



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR

PALM SUNDAY, YEAR B, MARCH 24, 2024

ISAIAH 50:4-9a; PSALM 31: 9-16; PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11; MARK 14:1-15:47

## HOLY WEEK IS HARD WORK



### A Modern Pietà

by Douglas Blanchard 1

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<sup>1</sup> A *pieta* is a distinctly Christian artifice depicting a grief-stricken Mary holding the mortal body of her son. This image was on the cover of the current issue of *The Living Church* in which an article invites the reader to consider, through modern day depictions of the Stations of the Cross, how the intermingling of love and grief carry us on the *Via Dolorosa*, the Way of Suffering. This is the hard work of Holy Week.

Holy Week is hard work.

It's supposed to be, because it drives to the heart of humanity's deepest yearnings, fears and joys.

It is such a special time that we engage the story differently, marking time by the pulse of Christ as he enters Jerusalem joyfully, as a king preparing for coronation, only to have his head pierced days later by a thorny crown, mocked and lashed and crucified, his regal nature ridiculed, while his friends desert him, his followers betray him, and he dies in tragic agony on a lynching tree on the outskirts of town.

It is a lot to take in...

But Holy Week is not, at its core, about listening to the story once more—the story whose ending we think we know, because we've heard it so many times before. If we distance ourselves from the story and our place in it—if we just listen with passive ears—our hearts will not quicken, our stomachs will not turn, our thoughts will keep their objective distance...and we will miss the point of it all.

We finger the palms today and process around with hosannas on our lips, not as quaint gimmicks of liturgical fancy, but as sensorial work meant to arouse us to alertness as we strike out on this journey that is Holy Week.

Some of us will not want to make the journey; it is just too hard, and we will divert to the demands of life by which we normally find our way.

But for those who are willing to step into this week with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, you will discover in it, and through it, an invitation to engage the deep Wisdom that lends meaning to our human existence—the whole of it in all its beauty and brokenness—nothing less than the Paschal Mystery, all of it meant to situate our lives in the divine story of steadfast love.

It is not possible to make our way alone. We do so in the context of a community that is committed to caring for each other, carrying each other at times. It is an arduous journey.

We find different guideposts this week—palm branches and wet feet and wooden crosses, and dissonance and darkness and death. Our pulse quickens, too, as we come face to face with all that haunts us. This is no reenactment of an ancient play; this is not pageantry so much as it is a portal into the depths of our human heart and the human condition, seeking what makes us tick, and why.

Gerald May once wrote: "Searching beneath anxiety, one will find fear. And beneath fear, hurt will be discovered. Beneath the hurt will be guilt. Beneath the guilt lie rage and hatred. But do not stop with this, for beneath the rage lies frustrated desire. Finally beneath and beyond desire, is love. In every feeling, look

deeply. Explore without ceasing. At the bottom, love is." <sup>2</sup>

In the complex layering of Holy Week, all of these elements of human experience are expressed liturgically, but for a purpose, yielding into the consummate embrace of a loving God. At the bottom, love is.

Holy Week has a telos, to be sure, but there is no contraction of time that gets us to Easter without making the journey of Holy Week. Many have tried, but the angle of entry is too acute, and they bounce off into orbit once more, thinking perhaps that next time it will be different, but the yearning for weighty meaning persists.

Yes, Holy Week is hard work.

So we make our way together, and we go with all the senses engaged, trusting that the shadowy weight of our memories and the glimmering hope of our dreams are connected intimately to each other, and to the Paschal Mystery that emboldens us to speak of eternal life even in the face of death—Christ's, and our own.

Palm Sunday plots the course for us:

Monday—a contemplative Eucharist providing space and time for quiet reflection on what has been done and what has not been done, with an invitation to let it be.

Tuesday—a Eucharist with special intentions for healing. Fragrant oil will be offered in a sacramental act of anointing.

Wednesday—the sublimely vexing service of Tenebrae at sunset. Darkness seems to consume the space, but one candle remains, beckoning us onward.<sup>3</sup>

Thursday—a community's response to Jesus' instruction to serve one another and remember him always. Foot-washing and a holy meal of memory before the altar is stripped.

Good Friday—a mother weeps at the foot of the cross, and we approach, too, with temerity and grief in our own right.

Saturday—a brief midday contemplative service to mark the "in between time", and the waiting, until at dusk we light a new fire and turn into the great vigil, hearing the story come full circle into God's consummate love once more. Baptisms and a host of joyful actions make this the night of great glory and wonder and awe.

Sunday—returning once again by the light of Easter Day—our day to celebrate the great Feast that gathers us up into the deep mystery of that divine love.

This week—this Holy Week—is set apart for your sake, and mine—a sacred space and time to plumb the depths of meaning and purpose and identity amid the anxious uncertainty of life's ambit, trusting that the turn is coming, that we might welcome that happy morning once more, and soon.

Let us be on our way.

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<sup>2</sup> May, Gerald. *Simply Sane*, 1993, pg. 87.

<sup>3</sup> *Tenebrae* is the Latin word for "darkness."



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