

Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday - A (2026)

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalm 31:9-16

Philippians 2:5-11

Matthew 21:1-11 (Palms)

Matthew 26:14-27:66 (Passion)

‘The crowds that went ahead of him were shouting, “Hosanna, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!”And Pilate again said to them (the crowd), “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Let him be crucified!”’ In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

So, which is it: Triumph or Tragedy? Joy or Horror? Celebration or Disillusionment? Is it Palm Sunday or the Sunday of the Passion? Over time, I’ve concluded that it is not an ‘or’ question but an ‘and’ declaration. The selected readings for this day offer triumph *and* tragedy, joy *and* horror, celebration *and* disillusionment. Palm Sunday serves as an entrance into what is arguably the most important eight days in human history, certainly as it relates to the worldwide Christian community, Holy Week. Our liturgical color changes for this week to red, symbolizing the passion of Christ and the blood he shed for our redemption on the cross. Christ’s blood is juxtaposed against the green of the palms, the symbolic sign of victory for the Jewish nation. The theme of Palm Sunday would not be complete without the crucial storyline of jubilant shouts of “Hosanna” and the veracity of the demands to “Crucify him!”

All four gospels tell of Jesus’ entrance into the city, commonly referred to as the Triumphal Entry. The atmosphere of Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem created a palpable sense of tension. Jesus has renewed sight to the blind, exorcized demons, miraculously fed 5,000 people, taught and preached, and, in John’s account, raised his friend Lazarus from the dead. The growing crowd that either witnessed or heard about these events joined Jesus on his march to the Holy City. The religious elites are in a panic and have been plotting ways to have this so-called rabble-raising and blaspheming itinerant peasant and his now-resurrected friend put to death. Matthew’s version says that all of Jerusalem was stirred up and in turmoil,

wondering who this Jesus was. From the Roman perspective, this Jewish holiday brought the potential for trouble in its own right, let alone the added tension of a boisterous crowd shouting and claiming that this ‘Blessed one who comes in the name of the Lord,’ is the King of Israel. Agendas abound from Pilate’s demand for law and order at any cost to the secret and efficient elimination of a troublemaking rabbi of the Sanhedrin.

I typically find this Sunday that begins our journey into Holy Week and the days that follow with a sense of disappointment yet hope, and of expectations not met with yet another week to ‘try again.’ Each year, I want to feel the excitement and energy like those crowds that had followed Jesus, who had witnessed his miraculous healings, and to experience in some sort of way the power associated with him raising Lazarus from the dead. I want to wave my palm branch with wild abandon, declaring that Jesus is indeed the Blessed One who comes in the name of the Lord. I look forward every year to hearing us all sing a hymn we all know, *All glory, laud, and honor*, with one strong and mighty voice. I arrive at this Sunday having, to some degree or another, fulfilled the Church’s invitation to the ‘observance of a holy Lent; by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial, and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.’

And yet, before we are twenty minutes into the liturgy, we hear again a Passion narrative from one of the gospels that seems to swallow up my “Hosanna” with shouts of “Crucify him” and Jesus’ question of “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Maybe that is why this Sunday creates a feeling of tension for me: I want to be joyful, I want to recognize some of the spirit work I did during Lent, and yet I know what is coming. The Collects for Holy Week set the tone:

Holy Monday

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went *not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified*: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace.

Holy Tuesday

O God, by the *passion of your Son* you made an instrument of shameful death to be our means of life: Grant us so to glory in the cross of Christ, that we may gladly suffer shame and loss for the sake of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ.

Holy Wednesday

Lord God, whose blessed Son our Savior *gave his body to be whipped and his face to be spit upon*: Give us grace to accept joyfully the sufferings of the present time, confident of the glory that shall be revealed.

Maundy Thursday

Almighty Father, whose dear Son, *on the night before he suffered*, instituted the Sacrament of his Body and Blood: Mercifully grant that we may receive it thankfully in remembrance of Jesus Christ our Lord, who in these holy mysteries gives us a pledge of eternal life.

Good Friday

Almighty God, we pray you graciously to behold this your family, for whom our Lord Jesus Christ *was willing to be betrayed, and given into the hands of sinners, and to suffer death upon the cross*.

Holy Saturday

O God, Creator of heaven and earth: grant that, as the *crucified body* of your dear Son was laid in the tomb and rested on this holy Sabbath, so we may await with him the coming of the third day, and rise with him to newness of life.

Simply put, the joyful shouts of expectant victory of the swollen crowd of supporters who followed Jesus to the royal city are temporarily overcome by the cries for crucifixion and the pall of looming death: the victory parade has morphed into a funeral procession. Is it any wonder why Peter rebuked Jesus for talking of suffering and death? Is it any wonder why Peter, wanting so desperately to be close to his master and the events surrounding Jesus while in Pilate's custody, vehemently denies evening knowing Jesus as the reality of following Jesus comes into sharper focus? Is it any wonder the other disciples fade into the background out of fear, confusion, and disillusionment?

The season of Lent asks us to do some self-examination; to reflect upon our relationship with God and with each other. It called us to an intentional time and practice of prayer, fasting, and meditation. It calls us to identify and set aside those things that keep us from more fully trusting and depending on God. Holy Week offers us the opportunity to put into practice what we have learned. We will have to decide if we are willing to pick up our cross and follow Jesus, knowing that being one of his disciples will cost us *something*. It may cost us friendships; it may cost us time; it may cost us influence; whatever it is, it will cost each of us *something*. Holy Week will once again test our mettle for a life of discipleship, sacrifice, service, and obedience. Holy Week can refine, strengthen, and deepen our relationship with Jesus as we walk in his path on the rough streets of Jerusalem. Holy Week is a time of walking with Jesus that can only be experienced, not explained. And in our doing, we will join with the unnamed centurion and all believers who proclaim that “Truly, this man was God’s Son.”

Dear friends, Easter is on the horizon. Like a plane descending toward the runway and the final preparations for landing are underway, we know what to expect. But the plane hasn’t landed, and Easter still hasn’t arrived. Our ‘Alleluias’ are still in hiding. We anticipate the celebration of an empty tomb and join with the disciples in the wonderment of it all. What had seemed like certain defeat will have turned into ultimate victory. But we’re not there yet, so do not rush what these coming days have in store for us. I encourage and invite you to slow down and be attentive to what you might experience as together we wait with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, receive the new commandment to love one another, and vigil in prayer as Jesus is humiliatingly tortured, mocked, and crucified and buried in a rock-cut tomb owned by Joseph of Arimathea.

God’s unrelenting love to reconcile the whole world through his gift of the forgiveness of sins and the salvation of our souls is made available for all; one just has to choose to receive it. Don’t rush. Experience and receive what God has for you this coming week. It is a dark week, no doubt, but the light is coming. It *will* arrive. It *will* change everything if we embrace it. Let’s get ready for landing.