“See, we are going up to Jerusalem and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priest and the scribes…”
Mark 10:33a

Between now and the end of April we are preaching a series on “Sayings of Jesus.” On this Palm Sunday, the saying comes from Mark 10:32-34:

32 They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, 33 saying, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; 34 they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.”

* * *

As far as we know, Jesus went to Jerusalem every year, during the month of March, to celebrate the Jewish Passover. It would take him a week to walk there from the northern region of Galilee. The Synoptic Gospels record this final trip to Jerusalem, each adding their own stories or parables along the way. And then they all come to the final week, what we call “Holy Week.”

Holy Week is a drama of human brokenness and divine forgiveness. It’s full of plot and emotions, characters and script that have been studied and quoted for over 2,000 years. Even with all that, no one knows exactly what happened.

In a sense, knowing what Jesus did, minute by minute, day by day, really doesn’t matter. Retracing his footsteps that are now covered with over 2,000 years of dust will not get us there. Holy Week is not about re-enactment; it’s more about what God accomplished in this week and the ripple-effect of it for all generations to come.

The first thing we may need to establish about this week was that it was political. People of that day lived under the rule of kingdoms and empires. The Jewish people
were now ruled by the Roman Empire. If you don’t understand the politics, it will be difficult for you to understand this week.

Rome put its foot on the throat of all who were under its rule. It ruled by domination. It ruled by intimidation. It’s all about power. If the Jews wanted to survive they would have to play by Roman rules. The high priest, Caiaphas, had to walk a fine line between maintaining Jewish traditions and keeping Rome happy. He must have been good at it because he reigned for 18 years.

What Rome will not tolerate is any hint of insurrection. So, when the majority of the Jewish population would go to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, a festival of independence from their Egyptian slave-masters, Rome would send in its legions of soldiers to fortify the city making sure there would be no more independence to celebrate. The eyes of the empire were watching. It was oppressive.

When a peasant carpenter from the insignificant village of Nazareth claims to be the Messiah, the Son of God, the King of the Jews, you can understand why that was a problem. There will be no “King of the Jews.” There’s only one Caesar, one ruler of the empire, and he was considered to be “the son of God.” There’s only one person you will call “Lord,” and that is Caesar.

Then there was the Jewish expectation of who the Messiah would be. Jesus didn’t fit the bill. They were looking for someone like King David of old. David was the king who established Israel as a mighty nation. The promise of God made to Abraham was fulfilled in David. You can hear it in the shouts they made as Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday;

‘Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven! (Mark 1:9-10)

Even his disciples thought this was who he was going to be.

- He would be a great military leader who would overthrow Rome and establish Israel as a world government.

- He would lead an ethical revival, renewing Israel to the law and the prophets.
• He would establish world peace.

• And most interestingly, he was not expected to be divine, but human. Though he would be an agent of God, the Messiah would not be the incarnation of God.

Once again, you can see why Jesus of Nazareth posed a problem. He was none of the above.

And yet, during his three years of public ministry, he became so popular with the common masses, with the peasant population, that there was a concern the crowds might actually crush him. (Mark 3:9-10) He acquired “Rock Star status,” which makes sense if you think about it. The Roman Empire had no use for weakness, sickness, poverty and pain. There was no “Department of Social Services!” The strong survived, the weak perished. Money was power. The elite ruled. All else was disposable.

When Jesus heals the sick, chastises the rich, speaks of another “kingdom,” blasts the religious leaders, eats and drinks with sinners, you can, once again, see why he is a problem. He endorsed everyone as a child of God. Christianity was born in poverty! It’s another kingdom.

Now with all that, imagine this “Holy Week.” He comes to Jerusalem for a festival of independence from the empire? Jerusalem is not just any city; it is THE City of God, the capital of ancient Israel – the City of David. It is a symbol of Israel’s hope. But as Marcus Borg and John Crossan note in their book, The Last Week, Jerusalem was also a place of “political oppression, economic exploitation and religious legitimation.” (Borg, Crossan, The Last Week, Harper One, p. 7) Rome owned Jerusalem, the high priest, the temple and everything in it. When Jesus comes riding into Jerusalem for Passover on a humble donkey, he is making a political and a religious statement about a different kind of kingdom.

