

FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life



Many congregations observe the week between Palm Sunday and Easter as Holy Week. What biblical events do this week's special days commemorate? In what unique ways can worship during Holy Week nourish our Christian faith and prepare us for our celebration of the Resurrection?

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Experiencing the Whole Story

When reading a novel, do you skip to the last chapter as soon as you've finished the first? After watching the first few minutes of a movie at home, do you fast forward to the last few? I sincerely doubt that you do. So why should anyone experience the Easter story this way?

Today is the Sunday before Easter, also known as Palm Sunday, and the beginning of Holy Week, arguably the richest time in the Christian calendar both liturgically and theologically. Holy Week immerses us completely in the story of the last week in Jesus' earthly life. It brings the past, as recorded in Scripture, into the present and allows us to hear and experience the story again. Encountering the full story as a community in this way prepares us for a more meaningful Easter celebration and more faithful and fruitful service to the risen Lord.

Palm/Passion Sunday

The traditional Palm Sunday service begins with great festivity as worshipers hear about Jesus' "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem. They may also participate in the story by processing through the sanctuary waving palm fronds to evoke the crowd that greeted Jesus. Children especially are encouraged to join the shouts of "Hosanna!" However, as the service progresses, it begins to grow somber. Worshipers hear the story of Jesus' passion—his arrest, trial, suffering, and execution. They may even repeat the crowd's cry, "Crucify him!"

Rejoicing and rejection, celebration and suffering—these emotions appear to be incongruent with one another, but the Liturgy of the Palms and the Liturgy of the Passion belong together. As Debra Dean Murphy writes, they remind us "that when we read



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Core Bible Passages

Holy Week worship understandably focuses heavily on New Testament Scriptures, especially the four Gospel accounts of the Passion narrative. However, this emphasis also encourages a harmonization of the texts that overlooks differences in details and emphases from the different Gospel writers. For instance, Matthew’s “Palm Sunday” narrative (**21:1-11**) occurs on Monday; doesn’t mention palms, only “branches” (CEB’s “palm branches” in **21:8** has no basis in the original Greek); and stresses how Jesus’ actions fulfill Scripture—a primary theme for Matthew.

The few Old Testament texts used during Holy Week help to place the events in the larger context of salvation history. For example:

- **Exodus 12:1-14**, assigned for Holy Thursday, contains God’s instructions for keeping the Passover feast. The text is appropriate to the day both because Jesus and his disciples celebrated Passover the night before his death (according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but not John), and also because it suggests continuity between God’s saving power in the Exodus and in Jesus’ sacrificial death.

- **Isaiah 52:13–53:12**, commonly read on Good Friday, is one of the prophet’s “servant songs” in which Christians have long seen anticipations of Jesus. This text helped the earliest believers understand both Jesus’ death as a substitutionary offering for the people’s sin (**53:4-6**) and his resurrection as God’s vindication of him (**53:11-12**).

and hear them we are not innocent bystanders—we are implicated in the stories. . . . We are the crowd along the streets of Jerusalem shouting, ‘Hosanna!’ . . . and we are the same mob on Good Friday screaming, ‘Crucify him!’”

Many who cheered Jesus expected him to rule as an earthly king, inaugurating “the coming kingdom of our ancestor David” (**Mark 11:10**). Palm branches were, biblical scholars note, symbols of national victory. But Jesus subverts, even satirizes, worldly ideas of power, arriving “humble and riding on a donkey” (**Matthew 21:5**; see also **Zechariah 9:9**).

During the service, some worshipers fold their palms into crosses. These palm crosses serve as a reminder that Jesus triumphed over sin, evil, and death by following the path of obedience to God (**Philippians 2:5-11**)—a path he still calls us to walk.

Holy (Maundy) Thursday

Holy Thursday commemorates Jesus’ last meal with his disciples before he was betrayed and arrested. Even congregations that celebrate Communion infrequently celebrate it today, honoring Jesus’ institution of the sacrament with the words, “Do this to remember me” (**1 Corinthians 11:24-25**).

