

# Palm/Passion Sunday

The account of Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion stirs strong emotions and challenging questions in individuals and communities. Because God attends to us when our praise shouts "hosanna," when our pain cries "why," and when we are at a loss for words, we can move forward in trust and faith. God holds all our times.

## Focus Scripture: **Matthew 26:14—27:66**

Some churches celebrate this day as Palm Sunday, marking Jesus' entry into Jerusalem to face his final days on earth (**Matthew 21:1–11**). *Hosanna* translates Greek and Hebrew words of praise that mean "save now, we pray."

Other churches observe today as Passion Sunday, marking the beginning of the trials and suffering Jesus endured during those final days. *Passion* is used here as a shorthand term to encompass the events of Jesus' betrayal, arrest, trial, suffering, and crucifixion. In this gospel, Matthew 26:14—27:66 forms the passion narrative.

In keeping with the rest of Matthew's gospel, Jesus' disciples known as The Twelve are portrayed in these verses in a harshly revealing light. Though Jesus asks them to keep watch in prayer, they fall asleep (Matthew 26:36–45). Once Jesus is arrested, they flee (Matthew 26:56). They are not at the cross during Jesus' crucifixion or at the tomb as the women disciples keep vigil.

The religious and civil authorities in this account are treated by the gospel writer in an equally frank manner. Some people judge this gospel as anti-Semitic because of the language in the passion narrative. Rather than a judgment against a religion, the issue here can be seen more as leaders who are driven by fear.

Pilate chooses to "go along to get along." He reduces hand washing from the powerful symbol described in Deuteronomy 21:1–9 to an empty gesture. The first readers of this gospel would have recognized this symbol and heard Pilate's declaration of Jesus' innocence in it (Matthew 27:24–26).

Matthew's gospel seeks to demonstrate how Jesus' life fulfills the Hebrew Scriptures. The tearing of the temple curtain – which separated the most holy place from the people – her-

alds the end of the old temple system and the saints rising from the tombs hearken back to God's Spirit at work in dry bones (Ezekiel 37).

This gospel uses several titles for Jesus. "Son of Man" is Jesus' most common self-reference. "King" or "Messiah" (*Christos* in Greek, meaning "anointed one") takes precedence in the trial before Pilate, for "king" could represent a political threat to Roman authority. It is the charge placed atop the cross. The title "Son of God" enters the High Priest's questioning of Jesus. Jesus' answer – which does not deny this identity – sparks the charge of blasphemy, punishable by death (Leviticus 24:13–16). At the crucifixion, "Son of God" is the confession by the Roman guards and centurion (Matthew 27:54).

In interpreting these events for early Christians who were not present in Jerusalem that week, **Philippians 2:5–11** declares that Jesus chose God's way over all. Jesus lived in love and obedience to God; his death was not the death of hope.

The verses of **Psalm 31:9–16** sound like the lament of one dying. In spite of all that death can strip away, the psalmist declares "my times are in your hand." In **Isaiah 50:4–9a**, the servant echoes such trust: "God helps me."

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Jesus' followers today participate in Jesus' death in two ways. We endure betrayal and injustices, and we also betray and treat others cruelly. Jesus' death resonates with every exploitation and lie that diminishes or destroys a human life. When have you perceived the love and justice of God's reign breaking through in the midst of a trying time? In what ways do your words and deeds declare trust and faith that God holds all your times?



April 17, 2011

## Focus Scripture

**Matthew 21:1–11**  
**Matthew 26:14—**  
**27:66 or Matthew**  
**27:11–54**

## Additional Scriptures

*Liturgy of the Palms*  
**Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29**  
*Liturgy of the Passion*  
**Isaiah 50:4–9a**  
**Psalm 31:9–16**  
**Philippians 2:5–11**

**God of mercy, gird our hearts to be wholly present to the events of Jesus' final days. Open our hearts to sing your praise, and use our tears to water lives committed to working for your reign on earth. In Christ. Amen.**

If you have Internet access, visit [www.spiritseasons.com](http://www.spiritseasons.com) to access Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and the focus passage.