Borg and Crossan point out that Herod the Great had built a modern Roman headquarters at Caesarea on the Sea; about 60 miles west of Jerusalem. Pilate, the Roman governor would have stayed there. So when he brings a Roman garrison to reinforce the troops in Jerusalem for the Passover, on the western side of the city comes the Roman legions with all their military might and on the eastern side, like “a planned political demonstration,” comes Jesus on a donkey! (Borg, Crossan, p. 2-3) The contrast is stunning. One displayed empirical power and the other displayed the humble power
of servanthood, love of God and neighbor. It is a contest of the kingdom of Caesar and the kingdom of God. It will be a contest that leads to crucifixion and then to resurrection. Which kingdom will prevail?

After entering the city, Mark tells us that Jesus went into the temple and;

“…looked around at everything, and as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve. “ (11:11b)

That was **Sunday**, which was the day after the sabbath for them.

During this week, Jesus and the disciples apparently stayed with Mary, Martha and Lazarus in the small village of Bethany, two miles outside the gates of Jerusalem, just beyond the Mount of Olives.

On **Monday**, they go back into Jerusalem to the temple. This is going to be like a prize fight!

> And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, ‘Is it not written, “My house shall be called the house of prayer for all nations”? But you have made it a den of robbers.’ (Mark 11:15-17)

And then Mark tells us the chief priests and scribes *really* started looking for a way to kill him. (11:18) The temple had become a headquarters for Rome, for empirical theology. With all this heat building up, he leaves Jerusalem and goes back to Bethany on Monday evening.

On **Tuesday**, they return for a series of challenges to his authority and questions by the rulers. They ask him about paying taxes to the emperor. Again, more politics. They asked him what was the greatest law in all the Torah? His response, from Deuteronomy 6:4;

> "Hear O Israel; the Lord our God, the Lord is One, You shall love the Lord your God with all heart, with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” (And he added a second from Leviticus 19.) The second is this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”'
It’s still political! Where is your allegiance? Where is your love? Whom do you serve? To whom do you belong?

They’re trying to trap him, and he is saying things like,

‘Beware the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.’ (Mark 12:38-40)

He’s not backing off.

Tuesday evening in Bethany, Mary anoints Jesus with an expensive ointment and the disciples squabble over the waste of money. Judas went to the chief priest to strike a deal to betray Jesus.

There are no records of what happened on Wednesday.

Late on Thursday afternoon, they would go into Jerusalem and celebrate the Passover feast in what we know to be the Upper Room. It’s here that Jesus brought new meaning to the old Passover symbols of bread and wine. He now would become the exodus from sin and death. He would be the liberator. Through him we would find our independence, not only from Rome but from evil.

Communion is more than a little quiet time to reflect on our sins. It’s a radical statement of freedom, from all oppressive powers of sin and death.

Thursday evening they leave the upper room to go back to Bethany and stop on the Mount of Olives, in the Garden of Gethsemane. The disciples fall asleep, Jesus prays and Judas betrays him. He’s arrested and carried to the house of Caiaphas, the high priest.

It’s late Thursday night, almost dawn. Peter denies even knowing him – three times. The human element of the story is disintegrating. The Jewish court holds a mock trial. There were false testimonies that did not agree. (Mark 14:56) They make the charges political so he would appear to be a threat to Rome.

- He forbids the paying of taxes.
- He claims to be the king.
• He seeks to pervert the nation.
  (Luke 23:1-3)

Early **Friday** morning they take him to Pilate’s headquarters with the charges. Rome doesn’t care about religion, Rome cares about control. If Jesus is claiming to be a king, we’ve got a problem.

Pilate goes back and forth. Different gospels have different accounts of what actually happened. The bottom line is that Jesus was convicted, beaten, and sentenced to crucifixion. Crucifixion was Rome’s way of making its own statement. “**If you claim to be a king, you will end up like this guy!**” On the cross, they hung a sign over his head like a cartoon; “**King of the Jews.**” It wasn’t a cartoon.

Jesus hung on a cross outside the gates of Jerusalem from 9:00 am on Friday until 3:00 pm in the afternoon and he died. It looked like Rome had won. The disciples scattered in fear, locked themselves in the upper room. Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus and put it in his own tomb. As far as everyone was concerned, it was over. Nobody saw the resurrection coming.

Holy Week is a week of drama. It was a political week as well as a religious week. It was a week about who had the real power and where is the real glory. It continues to be a week of questions. To which kingdom do we belong? So begins a **Holy Week!**

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Congregation: **Amen**