From “Hosanna” to “Crucify Him”

**Goal for the Session** Adults will keep vigil as witnesses to Jesus’ entry, suffering, and death in Jerusalem.

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**PREPARING FOR THE SESSION**

**Focus on Mark 11:1–11; 15:1–39**

**WHAT is important to know?** — From “Exegetical Perspective,” James D. Ernest

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**WHERE is God in these words?** — From “Theological Perspective,” Margaret A. Farley

Christianity is not a religion obsessed with pain. It is a religion of resistance and hope. The point of the cross is not finally suffering and death; it is, rather, that a relationship holds. God is not an arbitrary ruler who demands the price of suffering and death, but a God who makes possible all of our loves, as well as our resistance to evil. The meaning of the cross can be understood finally only within the whole of the good news of the promise of God to overcome terror, enfold us in Life, and dwell with us forever.

**SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?** — From “Pastoral Perspective,” Michael Battle

One of the central claims of the Christian tradition has been that God is love. Such a claim is not based on any abstract or sentimental notions about love; rather it is connected to the history of God’s love expressed through God’s activities of creation, redemption, and sustenance. That history finds its expression, for Christians, in the doctrine of the Trinity. Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem strangely prepares us to fight our tendency toward the delusion of superficial loves. With Jesus we are given a love that withstands the horror of crucifixion. It is the kind of love that displays how illusive our sense of reality often is.

**NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?** — From “Homiletical Perspective,” Charles L. Campbell

Riding on the colt, Jesus comes not as one who lords his authority over others, but as one who humbly rejects domination. Jesus comes to define King or Messiah, rather than traditional understandings of these titles identifying him. When he enters Jerusalem, Jesus radically redefines political power. Definitions of political power begin with Jesus, and bring with them profound implications for both the nature of the gospel and character of discipleship.
Focus on Your Teaching

Today’s extensive narrative from Mark challenges adults with more than its length. What generates the movement from shouts of “hosanna” to cries of “crucify” within barely five days? Such challenge is not mere historical curiosity. What does it mean to be a disciple of and witness to the One condemned by those vested with authority and respectability? Approach this session as a means to remember that the path to Easter’s joy leads through Jesus’ passion. Allow the story and its power to form the hinge point of the session.

God, help me to keep the Jerusalem vigil with Jesus, that I may witness to the Christ revealed in palm and cross. Amen.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Welcome adults by name. Introduce any guests or visitors.

Encourage adults to find a comfortable sitting position for the following meditation. Invite persons to take a deep, relaxing breath, and exhale.

Light one candle, and invite adults to remember a meaningful memory associated with Holy Week.

Light a second candle, and invite adults to call out single words or brief phrases that reveal something of the core of that memory or experience.

Light a third candle, and ask adults to consider the significance of calling this week “holy.”

Light a fourth candle, and have adults reflect on the mystery of crowds who shout “hosanna” one day and “crucify” a few days later.

Light a fifth candle, and invite adults to imagine themselves part of the procession and story that moves from a celebration with palms to an execution on a cross.

Light a sixth candle, and read aloud Psalm 31:15a (“My times are in your hand”). Ask: How might the psalmist’s words connect to Jesus’ experience of Holy Week? How might those same words shape how we approach this week, and our call to follow Jesus?

Offer these or similar words for prayer:

Hold our times in your hands, O God, as we keep vigil with the events of Holy Week, and as that story reveals the faith and discipleship to which we are called in our times. In Jesus Christ. Amen.

Note that today is Palm Sunday, a day that not only witnesses Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem but prepares for the impending series of events there that lead to his cross. Invite the participants to keep vigil as witnesses to the story about to unfold.
EXPLORING

Explain that the palm and passion narrative of Mark 11:1–11 and 15:1–39 will be read as a dramatic reading. Ask for volunteers to read the following parts (if you have a group smaller than eight, one or more persons will need to read two parts): Jesus, Pilate, bystanders (11:5), soldiers (15:18), passersby (15:29–30), religious leaders (15:31–32), centurion (15:39), and the narrator (portions of the text that are not dialogue). Explain that the whole group will speak in unison the lines of the crowd. Ask if there are questions about the process of reading. Encourage folks not to rush through the reading, but to read it as if they are in the midst of this experience as these characters are. Carry out the reading.