# The Focus for All Ages



This session is designed for all ages to come together for approximately one hour to explore the events of Holy Week from Palm/Passion Sunday to Jesus' death. If for reasons of space or numbers you choose to meet in age-specific groups, the session offers ways to customize the materials for different age groups.

**P**alm/Passion Sunday permits us to break the silence of Lent with the "hosanna" of the crowd on the streets of Jerusalem. Much happens in the coming week and this plan leads us to the table with Jesus and his followers as well as to the arrest, trial, and death. Travelling through this week of stories to Easter beckons us to live with the events and emotions of the entire week. Through the sadness we come to a deeper understanding of the fullness of the Easter "hallelujah."

In an all-ages event like this, allow each participant to take what she or he is ready to hear from these stories. The youngest children will benefit from some idea of the difficulties Jesus and the disciples faced during the days after Palm Sunday, in order to understand the wonder of the Easter story. Too often they are not allowed to hear of the reality of Jesus'

death. Older children are ready to put the events of Holy Week into a sequence and gain new meaning from them. So, too, will youth and adults deepen their faith through this journey with Jesus and those following Jesus. If you do not lead such groups regularly, take a few moments as a leadership team to talk about who might be present and how to integrate the age groups.

If you will be using this plan with a single age group, look at the suggestions for adaptations, particularly in the Respond zones, and design your session with your group in mind. Follow the format that is familiar to your group.

Pray that you and the participants will move through these Holy Week events and come to a clearer understanding of the Easter message.

April 17, 2011



## Materials needed

### Before the session

- ❑ Prayerfully reflect on this week's focus scripture, Matthew 21:1–11 and 26:14–27:66 and biblical background material (p. 43). If possible, read the entire focus scripture at one time to get the full sweep of the story.
- ❑ If possible, display the poster *The Seasons of the Church Year* (available from your curriculum distributor).
- ❑ Gather *pictures* and *posters* illustrating the events from Palm Sunday until the arrest of Jesus (optional).

### Gather

- ❑ Prepare worship table with *purple* or *red* cloth, Bible, and offering basket.
- ❑ Bring *song* you have chosen for the opening ritual
- ❑ Provide *name tags* (optional).

### Engage

- ❑ Prepare to tell the story on *today's two-page resource sheet "Stories of Holy Week."* The story can be told by one or more storytellers. Bring *plain white cloth*, such as a tablecloth. Practice with the cloth so

you can handle it confidently. If you expect more than 12 people, plan to have at least two groups with two storytellers, one beginning after the first group leaves the first station.

- ❑ Put up *signs* for each station in the story: #1 – Jerusalem street; #2 – House in Jerusalem; #3 – Mount of Olives; #4 – Home of high priest; #5 – Golgotha (Place of Skulls); #6 – Joseph's tomb.

### Respond

- ❑ **Art zone:** *cloth* from the story and select *art materials*, such as fingerpaint, watercolour paints, coloured markers, and clay
- ❑ **Quiet zone:** *card stock/heavy paper* (8 x 13 cm/3 x 5 in) and *envelopes*. Print the references on *newsprint*, or provide copies.
- ❑ **Conversation zone:** *copies of biblical background material* (p. 43).
- ❑ **Game zone:** *copies of today's resource sheet "Holy Week Game"* on *card stock/heavy paper*
- ❑ **Writing zone:** *Bibles, writing paper* and *pencils* or *pens*. Copy the subheadings from Matthew 26:14–27:66 onto a sheet of *newsprint*.



# Palm/Passion Sunday

**Scripture**

Matthew 21:1–11  
and 26:14–27:66

**FOCUS** To enter into the events and emotions in the stories from Palm Sunday to Jesus' death.

## GATHER 1

**Opening ritual**

**Call to learning** Welcome the participants as they arrive. Introduce new people to others. When it is time to begin, invite everyone to the worship table. If participants do not know one another, provide name tags.

**Sing** a song that the participants have sung during the opening ritual, throughout the Season of Lent. If you wish, receive an offering during the song.

