this prayer help you to be in Jesus' circle of disciples?

Second Reading

Philippians 2:5-11

Paul uses an early Christian hymn to help us comprehend Jesus' obedient selflessness on the cross and how God has made Christ lord over all reality. The perspective of the cross becomes the way we rightly understand God, Christ, our own lives, and fellowship within the community of Christ.

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

⁶who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,

⁷but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

⁸he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,

¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Reflection

How does Paul describe "the mind of Christ Jesus" in this text? What words would you pull out of this text to answer that question? What do the words "empty," "slave," "humbled," "obedient" mean to you? (These are the words that I've pulled out.) There is a pivot point in this text at the beginning of verse 9, the word "therefore." What does "therefore" mean to you in this text? What follows the "therefore"? What happens to Jesus as a result of his obedience? (verse 9) What happens to us and all creation as a result of Jesus' obedience? (verses 10-11) How will this text shape your Holy Week faith and experience?

Gospel

Matthew 26:14-27:66

In fulfillment of scripture and obedience to God's will, Jesus goes to the cross so that a new covenant in his blood may bring forgiveness of sins. Even the soldiers who crucify him recognize him to be the Son of God.

¹⁴One of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests ¹⁵and said, "What will you give me if I betray him to you?" They paid him thirty pieces of silver. ¹⁶And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

¹⁷On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?" ¹⁸He said, "Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, 'The Teacher says, My time is near; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.'" ¹⁹So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover meal.

²⁰When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve; ²¹and while they were eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." ²²And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, "Surely not I, Lord?" ²³He answered, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. ²⁴The 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." ²⁵Judas, who betrayed him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" He replied, "You have said so."

²⁶While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." ²⁷Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; ²⁸for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

³⁰When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

³¹Then Jesus said to them, "You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written,

'I will strike the shepherd,
and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'

³²But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee." ³³Peter said to him, "Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you." ³⁴Jesus said to him, "Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." ³⁵Peter said to him, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." And so said all the disciples.

³⁶Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." ³⁷He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. ³⁸Then he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." ³⁹And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." ⁴⁰Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? ⁴¹Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." ⁴²Again he went

away for the second time and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.”⁴³ Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy.⁴⁴ So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words.⁴⁵ Then he came to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.⁴⁶ Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.”

⁴⁷While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people.⁴⁸ Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him.”⁴⁹ At once he came up to Jesus and said, “Greetings, Rabbi!” and kissed him.⁵⁰ Jesus said to him, “Friend, do what you are here to do.” Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him.⁵¹ Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear.⁵² Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.⁵³ Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?⁵⁴ But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?”⁵⁵ At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, “Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me.⁵⁶ But all this has taken place, so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled.” Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

⁵⁷Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, in whose house the scribes and the elders had gathered.⁵⁸ But Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest; and going inside, he sat with the guards in order to see how this would end.⁵⁹ Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for false testimony against Jesus so that they might put him to death,⁶⁰ but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward⁶¹ and said, “This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days.’”⁶² The high priest stood up and said, “Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?”⁶³ But Jesus was silent. Then the high priest said to him, “I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.”⁶⁴ Jesus said to him, “You have said so. But I tell you,

From now on you will see the Son of Man
seated at the right hand of Power
and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

⁶⁵Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy.⁶⁶ What is your verdict?” They answered, “He deserves death.”⁶⁷ Then they spat in his face and struck him; and some slapped him,⁶⁸ saying, “Prophecy to us, you Messiah! Who is it that struck you?”

⁶⁹Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant-girl came to him and said, “You also were with Jesus the Galilean.”⁷⁰ But he denied it before all of them, saying, “I do not know what you are talking about.”⁷¹ When he went out to the porch, another servant-girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, “This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.”⁷² Again he denied it with an oath, “I do not know the man.”⁷³ After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, “Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you.”⁷⁴ Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath, “I do not know the man!” At that moment the cock crowed.⁷⁵ Then Peter

remembered what Jesus had said: “Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.²⁷

¹When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus in order to bring about his death. ²They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate the governor.

³When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. ⁴He said, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.” But they said, “What is that to us? See to it yourself.” ⁵Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself. ⁶But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, “It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since they are blood money.” ⁷After conferring together, they used them to buy the potter’s field as a place to bury foreigners. ⁸For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. ⁹Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, “And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on whom some of the people of Israel had set a price, ¹⁰and they gave them for the potter’s field, as the Lord commanded me.”

¹¹Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus said, “You say so.” ¹²But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. ¹³Then Pilate said to him, “Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?” ¹⁴But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

¹⁵Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. ¹⁶At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. ¹⁷So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, “Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?” ¹⁸For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. ¹⁹While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, “Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.” ²⁰Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. ²¹The governor again said to them, “Which of the two do you want me to release for you?” And they said, “Barabbas.” ²²Pilate said to them, “Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?” All of them said, “Let him be crucified!” ²³Then he asked, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Let him be crucified!”

²⁴So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, “I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves.” ²⁵Then the people as a whole answered, “His blood be on us and on our children!” ²⁶So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

²⁷Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor’s headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. ²⁸They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, ²⁹and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand

and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"³⁰ They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head.³¹ After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

³²As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross.³³ And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull),³⁴ they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it.³⁵ And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots;³⁶ then they sat down there and kept watch over him.³⁷ Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."

³⁸Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left.³⁹ Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads⁴⁰ and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross."⁴¹ In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying,⁴² "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him."⁴³ He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son.'"⁴⁴ The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

⁴⁵From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.⁴⁶ And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"⁴⁷ When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah."⁴⁸ At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink.⁴⁹ But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him."⁵⁰ Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.⁵¹ At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split.⁵² The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.⁵³ After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.⁵⁴ Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

⁵⁵Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him.⁵⁶ Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

⁵⁷When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus.⁵⁸ He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him.⁵⁹ So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth⁶⁰ and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away.⁶¹ Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

⁶²The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate⁶³ and said, "Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise again.'⁶⁴ Therefore command the tomb to be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, 'He has

been raised from the dead,' and the last deception would be worse than the first." ⁶⁵Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can." ⁶⁶So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone.

Reflection

I would invite you to read this story of Jesus' suffering and death each day this week, until Friday. As you read it (slowly and reflectively), what details do you notice? Then what is the arc of the story? What do you learn about Jesus in light of the other texts for this Sunday as you read this story? What do you learn about yourself, as you read this story? What questions does this story raise for you? What questions does this story ask of you?

When we get to Good Friday, the Gospel changes to the Gospel of John. When you get to Friday, read John 18:1-19:42. How is this different from the story in Matthew? I would ask you to read it, asking the same questions as you reflected on in reading Matthew's Passion. Are hymns, works of art, music that helps you reflect this Holy Week? Be sure to reflect on these as well.