

Give ear to my words, O Lord. Consider well my meditation. *AMEN*.

I admit that this day sneaked up on me. Just recently I received a call from Judy Mullen — she wanted to discuss the particulars of this day so she could produce the bulletin. I was under the impression that Palm Sunday was many Sundays away. I had not grasped that it was a mere two Sundays away at the time of our conversation.

Around the communion today, a number of priests will opt not to preach a sermon. That's because of and a direct result of all the pageantry and reenactments that will take place on this day, officially named the Sunday of the Passion/Palm Sunday. For many priests, this day will be the last time they will see certain members until Easter Sunday. Those are the ones that for whatever reason or reasons will not attend any of the Holy Week offerings. From what I have gleaned from you, I know that you will benefit once you have your own resident priest once again. With such a person, Holy Week, for example, can be really full and pregnant.

When I first began attending an Episcopal Church, I recall hearing Harriet's husband chanting these words, "The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, according to Matthew." The choir and the congregation had their parts — all sung. It was beautiful.

The church that formed me and where I experienced my initial foray into ordained ministry offered services on every day in Holy Week. Naturally, we began with Palm Sunday. Then there was a Eucharist celebrated on Monday and Tuesday in Holy Week. Wednesday saw us conducting Tenebrae. The institution of the Eucharist was celebrated on Maundy Thursday. Good Friday, we conducted the Traditional 3-hour Good Friday liturgy. Later that afternoon, we walked the stations of the cross. Saturday morning, we conducted the short Holy Saturday liturgy, and on that evening, the Easter Vigil (the first service of Easter) was observed. The fateful attended much of this offering, but most attended on Palm Sunday and then again on Easter morning.

Those who took in the whole week were essentially walking with Jesus on the last week of his life, and how moving was that?

In Corpus Christi, St. Andrew's, one fateful Palm Sunday, we processed all the way out to the highway on which the church was located to awaken by passers to what this day is about.

My first Palm Sunday in Wisconsin I was the rector of St. Luke's, Racine. I chose to have the people process around the city block where the church sits. Heading south on Main we processed to 7th Street and continued west to Wisconsin St, north to 6th Street, east back to Main Street and into the church. All the while we sang some version of Hosanna, blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord.

Of course, in various congregations, people have stepped up to read parts in the gospel of the day, known as the Passion Gospel.

Speaking of pageantries and reenactments, I have adopted a tradition, which I have urged congregations to follow — I even suggested it here this day — that we throw the palms we have been given at the Liturgy of the Palms into the aisle as we process to our seats. The rationale as you walked on the plants lying here and there no doubt became obvious.

I love that our presiding bishops, in recent years anyway, have chosen to communicate with us in written form through various letters. Here is what The Most Reverend Michael Curry had to say in his Palm Sunday message:

It's taken me some years to realize it, but Jesus didn't just happen to be in Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday. He wasn't on vacation. He wasn't just hanging out in town. Jesus was in Jerusalem on purpose. He arrived in Jerusalem about the time of the Passover when pilgrims were in the city. When people's hopes and expectations for the dawn of freedom that Moses had promised in the first Passover might suddenly be realized for them in their time.

Jesus arranged his entrance into Jerusalem to send a message. He entered the city, having come in on one side of the city, the scholars tell us, at just about the same time that Pontius Pilate made his entrance on the exact opposite side of the city. Pilate, coming forth on a warhorse. Pilate, with soldiers around him. Pilate, with the insignias of Rome's Empire. Pilate, representing the Caesars who claimed to be son of god. Pilate, who had conquered through Rome the people of Jerusalem. Pilate, representing the Empire that had taken away their freedom. Pilate, who represented the Empire that would maintain the colonial status of the Jewish people by brute force and violence.

Jesus entered the city on the other side, not on a warhorse, but on a donkey, recalling the words of Zechariah:

Behold your King comes to you
Triumphant and victorious is He
Humble and riding on a donkey

Jesus entered the city at the same time as Pilate to show them, and to show us, that God has another way. That violence is not the way. That hatred is not the way. That brute force and brutality are not the way.

Jesus came to show us there is another way. The way of unselfish, sacrificial love. That's why he entered Jerusalem. That's why he went to the cross. It was the power of that love poured out from the throne of God, that even after the horror of the crucifixion would raise him from death to life.