**Litany of remembering** Explain the format for the litany. A leader will open with the first sentence and invite the group to name stories they remember about Jesus or stories Jesus told. They may be stories from any of the gospels, such as when Jesus healed the bent-over woman, when Jesus fed the big crowd with five loaves of bread and two fish, or when Jesus told the story of the great banquet. After each one, the group responds: *We remember Jesus.*

**Leader:** O God, this is a week of remembering. We remember this about Jesus...

**Response:** *We remember Jesus.*

**Leader:** We remember all this about Jesus. But there is more to the story of Jesus for us to hear today. Amen.

**Connecting with the focus**

**Parades** Invite the group to recall parades they have watched or been in. Ask:

- **What kinds of parades have you seen?**
- **What do you enjoy the most at a parade?**
- **What do we expect to see at a parade?**

After the group has named what they expect to see at a parade, repeat some of them. Explain that the Bible story for this session begins with a kind of parade, but not one with the things we often see at parades.

## 2 ENGAGE

**Preparing for the story**

If you have the church year poster, locate Lent on it. With or without the poster, note that Palm/Passion Sunday comes on the sixth Sunday during the Season of Lent, and Holy Week begins on the Monday following that Sunday. Explain that the group will follow the storyteller from place to place, hearing a new story from the week between Palm Sunday and Easter at each stop.

**The Bible story**

**Holy Week stories** As you move from station to station, wait until everyone is with you and ready to listen before you begin. This story will take a generous part of the session, but don't hurry it. Tell it dramatically and use the cloth to bring attention to a significant feature in each story. Ask the group to think quietly about all the stories at the end of the last one.

*If you are telling this story to a group of children, invite their questions at the end. Be open to anything they want to discuss. Some of the stories may be new or have new information for younger children. They may need to be reminded that this is not the end of the story of Jesus for us. More of the story will come at Easter.*

*If you are telling this story to a group of youth or adults, you may not find it necessary to move from station to station. However, pause after each story to allow a moment for the group to think about it quietly.*

**The Bible story and us**

Invite the group to imagine how Peter, Mary Magdalene, John, James, and all the followers of Jesus were feeling at the end of the last story. It is not necessary to talk about these feelings because the participants have opportunities to work with them in the Respond zones.

# 3

RESPOND

Explain the choices in the zones. Invite everyone to select a zone and work with the materials there.

- **Art zone: Group art** Many times the best way to express emotions is with your hands instead of words. Sometimes that expression is found through shapes and colour. Select two or three media for the people in this zone to express the emotions they heard in the story or felt in themselves as they heard the story. You might provide fingerprint, watercolour paints, coloured markers, or clay. Remind the participants in this zone of what they thought about at the end of the story: the emotions they heard in the story and the emotions they felt during the story. Have them express those emotions using the materials provided. To display their work, drape the cloth from the story over a table and place their work on it.

- **Quiet zone: Holy Week prayer reminders** Jesus prayed during these difficult times. Prayer can be an important part of Holy Week for us, too. These simple prayer reminders provide a way to structure such prayer times. Print the following references and questions on newsprint, or provide copies of them in this zone:

Monday	Matthew 26:14–29
Tuesday	Matthew 26:31–56
Wednesday	Matthew 26:57–75
Thursday	Matthew 27:1–26
Friday	Matthew 27:32–56
Saturday	Matthew 27:57–66

On each day, read the Bible passage and think about these questions:

- **What happens in this reading?**
- **What would I like to know about this reading?**
- **What is my prayer for this day?**

Provide card stock/heavy paper (8 x 13 cm/3 x 5 in) and markers. Instruct the participants to write each day and Bible reference on a card for each day, and to write the questions on one other card, which can be used for each day. Give each one an envelope to take the cards home to use during Holy Week.

