**Readings for March 24, 2024 – Palm Sunday of the Lord’s Passion**

 Fastened to the Way of the Cross

*As we prepare to enter Holy Week, we journey with Jesus to Jerusalem, where the fulfillment of his mission will take place. Can we “fasten” our hearts tighter to Christ as the events of this week unfold? - “The cross is the school of love.” – St. Maximilian Kolbe*

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**Opening Prayer:** Dear Lord Jesus, we are moving toward the sadness of Holy Week, but we keep our eyes fixed on you. We gather today as “an Easter people,” always rejoicing that you conquered evil and death for all time. Give us your wisdom and light today as we study and share together. We ask this in your name. Amen.

**Group leaders please note:** The gospel below is for the procession. If groups want to explore the longer passion account as part of the Liturgy of the Word, see **Mark 14: 1-15: 47**

**At the Procession with Palms (before Mass) – Gospel** [**Mk 11:1-10**](https://bible.usccb.org/bible/mark/11?1)

When Jesus and his disciples drew near to Jerusalem,
to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them,
“Go into the village opposite you, and immediately on entering it,
you will find a colt tethered on which no one has ever sat.
Untie it and bring it here. If anyone should say to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ reply,
‘The Master has need of it and will send it back here at once.’”
So they went off and found a colt tethered at a gate outside on the street, and they untied it.
Some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?”
They answered them just as Jesus had told them to,
and they permitted them to do it. So they brought the colt to Jesus
and put their cloaks over it. And he sat on it.
Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches
that they had cut from the fields. Those preceding him as well as those following kept crying out:
    “Hosanna!
        Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!
        Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is to come! Hosanna in the highest!”

**At the Mass - Reading I** [**Is 50:4-7**](https://bible.usccb.org/bible/isaiah/50?4)

The Lord GOD has given me a well-trained tongue,
that I might know how to speak to the weary a word that will rouse them.
Morning after morning he opens my ear that I may hear;
and I have not rebelled, have not turned back.
I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who plucked my beard; my face I did not shield from buffets and spitting. The Lord GOD is my help, therefore I am not disgraced;
I have set my face like flint, knowing that I shall not be put to shame.

**Responsorial Psalm** [**22:8-9, 17-18, 19-20, 23-24**](https://bible.usccb.org/bible/psalms/22?8)

**R. (2a)  My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?**All who see me scoff at me;
    they mock me with parted lips, they wag their heads:
“He relied on the LORD; let him deliver him, let him rescue him, if he loves him.”
**R. My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?**Indeed, many dogs surround me,  a pack of evildoers closes in upon me;
They have pierced my hands and my feet; I can count all my bones.
**R. My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?**They divide my garments among them, and for my vesture they cast lots.
But you, O LORD, be not far from me; O my help, hasten to aid me.
**R. My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?**I will proclaim your name to my brethren;  in the midst of the assembly I will praise you:
“You who fear the LORD, praise him;
    all you descendants of Jacob, give glory to him; revere him, all you descendants of Israel!”
**R. My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?**

**Reading II** [**Phil 2:6-11**](https://bible.usccb.org/bible/philippians/2?6)

Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God,
    did not regard equality with God something to be grasped.
Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,
    coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance,
    he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death,
    even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him
    and bestowed on him the name which is above every name,
    that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,
    of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
    and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Related Reflections

This Sunday we begin [Holy Week](http://www.loyolapress.com/our-catholic-faith/liturgical-year/holy-week?utm_campaign=lent2017&utm_medium=blog&utm_source=CJ&utm_content=lent), the days during which we journey with Jesus on his Way of the Cross and anticipate his Resurrection on Easter. These days are indeed profound and holy. There are many vantage points from which to engage in Jesus’ Passion. In the characters of Matthew’s Gospel (Matthew 27:11–54), we find reflections of ourselves and the many ways in which we sometimes respond to Jesus.

Sometimes we are like Judas, who betrays Jesus and comes to regret it. We are sometimes like Peter, who denies him, or like the disciples, who fell asleep during Jesus’ darkest hour but then act rashly and violently at his arrest. Sometimes we are like Simon, who is pressed into service to help Jesus carry his cross. Sometimes we are like the leaders who fear Jesus or like Pontius Pilate, who washed his hands of the whole affair.