As the drama of the day unfolds, two men go to a place and retrieve a donkey and a colt and bring them back to Jesus who mounts them and rides into the great city. There was no social media to signal his coming as would have been the case if this occurred in our century. In spite of that "shortcoming," the people were well aware of his coming, and they turned out to hail him.

They turned out to welcome him and to bless him as the one “who comes in the name of the Lord.”

Can it really be true that this same group of people are the ones that later in this drama will turn on him and shout out their desire that this man be put to death?

In many various voices, we heard about the ultimate betrayal of Jesus. Judas made arrangements to betray Jesus at an opportune time. What? Didn't Judas feel something when he was scheming and planning to do this deed? Think about this: Do you think about your betrayal of God when you sin? Ever looked at it that way?

The moment we have awaited. The disclosure of the one that will betray. But on the heels of that disclosure, Jesus celebrates a meal not unlike the one he has asked us to celebrate in remembrance of him and until he comes again.

The elements are there, (i.e., Jesus took a loaf of bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to his friends. He called the bread his body. Then he took the cup over which he gave thanks, calling the contents his blood, for forgiveness of sins, and he urges his friends to drink from that cup. He finishes up with what we might call a communion hymn.) How can we, in this day, casually approach the altar and take the Holy Eucharist?

We come to a part in our drama that still gives me much difficulty. Consider the words, “... 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.” Judas was setting out to do a dastardly deed, indeed, but somebody, I assert, had to do it. Didn't we read week before last about a man born blind from birth so that “God's works might be revealed in him”? If not Judas, then who? Why so tough on the man?

We see a scene in which Jesus approaches the Father with the idea that perhaps there might be another way. Nevertheless “not what I want but what you want.” Throughout the ordeal of praying, the disciples could not stay awake with him.

A symbol of love and affection is used in a most disgusting way. Judas kisses his master thereby signaling the identity of the man to be arrested.

Jesus makes a bold pronouncement when he says, “Do you think I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?” I was intrigued by this because I read about an encounter between Marco Polo and Genghis Khan.

According to a legend retold by Barbara Brown Taylor in *Mixed Blessings* (Atlanta: Susan Hunter Publishing, 1986), when the explorer Marco Polo was captured and brought before the infamous Genghis Khan, he told the Khan the story of Jesus according to the Gospel of Matthew.

The Khan liked the story and listened attentively. But when Polo came to the events of Holy Week and told of Jesus' betrayal, trial, scourging, and crucifixion, his fearsome host became increasingly agitated.

When Marco Polo recited the words, “And Jesus cried again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit,” the Khan exploded.

“What did the Christian God do then?” he demanded. “Did he send his thousands of legions from heaven to smite and destroy those who had so treated his son?”

Polo’s answer clearly disappointed the Khan, who remained unconverted.

Unlike Genghis Khan, we know the rest of the story. But can we recall the suspense, the shock, outrage, grief, and wonder of the first time we heard it?

Taylor reminds us that that is exactly what we are asked to do as our final Lenten discipline during this Holy Week.

She admonishes us: “Let us, then, keep [Jesus] company this week, and stay awake with him, and forsaking our own comfort, walk with him as far as we can. Today’s gospel story ends bitterly; it leaves Christ dead upon the cross, and while everything in us wants to rush to the Easter affirmation that he is also risen and he will come again, for this week at least we are asked to stay with him where he is, to share his story and his pain like someone who is experiencing it all for the first time—like Genghis Khan—and to be hurt by it, and healed by it, and amazed.” (*Synthesis*, April 9, 2017)

As far as we know from this account in Matthew, Jesus has died.

I hear that great hymn (164) of Holy Week found in the *Hymnal 1982*, and specifically, I hear this conclusion to our drama today:

Alone thou goest forth, O Lord,
in sacrifice to die;
is this thy sorrow naught to us
who pass unheeding by?

Our sins, not thine, thou bearest, Lord;
make us thy sorrow feel,
till through our pity and our shame
love answers love's appeal.

Verse three has a good lead in but goes a bit further than our drama today suggests, so I have echoed the first phrase of that stanza only in closing,

This is earth's darkest hour,
No doubt the witnesses of that day would have replied, “AMEN.”