*If making the reminders with a group of children, you may want to prepare the directions in advance and have the children prepare the daily reading cards.*

*Share this project with the congregation by making additional sets to take to people unable to come to the church during Holy Week.*

- **Conversation zone: Holy Week readings** No matter how many times we have read about the events of Holy Week, we find something new each time. This zone is particularly for participants who have read and heard these stories often. They will focus on **Matthew 26:14–27:66**. Provide Bibles for everyone to follow as one person reads the focus scripture aloud. Distribute copies of the biblical background material (p. 43). Invite someone to read the commentary on the focus passage. Allow a few moments for them to think about the Bible passage and the background material. Begin with this question: *What new thoughts have come to you as you thought about the Matthew text and the background information?* Then let the conversation flow from there. Suggest that they continue to read this story throughout the week in preparation for the Easter story (Matthew 28:1–10).

- **Game zone: Holy Week game** Make two copies of today's resource sheet "Holy Week Game" on card stock/heavy paper for each game. Cut the game pieces apart and have the participants identify each picture and its part in the Holy Week stories. Use two sets of cards to play matching games. They can take turns turning over two game pieces, trying to match them, or make up their own games.

*If you are using the game with children, make enough copies for them to take the games home to play with their families during Holy Week.*

- **Writing zone: From headlines to stories** Writing about an event so that emotions and more senses are included can bring a story to life. Copy the subheadings from

Matthew 26:14—27:66 onto a sheet of newsprint.

Have the participants select a subheading, find it in the Bible, read the Bible text, and then rewrite the story, adding more detail. Questions they might think about are:

- **What happened before this event? What were people in the story doing?**
- **What is in the scene? Is it indoors or outdoors? What sounds might be heard? What smells might be noted?**

■ **What expressions are on the people's faces?**

■ **Who is not at the event? Why?**

Suggest that they read their stories during the week as a way to prepare for the Easter story.

*To include young children, have them work with a youth or adult.*

*If you have posters and illustrations of the Holy Week events, have the participants look at them to enhance their writing.*



**Gather** When it is almost time to conclude the session, ask the participants to finish their activities and come to the worship table.

**Prayer** In this litany, the group will respond with: *We want to remember these stories.* Explain that they will say the response after each sentence.

**Leader:** O God, this is a week of remembering. *Response*

We remember how Jesus came into Jerusalem riding a donkey. *Response*

We remember how he upset the tables in the temple courtyard. *Response*

We remember how Jesus ate the Passover meal with the disciples. *Response*

We remember how Jesus prayed alone and sad in the garden.

*Response*

We remember how Jesus was arrested and put on trial before the high priest and before Pilate.

*Response*

We remember how Jesus died.

*Response*

We remember that there is more to the story of Jesus. Amen.

**Blessing** Invite the participants to say this blessing to persons next to them: "Remember that the story is not ended."



How were the participants able to enter into these stories with their emotions as well as their understanding? If you are planning an all-ages session for Easter, what have you learned about the group to inform your planning?



# Stories of Holy Week

based on Matthew 21:1–11 and 26:14—27:66

Lead the group from place to place to hear each story. Wait until everyone is ready before beginning each story. Tell it dramatically and use the cloth to add to the drama. See the session plan for ways to adapt the storytelling to specific age groups.

## Station

# 1

### Jesus enters Jerusalem

Jerusalem was bustling with people arriving from all over the country to celebrate Passover. On Passover, the Jewish people remembered how

God had brought them out of slavery in Egypt. They celebrated with a special meal and they worshipped God in the temple. Being in Jerusalem for Passover was everyone's hope.

Jesus and his friends were on their way to Jerusalem too. When they were almost in the city, Jesus gave two of his friends a special job. "Go to the village just ahead. You will see a donkey with her colt tied. Bring them to me. If anyone stops you, say, 'The Master needs them. They will be returned soon.'"

The two friends did as Jesus said. When they brought the donkey and her colt to Jesus, they put their clothes on them. Then Jesus got on and rode into the city. A large crowd gathered as word spread that it was Jesus. The people cut palm

tree branches and laid them and their clothes on the road before Jesus. (*Spread the cloth as though in front of Jesus, doing so with a flourish.*) When people asked "Who is this?" those who were shouting said "It is the prophet Jesus from Galilee."

