

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

April 2, 2023 – PALM/PASSION SUNDAY, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*Spending a Week with Jesus*”*

Isaiah 50:4–9a	(A prophecy of the Suffering Servant)
Psalms 31:9–16	(God’s Servant pleads for mercy and kindness amidst grief and suffering)
Philippians 2:5–11	(God has exalted His Son above all others)
St. Matthew 26:14—27:66	(The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ)

When we read through this lengthy section of St. Matthew’s gospel, we see many examples of humanity’s worst: betrayal, corruption, denial, fear, anger, distress, jealousy, abuse, cruelty, anguish, neglect, taunting, confusion, temptation, and despair. (Sort of like shopping at Walmart on Black Friday.)

But throughout *His* suffering, Jesus remains God’s humble and obedient Servant.¹ On His way to be crucified, as Jesus rides through the midst of the Palm Sunday crowd, they don’t know what’s coming. Neither do His disciples. Jesus has given them heavy hints and even outright declarations that He would be betrayed into the hands of sinners and killed. But they are like us. Although we *know* our loved ones will die *someday*, we shy away from actually imagining what it will be like, or admitting it could happen at any moment. Whether they are ignorant or in denial, to the disciples and to the crowd, Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem is a moment of incredible excitement and potential.

They’ve seen the miracles He has done. Who knows what His power might bring about, if they can convince Him to turn it against Rome? Making such a bold entry into the very heart of what the occupying power has stolen from them surely bodes well for such a possibility.

Yet what a lonely moment this must be for Jesus, to be surrounded by cheering fans while burdened by the awareness of how brief and fickle their acclaim will be. For Jesus, this is the point of no return. By entering Jerusalem on a colt with the crowd laying down their cloaks before Him while shouting “Hosanna to the Son of David!” He has triggered one prophetic tripwire too many. Both the Roman rulers and the Jewish religious authorities can no longer pretend He is some insignificant street preacher, merely a temporary fad, or that He is not dangerous. In fact, Jesus deliberately provokes the crisis that will end with Him nailed to a cross,² because this is all part of God’s master Plan of Salvation for the whole world.

Jesus knows what’s coming. He knows He will be betrayed. He knows He must endure great pain and agony. Even so, Our Lord does not do what would seem natural to us. He does not run, hide, or lie, in order to save Himself. Even, in the Garden, as he begs God in prayer to “let this cup pass” by, still Jesus trusts enough to pray for *God’s* will, and for the strength to fulfill *God’s* purpose on earth.

Astonishingly to *us*, in the unbearable circumstances of which we heard in the Passion Narrative, Christ's words and actions are nevertheless full of grace and love. Hospitably, He shares a Passover meal with Judas, His betrayer. Later at Gethsemane, He refuses to take up the sword against His captors. Again, He shows peace when condemned by the authorities, and He remains silent when mercilessly taunted on the Cross. Jesus undergoes every imaginable horror, in order to demonstrate God's mercy and forgiveness to the most misguided people, on the darkest day *ever*.

Would it be within the realm of possibility for us to do the same? Compared to Jesus, what do *we* say to God in our most anguished prayers?³ And how can Jesus' words and actions during the last days of His life be an inspiration for us, as we walk through the dark days of *our* lives—particularly in these challenging times for our community and nation?

This morning, as we embark upon Holy Week, God calls us to make a choice—as He once called the people of Jerusalem. We can choose to be very present with Jesus and His disciples throughout this special week, confronting the ways in which we, too, betray Our Lord. We can offer Him our love and gratitude, as we witness Him struggle for the courage to endure His suffering and death. Or, we can shut the doors of our hearts and minds, and hide our *spirits* away, unwilling to let our composure be torn in two like the curtain of the Temple, by the call to forgiveness and humility which God's Suffering Servant models for us.

However, if we choose to spend this week with Jesus, the only things we will need for the journey are open and prayerful hearts, and the Holy Scriptures. And, if we spend this week close by our Lord, we shall see that because of His great sacrifice for us, our fear, our sins, our griefs, and our illusions about ourselves also have less than one week to live. Why? Because these will be nailed to the Cross, die along with Him, and then be changed forever, by the grace and power of His Resurrection.

So, how will you spend this Holy Week?

May God give us the grace to spend this week staying close by Jesus,⁴ that we may come to the vacant tomb on Resurrection Sunday emptied of *ourselves* and filled with the new life Christ offers us. *Amen*.

² Adapt. N. George-Hacker, 13 April 2014, St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

¹ Adapt. Lesley Mazzotta, "Bible Study: Palm Sunday (A)," [EpiscopalChurch.org](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/bible_study/bible-study-palm-sunday-a-2014/), 13 April 2014 <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/bible_study/bible-study-palm-sunday-a-2014/> 27 March 2023. Used with permission.

² Adapt. Whitney Rice, "Walk through Holy Week with Jesus," [EpiscopalChurch.org](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/walk-through-holy-week-with-jesus-palm-sunday-a-2014/), 13 April 2014 <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/walk-through-holy-week-with-jesus-palm-sunday-a-2014/> 27 March 2023. Used with permission.

³ Adapt. Mazzotta, *op. cit.*

⁴ Adapt. Rice, *op. cit.*