“Remembering” Jesus at the table isn’t an exercise in merely thinking about the past. As *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion* says, this remembering “becomes re-presentation of past gracious acts of God . . . so powerfully as to make them truly present now.” Through the Eucharist, the risen Jesus feeds us *today*, strengthening us to be his body for the task at hand. The hopes of the past, present, and future meet whenever Christians break the bread and share the cup.

Surprisingly, the Gospel reading during this service isn’t from the Last Supper, but instead the story of Jesus washing his followers’ feet in **John 13**. After his example of humble service, Jesus gives them “a new commandment” to love each other (**13:34**). Some churches call this day Maundy Thursday, from the Latin *mandatum novum*, which means new commandment.

Foot washing remains part of today’s liturgy for many Christians. While this was a common act of hospitality in first-century Palestine, often performed by servants, foot washing no longer connotes welcome and care in modern contexts; indeed, some participants find it awkward. However, as Laurence Hull Stookey writes, doing something “a bit strange, embarrassing even, is more likely to be an experience in humility” than doing something familiar.

Whether we wash feet or not, we’re asked this day whether we live in ways by which “everyone will know that [we] are [Jesus’] disciples” (**John 13:35**)—whether we embody, in Sister Joan

A Holy Week Glossary

Eucharist (*YOO-kuh-rist*)—another name for Holy Communion, the Lord’s Supper; from the Greek *eucharístia*, meaning gratefulness, thanksgiving.

Good Friday—the name for the day commemorating Jesus’ death is of uncertain origin; it’s possibly a corruption of “God’s Friday” or may draw on an archaic meaning of *good* as holy.

Liturgy of the Palms—the portion of the service on the Sunday before Easter that details Jesus’ “triumphal entry” into Jerusalem.

Liturgy of the Passion—the portion of the service on the Sunday before Easter relating to Jesus’ suffering and death.

Maundy Thursday—a name for the Thursday of Holy Week, derived from the Latin translation of **John 13:34** (*mandatum novum*, or new commandment).

Passion—from the Latin *passio*, meaning suffering; the term encompasses Jesus’ betrayal, arrest, trial, torture, and crucifixion.

Passion narrative—any Gospel accounts of Jesus’ passion; traditionally, Matthew’s, Mark’s or Luke’s are read on Palm/Passion Sunday in a three-year cycle, while John’s is read on Good Friday every year.

Tenebrae (*TEN-uh-bray*)—Latin, meaning shadows; a service of gradually increasing darkness, symbolizing “the approaching darkness of Jesus’ death and of hopelessness in the world without God” (UMC.org); often celebrated on Good Friday, but also on Holy Thursday or earlier in Holy Week.

Chittister’s words, “the promise of a new way of being human together.”

Good Friday

On Good Friday, Christians commemorate Jesus’ death. Some structure services around his “Seven Last Words”: statements from the cross, compiled from the four Gospels (no single Gospel includes them all). The service may last three hours—as long as Jesus hung on the cross—and include music, brief homilies, and silence.

The last words may also form the spine of a Tenebrae service. This service plunges worshipers into increasing darkness as candles are extinguished, one by one, with each reading. Finally, a lone lit candle remains—the light shining in darkness (**John 1:5**).

Good Friday teaches us how to lament when we face darkness in the world and in our lives. Congregations read, chant, or sing **Psalm 22**: “My God! My God, why have you left me all alone?” (**verse 1**). On the cross, Jesus made the psalm-singer’s cry of dereliction his own, displaying total emotional honesty before God. This service gives us words to voice our own shock, anger, and grief to God.

This service also displays sin in all its ugliness. Jesus’ death is brutal and dehumanizing. The apostle Paul teaches that Christ saved us by becoming accursed (**Galatians 3:13**), and that “God caused the one who didn’t know sin to be sin for our sake” (**2 Corinthians 5:21**). The Crucifixion is the result of humanity’s sin. Some congregations hear the Solemn Reproaches of the Cross, an ancient text that names God’s merciful, saving acts, repeating after each the charge, “But you have prepared a cross for your Savior.”