Jesus went to the temple courtyard, where he became angry when he saw the moneychangers cheating the people. Jesus turned over their tables. Money and doves flew all over the place. (*Quickly pull the cloth up from the floor.*) People, including the children, continued to shout "Hosanna!" The religious leaders were not happy, but Jesus ignored them and went to Bethany to spend the night.

## Station

# 2

### The Last Supper

For three days, Jesus taught in the temple, attracting many people. The religious leaders watched Jesus closely.

Meanwhile, Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, made a deal with the chief priests to betray Jesus. They paid Judas 30 silver coins.

Later in the week, Jesus and his friends gathered to celebrate the Passover feast. As they were eating (*spread the cloth as on a table*), Jesus said, "Tonight one of you will betray me." They looked at Jesus. Each one, even Judas Iscariot, said, "Not me, Master, not me."

When it was time to pray, Jesus took the bread, and said, "Take, eat. This is my body." This was not the usual Passover prayer. Then he held up a cup of wine and said, "Drink, all of you, and remember God's love." They all drank from the cup, but they were puzzled by Jesus' words. And they didn't want to ask him what he meant.



# Stories of Holy Week (cont.)

## Station 3

### In the garden

After they had eaten the Passover meal and sung a hymn, Jesus and some of the disciples went to the Mount of Olives just outside the city. They went to a garden called Gethsemane. Jesus said, "Stay here while I go over there to pray." He took Peter, James, and John with him. To them, he said, "I am very sad. Stay awake with me." Then Jesus lay down on the ground to pray. (*Crumple up the cloth to make a rock for a pillow and set it on the floor.*) Jesus prayed to God because Jesus knew some people wanted to hurt him. Jesus asked God for strength. Twice Jesus came to find everyone with him asleep. This saddened him, too.

## Station 4

### Arrest and trial

Later, Judas came and kissed Jesus on the cheek. This was the sign Judas had arranged with the chief priests. Then the soldiers came to arrest Jesus.

One of Jesus' followers pulled out a sword, but Jesus said "Put it away." Then Jesus' followers all ran away.

The soldiers took Jesus to the religious leaders at the home of Caiaphas the high priest. They wanted Jesus to die, so they took him to Pilate, the Roman governor.

The crowd shouted "Crucify him! Kill him!" "What has he done wrong?" asked Pilate. He wanted nothing to do with Jesus. But the crowd shouted louder.

The soldiers made fun of Jesus. They put a crown of thorns on him and a red robe. (*Drape the cloth around your shoulders like a robe.*) "Hail, king of the Jews," they laughed. Then they led him to a place called Golgotha to crucify him on a cross.

While all this was happening, Peter was in the courtyard. Three times, people accused him of being with Jesus. Each time he claimed he didn't know Jesus. When the rooster crowed, Peter remembered Jesus' words to him: "Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." Peter left the courtyard, sobbing.

## Station 5

### Death of Jesus

When they got to Golgotha, also called the Place of the Skulls, they put Jesus on a cross between two thieves.

Everyone waited for Jesus to die. His friends were sad beyond belief. Some of the women who followed Jesus watched from a distance.

About three o'clock on Friday afternoon, Jesus shouted and stopped breathing. The earth shook and the holy curtain in the temple ripped in half. (*Let the cloth fall in a heap at your feet.*)

## Station 6

### Burial of Jesus

After Jesus died, Joseph, a rich man who lived in Arimathea, went to Pilate. "May I take the body of Jesus to bury him?" he asked. Pilate gave orders to let

Joseph take the body. Joseph wrapped it in clean linen cloths and put it in a new tomb. (*Gently pick up the cloth and fold it neatly.*) Mary Magdalene and the other Mary watched all this across from the tomb.

The next day, the religious leaders went to Pilate and asked him to station guards at the tomb. But Pilate, wanting nothing to do with Jesus' death, said to them, "Take them!" And they did, so guards stayed at the tomb to make sure nothing happened to Jesus' body.



# Holy Week Game