The events of Jesus’ Passion, Death, and Resurrection are called the Paschal Mystery. No amount of study will exhaust or explain the depth of love that Jesus showed in offering this sacrifice for us. After we hear and reflect on the stories we have received about these events, we are left with one final task—to meditate on these events and on the forgiveness that Jesus’ obedience won for us.

* When have you experienced something in your life that you would consider “profound” and “holy”?
* How are we called to respond to moments that are profound and holy?

Joe Paprocki, Loyola Press

**Forsaken - A Palm Sunday sermon:**

A few minutes ago we were shouting “Hosanna!” to our King; now we have heard the story of his death. This King of the Jews has been crucified. His last words in Matthew’s narrative pierce the heart: Eli, eli, lema sabachthani? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Jesus breathes his last. Love divine, God incarnate, abandoned and dead on the cold tree of Calvary. The temple curtain tears in two and the earth shakes as heaven and earth mourn the death of God’s beloved Son. There isn’t much more to be said beyond the centurion’s proclamation: “Truly this man was God’s Son.” What else can one say?

It’s not that it’s hard to speak of, to preach, the crucifixion. Every act of Christian proclamation, every sermon, should be centered in nothing other than Christ and him crucified. Anyone who disagrees is either confused or trying to sell you something. But to speak today? After hearing the Passion narrative? It seems too soon. Perhaps we would do better simply to sit together, mourning the death of Jesus, lamenting that it was our sin, our death, that necessitated this act of self-emptying, sacrificial love.

When our words run out, however, Jesus speaks to us. This morning’s reading from Isaiah, the third of the Songs of the Suffering Servant, reminds us that the Lord’s anointed One has the tongue of a teacher and speaks to sustain the weary. So what does the death of Jesus proclaim to us in these times?

[In our world, we seem surrounded by war, disease and too many deaths.] There will be death. We have sinned. These twin statements are true in all times and places. What does the crucified Christ speak to us today? He reminds us that he is present in sin and death. In sin, to forgive us and set us free. In death, to bring us back to life. In his living and his dying, Jesus has joined himself to humanity, has entered into the depths of our existence. He allows sinners to judge him, to condemn him, to punish him, and to kill him. In the end, as he dies, he shouts his cry of dereliction. He is forsaken, lost. Defeated, dead. Why? Because of God’s great love for us. The Lord never intended our sin or death, which so disfigure this world, to have the last word.

Jesus joins us in our forsakenness, takes our sin as his own, and dies our death. All so that we could be rejoined to God, forgiven of our sin, and given the gift of eternal life. It’s all grace. When he dies, the Temple curtain is torn in two. The ripping apart of Jesus’ life reknits the connection between God and humanity. Jesus’ forsakenness enables us to be found, for in his death we behold the unmistakable scope and power of God’s love for us. This is true for us today. In Jesus’ death, our sins are forgiven, and we are set free. Free to respond better tomorrow than we did yesterday. And in Jesus’ death, we are restored to life. There may be sadness coming. But we will not give up hope, for we worship the Lord of life, Jesus Christ, in whose death the power of death has been defeated.

That, perhaps, is enough. Enough for today. It’s not the end of the story. Death is never the end. Come back next week (Easter Sunday) and I’ll tell you all about it. For now, our words have run out. In the midst of sin, you are forgiven. In the midst of death, you live.

By David R. Lyle, Senior Pastor of Grace Lutheran Church and School in River Forest, IL

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When we resort to violence, we show that we no longer know anything about God, who is our Father, or even about others, who are our brothers and sisters. We lose sight of why we are in the world and even end up committing senseless acts of cruelty. We see this in the folly of war, where Christ is crucified yet another time. Christ is once more nailed to the Cross in mothers who mourn the unjust death of sons and husbands. He is crucified in refugees who flee from bombs with children in their arms. He is crucified in the elderly left alone to die; in young people deprived of a future; in soldiers sent to kill their brothers and sisters. Christ is being crucified there, today. (Pope Francis – Palm Sunday Homily, 2022)

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**Some Ignatian thoughts (based on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola)**

**Centered on Christ:** There is one prayer in the Exercises which never varies in all the meditations. “I will beg God our Lord, for the grace that all my intentions, actions and operations may be directed purely to the service and praise of His Divine Majesty.” The Exercises are not centered on our feelings and emotions, they are centered on Christ. It is in the light of God’s revelation in Christ, and in the faith that “God is in all things and all things in him” that we consider ourselves. “What have I done for him? What will I do for him?