Good Friday is dark, but it isn’t about despair. It holds the pain and tragedy of Jesus’ death in tension with the anticipation of the Easter light that’s about to break. The Passion narrative of **John 18–19** is a common reading on Good Friday. In it, John depicts Jesus as crucified but in command, completely sovereign, fulfilling his own prophecy: “When I am lifted up from the earth”—elevated on the cross, exalted in his return to God—“I will draw everyone to me” (**John 12:32**). When he declares, “It is finished” (**19:30**, NRSV), he affirms he’s completed his mission.

Jesus’ victory *in* death, even before his Easter victory *over* it, is what makes this Friday “Good.” His willingness to suffer in humility and love for our salvation makes this week, and the entire story it tells, “Holy.”

Holy Week and Anti-Semitism

For centuries, some observances of Holy Week contributed to a sinful culture of anti-Semitism. “Many an older U.S. Jew,” states the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s website, “has heard vivid tales from grandparents of repressive measures in the old country, including the need to lock oneself in one’s house on Good Friday against marauding ruffians.”

Certain Holy Week texts must be carefully interpreted to avoid fueling anti-Jewish sentiment. For instance, the “blood libel” of **Matthew 27:25** doesn’t fix blame for Jesus’ death on all Jews, and John’s references to “the Jews” refer only to those Jewish leaders who opposed Jesus. Such language is evidence of first-century conflicts between the evangelists’ communities (who accepted Jesus as Messiah) and other Jewish communities (who didn’t).

Even well-meaning efforts to appreciate Jesus’ Jewishness—so-called “Christian seders,” for example—can cause offense. As Laurence Hull Stookey notes, “We might well ask how we would feel about Muslims periodically having a kind of baptismal or eucharistic rite in order to try to ‘get in touch with their Christian roots.’”

United Methodist Perspective

During his ministry in Georgia, John Wesley held Holy Week in special regard. He resolved to observe Lent, “especially the Holy Week.” He apparently fasted until at least 3:00 p.m. each day of the week; and during the Holy Week of 1736, he ate mostly bread.

Holy Week observances aren’t mandatory in today’s United Methodist Church, but Discipleship Ministries (www.umcdiscipleship.org/) does offer a wide range of resources for use in planning Holy Week worship, including an outline for a single service that encompasses the week’s events (“The Last Week,” <http://bit.ly/2n6bmp6>), a Tenebrae service (“Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley,” <http://bit.ly/2mkw4CT>), and several prayers and litanies for Good Friday (such as “Lord, I Have Known,” <http://bit.ly/2n64E2m>).

Mark Burrows, director of Children’s Ministries at First United Methodist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, told UMC.org reporter Joe Iovino, “Children need more, and want more, than rainbows and butterflies [at Easter]. . . . Without the Holy Week experiences, the story is incomplete.” United Methodists and other Christians of all ages need the complete story, too.


Helpful Links

- “Chuck Knows Church: Holy Week” — <http://tiny.cc/puq1jy>
- Joe Iovino, “Teaching Children About Holy Week” — <http://tiny.cc/rac7jy>

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FaithLink: Connecting **Faith** and **Life** is a weekly, topical study and an official resource for The United Methodist Church approved by Discipleship Ministries and published weekly by Cokesbury, The United Methodist Publishing House, 2222 Rosa L. Parks Blvd., P.O. Box 280988, Nashville, TN 37228-0988. Scripture quotations in this publication, unless otherwise indicated, are from the Common English Bible, copyrighted © 2011 Common English Bible, and are used by permission. **Permission is granted to photocopy pages 1–4 of this resource for use in FaithLink study groups.** All Web addresses were correct and operational at the time of publication.

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volume 22
number 50
april 9, 2017

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Holy Week

In what unique ways can worship during Holy Week nourish our Christian faith and prepare us for our celebration of the Resurrection?

CREATE Your Teaching Plan

Keeping in mind your group members and your group time, choose from among the OPEN, EXPLORE, and CLOSE activities or from “Teaching Alternatives” to plan the session.

OPEN the Session

Pray Together

Read aloud together a prayer for Palm/Passion Sunday (such as *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 281), or lead this or a similar prayer:

Eternal God, who made all time holy by entering it in the life of your Son, now guide and teach us as we remember the final days of his earthly ministry, and make us more holy by your Spirit, that our lives may more fully and faithfully proclaim Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. Amen.

