



SCRIPTURES AND SYNOPSES

The events of Christ's Passion, which take place during the last week of Jesus' life, often don't receive enough time in our worship and study. These stories are important to our faith journey and our identity as followers of Jesus. And yet we often move too quickly from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday with little time to take in the dramatic story of that last week. Throughout the six weeks of Lent we will "freeze-frame" moments in Holy Week so we might put ourselves in the picture, thereby "Entering the Passion of Jesus." How might taking a closer look at the ancient story open us to deeper conviction for our role in its ongoing message? Inspired by Amy-Jill Levine's book by the same name.

Ash Wednesday — Preparing the Canvas

"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit." — Psalm 51:10-12

So much of life happens around us, even to us, that we take little time to notice. The amount of stimulation and news and ideas and expectations coming at us can outweigh our ability to process all of it and so we stop looking too closely, we filter in order to survive. While this is necessary, it can also dull our senses for seeing the things that matter deeply. In this season of Lent, we will intentionally put a "frame" around the scenes of Jesus' last week and also frame our own lives in a way that we can see what really matters. In this Ash Wednesday service, we will ready ourselves for this journey by preparing the canvas of our lives, reapplying a base coat on which to create new works of art.

Week 1 — The Parade: Risking Reputation

“[The disciples] brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and [Jesus] sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The 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!’” — Matthew 21:7-9 (with references to Matthew 21:1-11, Mark 11:1-11, Luke 19:28-44, John 12: 12-19)

Jesus’ ride into Jerusalem at the beginning of Holy Week was full of risk. Rather than a nice impromptu celebration, it can be seen for the carefully planned and significantly symbolic event that would rub those in power the wrong way. In a moment already filled with tension, this “victory parade” had many implications, and as we know, many consequences. We will stop the action just at the beginning of the parade to take stock of all the players, including the role the city itself plays full of pilgrims for the Passover.

Week 2 — The Temple: Risking Righteous Anger

“Then they came to Jerusalem. And [Jesus] entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers. . . . He was teaching and saying, ‘Is it not written, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations”? But you have made it a den of robbers.’” — Mark 11:15-17 (with references to Mark 11:15-19, John 2:13-21)

Jesus’ response to a visit to the Temple in the midst of this busy, noisy, Passover “tourist season” is utter frustration turned to anger. With so much at stake, “business-as-usual” seems obscene. This can be true for us today. The banality of our everyday lives sometimes seems ludicrous in the face of such suffering around the world. But taking a moment inside the scene where Jesus is overturning tables in this “house of prayer for all nations” can offer us a way to see what we actually might do to reassess our own actions and make our own corner of the world (our “temples”) a more welcoming place for all people.

Week 3 — The Teaching: Risking Challenge

“But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, ‘Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.’ And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, ‘Whose head is this, and whose title?’ They answered, ‘The emperor’s.’ Then he said to them, ‘Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’” — Matthew 22:18-21 (with references to Matthew 22:15-22, Mark 12:13-17, Luke 20:20-26)

That last week, Jesus doesn't "lay low." He puts himself out there, susceptible to those who want to trap him, twist his words, get him to say something damning. He cannot turn from his vocation—he is not only a master teacher, but prophet and voice of the Divine. It is his ability to draw the people to his teachings that pose a threat, a challenge, to the authorities. We place ourselves in the crowd this week, to be moved and motivated by Jesus for our lives—to get a faithful perspective. What would we have seen, heard and felt? What do we do now?

Week 4 — The First Dinner: Risking Rejection

"While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. But some were there who said to one another in anger, 'Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.' And they scolded her. But Jesus said, 'Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me.'"

— Mark 14:3-7 (with references to Mark 14:3-9, Matthew 26:6-13, John 12:1-8)

Besides the Last Supper, Holy Week contains another important story that happens at dinner. Earlier in the week, Jesus and his followers gather for a meal, and a woman shows up unexpectedly to anoint Jesus in an extravagant show of devotion. To say she caused quite a "stir" might be understating it a bit. We imagine ourselves in the room and we see the looks of judgment and even outrage on the faces around us. Are we ourselves moved by her generosity and outpouring of emotion? Or are we uncomfortable as Jesus refers to his own death? Does our complaining or anger really serve to hide our own fear? Jesus invites us to tell this story "in remembrance of her." What uncomfortable stories are we called to tell in our time?

Week 5 — The Last Supper: Risking the Loss of Friends

"After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.'"

— John 13:12-16 (with references to Luke 22:14-27, John 13:1-16, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

Jesus' words at the Last Supper were shocking to those in attendance. His words can seem familiar, even comforting to us because we hear these words every time we have communion. But at the moment of their utterance, they were anything but "usual." This week, we enter the scene of that last supper long enough to get a grasp of the shock

that would have rippled through Jesus' friends. Partaking of body and blood? Not kosher! A "Lord" washing feet like a servant? Unbelievable! Breaking bread with the enemy? What?! But Jesus knew his time was up. And it was time for the disciples to get the message, even if it came in a shocking way: love one another as I have loved you—by serving, forgiving, freeing, communing—becoming one with—God.

Week 6 — The Garden: Risking Temptation

"They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.' He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.' And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.'"
— Mark 14:32-36 (with references to Mark 14:32-52, John 18:1-11)

Gethsemane is the moment when a chain of events begins that cannot be halted. Once Jesus is taken into custody, there is no going back. So we pause a moment with him in the garden just before his arrest, and we feel with him the temptations that arise when facing difficult circumstances—to run, hide, use whatever power we have to change things, fight it, perhaps even bargain with God. We walk among the sleepy disciples who just can't grasp what is about to happen. And we open to let the story remind us that no matter what we face, or how we fail to meet the demand of the moment, second chances are possible.

Holy Week "First Dinner" Service — "In Remembrance of Her: Gratitude for Those who Care for Our Community"

This is an evening of honoring unsung people whose stories are not often recognized. It is prompted by Jesus' mandate to remember the woman who anointed him with oil—an act of care, generosity, and preparation. Caregivers, first responders, fire and police personnel, health care professionals, hospice workers, and any in your community that quietly care for others are the focus of this dinner and ritual of gratitude that could take place one night in the beginning of Holy Week. Consider making it an ecumenical or interfaith event with other religious communities.

Holy Week "Last Supper" Service — "In Remembrance of Me"

Moving to various places in the church, this "stational" service will journey through the whole of the six scenarios we have visited during the six weeks of Lent: The Parade, The Temple, The Teachings, The First Supper, The Last Supper, and The Garden. Then we will move to The Cross to reside there, taking in the sorrows of this moment, our own sorrow, and the sorrows of the world. Having entered into the Passion, how will we respond?