

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Liturgy of the Palms and Passion, Sixth Sunday in Lent – Year B

Liturgy of the Palms – Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Mark 11:1-11 or John 12:12-16

RCL Readings – Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 14:1-15:47 or 15:1-39, [40-47]

ACNA Readings – Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22:1-11, [12-21]; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark [14:32-72], 15:1-39, [40-47]

Seasonal Introduction. Palm Sunday marks the first day in Holy Week and the last week in Lent, which will conclude at the Easter Vigil on Saturday. Holy Week is an eight-day festival (similar to the eight-day festivals of Passover, Sukkot, and Hanukkah) which commemorates the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem through the resurrection.¹

From the 4th Century we have literary evidence from several pilgrims, St Cyril of Jerusalem and *Itinerarium Egeriae* (Travels of Egeria), that describe in detail the customs and celebrations of Easter in Jerusalem they witnessed during their visits to the Holy Land.^{2 3} Unfortunately, there are some followers of Jesus that choose not to celebrate Easter from the misplaced idea that it

¹ Jesus entered Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, as spoken of in Deuteronomy 16:16. While the Catholic and Protestant churches have largely followed the Easter calendar solidified by the Venerable Bede, because Passover occurred before Jesus' resurrection, the Orthodox Church will never celebrate Easter before Passover. This is why the church has two major branches that celebrate Easter on different dates (along with some minor branches that celebrate Easter according to their own calendars).

² These early travel books provide information on Christian customs, early liturgies, and places of worship and are very interesting to read. They also inform us of how customs changed over centuries and even decades as the eastern and western churches created or kept specific customs. These differences and traditions are, by themselves, neither good nor bad. However, it is good to learn from traditions other than our own, particularly as some traditions may give better insight into the life and times of Jesus and the Apostles. See also the Hebrew Perspective on Tradition.

³ Many things were called Holy by God. Time was the first thing made holy (Shabbat) but things were also made holy such as the Temple and various utensils within the Temple. God has also declared that people can be holy—the Saints. Today we call other things holy as well, such as the Holy Land and the Holy Bible (II Timothy 3:15). The Holy Land is commonly known to refer to the land of Israel, even from these early pilgrimages, however, the modern term for the land of Israel is simply הארץ *haaretz* (the land). In point of fact, the land of Israel as a whole is never called holy in the Bible. God calls the land His (Leviticus 25:23) but not holy. Only later do two Jewish texts, written in Greek, start to speak of the holy land, II Maccabees 1:7 and Wisdom of Solomon 12:3.

In the exilic and post-exilic writing there is a definite distinction made between Israel and other lands. The term אדמה *adama* (the ground) became more popular (although still much less than *haaretz*) and Amos stated that the people would die in a land not their own, an impure land/ground (Amos 7:17). Twice the ground is called holy—the first time is in Exodus 3:5, which is clearly referring to that specific location on Mount Sinai. The second time comes up once again in the post-exilic writing of Zechariah 2:12 (or 2:16), “And the LORD will inherit Judah as His portion in the holy land (*adama*), and will again choose Jerusalem.”

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Liturgy of the Palms and Passion, Sixth Sunday in Lent – Year B

has pagan roots or that Easter is 'not found in the Bible'.⁴ In truth, it is during this eight-day period of Jesus' life that many biblical prophecies, hopes, and dreams were fulfilled in the Messiah. As God commands regarding all His great acts of redemption, this is surely worth remembering and celebrating in its season.

Introduction to the Liturgy of the Passion. The Passion of Christ is another name for Holy Week, the eight days from Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem until His triumphal victory over the grave—including both the crucifixion, under the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, and the resurrection, by the power and authority of God almighty. Passion comes from the Latin root for "suffer or endure."⁵ The segments in the Gospels that detail the events of this week are known as the Passion Narratives. Today, passion has been redefined—we do not want to suffer or endure. "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried." (G.K Chesterton) As disciples of the Messiah, we have much to learn from His Passion.