Recall Holy Week Experiences

Note that today is both the Sunday before Easter and, in many churches, the beginning of Holy Week. Identify any worship services, special events, or other ways in which your congregation observes Holy Week. Invite participants to talk briefly about early, vivid, and/or any especially strong memories they may have of worship during Holy Week. Be ready to start the discussion by talking about a memory of your own. Ask: How familiar or comfortable are you with Holy Week observances? What, if anything, do you appreciate about Holy Week?

EXPLORE the Topic

Discuss “Experiencing the Whole Story”

Read or review the essay’s first section. Ask participants to imagine that someone who knows nothing about the last week in Jesus’ earthly life is attending your worship today and will come back next week for Easter services. Ask: What would this person learn about the last week of Jesus’ life from the way your church observes these two Sundays? What might they still not know? Encourage participants to answer as specifically as possible.

Plan Holy Week Worship Services

Supplies needed: Bibles, hymnals/songbooks (if any) used in your congregation, paper, and pens or pencils.

Invite participants to spend the bulk of this session engaging directly with the content of Holy Week. Form three teams of participants. Assign each team a different day of Holy Week: Palm/Passion Sunday, Holy (Maundy) Thursday, and Good Friday. Ask each team to work together, according to the following instructions (write them on a large piece of paper or project them for ease of reference), to develop a brief outline of a worship service:

- Read or review the appropriate section of the essay.
- Identify and briefly state the major theme(s) of your assigned day.
- Select at least two Bible readings that relate to the day’s theme(s).
- Select at least two hymns/songs that relate to the day’s theme(s).

- Describe at least one action a congregation could do in worship that relates to the day's theme(s).
- How does the service you have outlined compare to your congregation's actual observance of this day?

After allowing sufficient time, invite each team to share its project with the whole group. Once all teams have reported, ask: What surprised you or stuck with you the most about your assigned day? What else do you know about that day that wasn't mentioned in the essay? How, specifically, would or does observing that day prepare you to celebrate Easter? (Alternative: Read or review each section of the essay as a whole group.)

Study Old Testament Holy Week Scriptures

Ask half of the participants to read Exodus 12:1-14 and the other half to read Isaiah 52:13-53:12. Ask: How do these texts talk about God's saving acts for God's people? Why did these texts become important for early Christians? How does hearing these texts during Holy Week shape your understanding of Jesus' suffering and death?

Discuss "Holy Week and Anti-Semitism"

Read or review the sidebar "Holy Week and Anti-Semitism." Ask: Why is it a historical and theological mistake to hold all Jews responsible for Jesus' death? How can Christians explore Jesus' Jewishness and the church's Jewish roots without alienating or threatening our Jewish neighbors today?

Have a Holy Week Hymn Sing

As a group, look through the Holy Week section (if applicable) in your congregation's hymnal or songbook for hymns/songs the group could sing (or read aloud) together. (If your hymnal has no such section, look for hymns and songs related to the themes and Scriptures of Holy Week.) Ask: Which hymn or song for Holy Week is your favorite (or least favorite), and why?

CLOSE the Session

Make Worship Recommendations

Ask each participant to name one specific worship practice they would recommend your congregation adopt for next year's Holy Week observances. They may choose from those mentioned in the essay or discussed during the session. Choosing against an observance is also a valid option. Ask participants to talk briefly about why they're making their recommendation.

Pray Together

Read aloud together a prayer for Good Friday (such as the *Hymnal*, 284), or invite participants to listen and pray as you read aloud Philippians 2:5-11, responding with, "Amen." Encourage participants to exchange signs and words of peace as they depart.

Teaching Alternatives

- Have participants with smart devices search video sites like YouTube for interesting examples of Holy Week worship and music to show the group.
- Invite members of a Christian denomination or tradition other than your own to attend and talk about Holy Week observances in their congregation. Ask: What similarities and differences do participants note to their own experience?

Next Week in
FaithLink
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Easter Traditions

Today is Easter Sunday, a day many consider the most important in the Christian year. What are the ways that Easter has been celebrated throughout history? How is Easter observed today in different churches? How can these traditions revitalize our faith and discipleship?