

**Combined Gospel & Sermon**  
**Palm/Passion Sunday; March 24, 2024**  
**Pastor Jaime Larson-McLoone**  
**“Jesus, keep us near the cross.”**



A lot has happened since that palm-waving procession into Jerusalem.

Jesus has returned to the temple and turned tables. He has responded to tests from the religious leaders and in turn tested them with a parable that challenges their leadership. He has foretold the destruction of the temple and the persecution of his followers.

Jesus has celebrated the Passover meal with his disciples, where they pledge their loyalty to Jesus, even if it leads to death. And then he watched them fall asleep while he prayed in desperation: “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.”

Jesus rises from prayer, and is immediately betrayed by his disciple Judas. The other disciples desert, and Jesus is arrested. The council of priests accuses Jesus of blasphemy, and he is blindfolded and beaten. And just before the cock crows, Peter utters his third denial: “I do not know this man you are talking about.”

We continue with the gospel recorded in the 15th chapter of Mark, beginning with the first verse. Glory to you, O Lord.

### **Gospel: Mark 15:1-39**

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, "Are you the King of the Jews?" He answered him, "You say so." Then the chief priests accused him of many things. Pilate asked him again, "Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you." 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, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" 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, "Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?" They shouted back, "Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him!" So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

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, "Hail, King of the Jews!" 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, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!" In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe." 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, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And

the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. 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!”

### **Sermon by Pastor Jaime Larson-McLoone**

#### **“Jesus, keep us near the cross.”**

Jesus has spent his last week stirring up trouble. And during Passover, a volatile time when Rome kept a close watch on Jerusalem and extra soldiers on standby in case people got any dangerous ideas about revolution and freedom. So should it really surprise us that so many deserted?

There are lots of people gathered in Jerusalem, with lots of motives. Some are just there to worship. Some have power, and want to hold on to it. Some want to keep the peace, though they have to compromise their faith or their principles to do so. Some are simply afraid. Where do you see yourself?

Certainly, it’s easy to place ourselves outside the crowds - outside the story - looking on in judgment. We wouldn’t disappear or deny. It takes some bold honesty and vulnerability to imagine ourselves somewhere within the story.

Some of those gathered had paraded into Jerusalem with shouts of “hosanna,” but then disappeared when the personal risks of following Jesus became apparent. Maybe that has been us. Supporting a Christ-like cause enthusiastically from a distance, but never daring to walk into the midst of the city and get personally involved.

The disciples swore they’d stick by Jesus but abandoned him immediately when the going got tough – or, like Peter, denied even knowing Jesus. Maybe that has been us, talking out of both sides of our mouths, changing our stories to preserve our reputations. Or worshiping each Sunday but following our own way the other six days of the week.

Some of those who had cheered Jesus later asked for the release of Barabbas. Maybe he seemed a little more like the revolutionary they were hoping for. The

one who would lead a real revolt against Rome. Or perhaps he just seemed like the one who wouldn't get them all killed by the end of the day.

Maybe that has been us, praising Jesus and celebrating his radical love for the whole world here in the sanctuary. But then leaving this place and chasing after earthly, self-proclaimed saviors who always prioritize saving us over saving the whole world.



*God knows it is not easy to stay near the cross. It is not easy to draw near to death. But that is the call of Holy Week. Holy Week challenges us to stay near the cross. To fight the temptation of skipping ahead to the joy of Easter.*

Some mocked Jesus, reveling in what seemed like his failure. Perhaps that has been us, delighting in the spectacular downfall of some public figure, forgetting that they, too, were created in God's image. I bet some thought the cross was just too gory. Who could blame them for not wanting to get too close? And maybe that has been us, not wanting to get too close to the world's pain and suffering - or to our own neighbors' pain and suffering.

Those folks in the crowds were all human. We are all human. All capable of turning our backs on Jesus and our neighbors. All desperately in need of God's grace.

But some...some stayed near.

There were also women looking on from a distance, Mark writes; 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.

God knows it is not easy to stay near the cross. It is not easy to draw near to death. But that is the call of Holy Week. Holy Week challenges us to stay near the cross. To fight the temptation of skipping ahead to the joy of Easter.

Perhaps it is too much to be right there at the foot of the cross, too much to watch Jesus suffer and die up close. But we can be like those women. We can dare to be present.

Present as Jesus is betrayed. Present and he suffers and dies. And then - present as he rises.

**Pastor Jaime**

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