At the reading’s end, pause for a few moments of silence. Solicit general reactions to the reading. Ask about ways in which adults heard or experienced something new in this reading.

Go through the “cast of characters” involved in the text. Talk about the role that each plays, and why Mark might have thought that role was important enough to include it. Another way of approaching this would be to ask:

- If that character(s) were missing, what insight into Mark’s Gospel and/or Jesus’ passion would be left out of the story?

Read the first three excerpts on Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Mark 11:1–11; 15:1–39). Ask:

- What do you find helpful in the excerpt for digging deeper into the events and meanings of the palm and passion narrative?

Note the title of the excerpt “Where is God in these words?” While God is not a “speaking” character, encourage adults to identify where and in what ways God is involved in this story. Ask:

- What difference does God make to those characters just explored?
- Most significantly, what difference does God make to Jesus—and in what ways does Jesus reveal the nature and character of God?

Read the “Now What?” perspective on Resource Sheet 1. Ask:

- Where specifically in the stories of Jesus’ entry and suffering and crucifixion do you witness Jesus “rejecting domination,” “defining King or Messiah,” and “redefining political power”?

Challenge adults to consider: What does it mean for us today to be witnesses to the Christ these stories proclaim? Ask:

- In what ways might being a “witness” to these stories involve in contemporary ministries “rejecting domination” and “redefining political power”?

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

1. **What Do We Make of This Story—and What Does This Story Seek to Make of Us?**

   Read aloud the “Where?” excerpt by Margaret Farley. Ask participants where in the
passion narrative they see a “religion of resistance and hope.” Challenge adults to consider how those words, and how such a faith, address issues they face in their own lives, individually and as part of the wider community and society. Ask:

- Where is the church today called to resist, and how is hope involved in that resistance?
- What are ways individuals might participate?

2. **Keep the Vigil: In Community**

Identify Holy Week observances or activities held in your congregation and/or other congregations. Talk about the ways in which these programs might enable a deeper appreciation and experience of the events of Jesus’ passion. Challenge adults to make a commitment to participate in one or more of these observances, especially one they might not otherwise have participated in. Encourage adults to find someone to go with or bring, and then have time to visit afterward to talk about the experience and its meaning. You might even consider going as a group together, and spending time afterward in such conversation and reflection.

3. **Keep the Vigil: Reading**

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (A Litany for Palm/Passion Sunday) and have the adults prepare to use it as a devotional during the coming week. Instruct adults to write down next to each section of the litany one of the chapters from three of the Gospels taken from the list that follows. The final chapter (John 19) can be read on Saturday. The chapters are: Matthew 26–27; Luke 22–23; and John 18–19. Encourage participants not to simply read the story in the passage, but to use each passage as a platform for reflection and prayer, keeping these questions in mind:

- What is revealed in this passage about Jesus; about God; about us?
- Who does this passage beckon us to remember in prayer?

**CLOSING**

Gather around or in front of the lit candles. One by one, in silence, extinguish the candles. Affirm that the vigil of Jesus’ passion ends with witnesses standing at a distance, and with a lifeless body laid in a tomb. It would seem all light is gone—but it is not. Bid the adults to continue the vigil of Jesus’ passion through this week, that they may come to that place where light returns (*light one of the candles*).

Close by offering the prayer on Resource Sheet 2 (A Litany for Palm/Passion Sunday), noting that the words of the refrain come from the psalm used earlier in Gathering.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for April 8, 2012, or e-mail it to participants during the week. Encourage adults to read all of the lectionary texts, with particular attention paid to the focus scripture, prior to reading the resource sheet.
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A Litany for Palm/Passion Sunday

One When words of praise aimed our way tempt us to think that we are saved by popular opinion, or made whole by following the whims of crowds, remind us:

All Our times are in your hands.

One When we approach times and places of testing, whether stirred by differing values, failing health, or outcomes that stretch beyond our comprehension, assure us:

All Our times are in your hands.

One When misunderstandings hold us captive, and we find ourselves opposed or abandoned, and it seems we are left without voice or advocate, help us to remember:

All Our times are in your hands.

One When we reach the end of our rope and cannot see a way forward, when life spirals out of control, or death looms for loved ones or ourselves, help us to affirm:

All Our times are in your hands.

One Be with us in this week, as we move through its impassioned shadows toward Sunday’s still-to-dawn hope; and be with us in all of our times, as we would live in trust:

All Our times are in your hands.