Gerard Hughes, S.J. (published in *An Ignatian Book of Days,* Jim Manney, Loyola Press)

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In the Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius advises those who have a deep sense of their own sinfulness to have a conversation with Jesus on the cross. That is, Ignatius invites us to imagine ourselves standing at the foot of the cross, knowing how often we have failed in friendship with God, and ask him how it is that he became like us in order to die for our sins. Ignatius adds: “A colloquy is made, properly speaking, in the way one friend speaks to another, or a servant to one in authority.”

Those who can, in imagination, look Jesus in the eye, knowing that he sees us just the way we are, and find love and forgiveness, feel a great sense of relief. People who ask God to show them their sins discover, to their delight, that along with the shame and tears, they are freed of a tremendous burden. With a great sigh of relief they realize that God still loves them in their sinfulness and still wants their friendship. (Note: The author also suggests reading the Prodigal Son scripture (Luke: 15)

**What about the world?** You and I are not the only ones who have fallen short of what God wants; the whole world seems to be on the road to hell, far from the bounteous garden God wants it to be. You may be wondering how God looks at this world now. The question sits close to our heart, even if not articulated: “Has God given up on our world?”

(Here, the author suggests the following meditation):

**Sit quietly and ask to be in the presence of God.** Then, in your imagination, go with God to the scene at Calvary.

Recall that the whole story of God’s dream for our world comes to a climax. God has chosen the Israelites to be the light of the world and the people from whom will come the Messiah, the anointed one of God, the Savior of the World. … Now God’s own people have turned Jesus over to the pagan Romans to be crucified. In other words, both Jews and Gentiles conspire to destroy God’s hope, Jesus of Nazareth.

Crucifixion is a horrible way to die. God sustains this world as the horror unfolds. Ask for God’s reactions. Listen to the words of Jesus as he dies this horrible death: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Perhaps these words give us some indication of God’s attitude to this broken and fallen world. If God did not give up on the world after this horror, then perhaps it is true that God will never give up on this world.

William Barry, S.J., from *A Friendship Like No Other* (Loyola Press)

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Discussion Questions

Look at the first reflection (Paprocki). What are some times when you experienced something profound and holy? What was that like, what might have come from this?

What are some signs in our lives that God has not given up on the world? How do I respond to this?

How does the cross, a symbol of execution, become an exalted sign of victory for us? How does contemplating the cross (or conversing with Jesus at the foot of the cross) help us to focus on humility, forgiveness? How does it help us remember to whom we belong?

What are your feelings usually as you hear the readings on Palm Sunday? What does this liturgy generally bring up for you? Does this day, and Good Friday, sometimes carry a different meaning at different times in our lives? (For example, sometimes we might be going through our own “Good Friday moments” when we hear these readings. Have you ever had an experience of this?)

St. Paul tells us of Jesus’ great humility, “emptying himself” and opening himself up to the pain and sorrow of our human world. How do we respond to this? How can we move forward in our lives with greater humility, and greater “exaltation” for Jesus?

What are your overall thoughts about your experience of Lent this year? How did it go? Were there any surprises that came up for you? How did the theme of “fastening” ourselves to God more tightly resonate with you?

**Closing Prayer**

Oh Jesus, our teacher and savior, you emptied yourself, taking the form of a slave. No self-concern, no turning away; dear Christ, teach us to love in your way. Filled with your Spirit, let us surrender into your love. Amen.

(Based on a poem by Anne Osdieck)

*“Oh Lord, I pray, fasten my soul to you.”*

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Something to pray with this week

Picture yourself at the foot of the cross with Jesus. What do you want to say to him? What do you feel you need to bring to him as you contemplate his great love and forgiveness, even in the face of torture?

When I think of Jesus on the cross, and I place myself at the foot of the cross, can I also see and understand more clearly the crosses that my oppressed brothers and sisters are bearing each day?

What are some of these crosses? Can I ask Jesus for the clarity to see what others are facing?

How can I help to carry these crosses (to be a Simon) for those in need?

Thinking of Jesus, reflect on how he was betrayed and denied (even by his friends). Have you ever experienced being left behind, forgotten, or ignored?

How did it feel? How did it impact you? Did the experience make you bitter, or better?

***As Lent ends, how will I continue to “fasten” my heart and soul more tightly to God as I continue in my life-long faith journey?***