Common Theme. We enter Holy Week with a great triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Jesus would no longer hide who He was. The people call out *hosanna*, save us! But we know what is coming, Friday will come and Jesus will be tried and executed. But the good news is that Jesus also knew what was going to happen. As the people cried out *hosanna* Jesus had every intention to do just that. While we have known for almost two-thousand years the story of what happened that week, Jesus knew it for far longer. And yet He chose to humble Himself—He chose to save us.

Hebraic Context. It is only in John's gospel that the branches of the trees thrown on the ground in front of Jesus as He enters Jerusalem are noted as being palms. In Hebrew, the word palm is תָּמָר *Tamar*. Historically, palm branches were symbols of victory in both Jewish and Roman imagery. During the Maccabean revolt the palm motif was used on their coinage as a symbol of messianic freedom.

⁴ John uses almost half of his Gospel to speak on the events of Easter and all four Gospels emphasize the week before Jesus' death and the day of His resurrection (this is not Jesus' "final week" as he was resurrected and walked the earth, meeting his disciples, family, and many others before His ascension).

It is true that early pilgrims called the holiday by its Aramaic name, *Pascha*, as Easter is derived from the much later converts within the Germanic languages (and is only called Easter by a few Germanic and English language groups). Easter has connotations of both East and Spring, making Easter a Spring holiday (Passover often uses the same spring holiday terminology). Easter has nothing to do with Ishtar, a goddess from language groups that all call this holiday "*Pascha*".

⁵ The word "patience" also comes from the same Latin root. Much of the world now lacks patience, with so many of our inventions geared towards immediate gratification.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Liturgy of the Palms and Passion, Sixth Sunday in Lent – Year B

In the Scriptures, the word תָּמָר *Tamar* refers only to the tree and not the fruit. However, later it is Jewish sages that comment that the honey described as one of the seven species of the land of Israel (Deuteronomy 8:8) comes from the date palm.^{6 7} In Jewish tradition, palm fronds were used originally during the festival of Sukkot as the roof covering for the sukkah.⁸ Through this, palms became part of the annual act of worship and thanksgiving of every Israelite. The symbol of the palm entered the prayer life of the Jewish people in Psalm 92:12, which compares the righteous as palms planted in the house of the Lord. The palm appears in rabbinic literature in several messianic contexts, for example in a discussion on meanings of Biblical plants in dreams and visions it says, “One who sees palm trees in a dream has seen a sign that his transgressions have ceased, as it is stated: ‘Your iniquity is finished, O daughter of Zion’ (Lamentations 4:22)” Likely because the Gemara likens תָּמָר *Tamar*, the date, to *tam ra*, which means evil has ceased (Berachot 57a). In summary, Jewish tradition pairs the palm with righteousness, the messianic age, redemption, and even the forgiveness of sins. It was, therefore, only fitting that the palm was used in the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem.

Isaiah 50:4-9a. This passage provides some details of the sufferings of the Messiah written in the first person using the voice of the Messiah.⁹ He begins by saying that the Lord has provided Him with the ability to speak wisely; called the ‘tongue of the learned’ for the purpose of speaking a word in season.¹⁰ Isaiah then provides some chilling details of the sufferings of the servant. We are told that He “gave My back to those who struck Me, and My cheeks to those who plucked out the beard; I did not hide My face from shame and spitting.” While no mention in the Gospels is made of who plucked Jesus’ beard, we do know that He was beaten on the back

⁶ The similarity between the Hebrew *dvash* (honey) and Arabic *dibis* (fruit molasses, most commonly from dates) may indicate that this is a better understanding of the land flowing with milk and honey. However, the earliest intact apiary discovered by archaeologists was also found in Rehov, Israel from c. 900 B.C.E. Most likely, both bee honey and fruit molasses are being referred to.

⁷ The sages go on to say that no part of the palm was pure waste and connect this to the people of Israel. The midrash says that, “The palm has nothing that goes to waste, but rather, dates for eating, fronds for praise, branches for roofing, fiber for ropes, leaves for sieves, large beams for roofing the house, so, too, Israel has no one who goes to waste.” Genesis Rabbah 41.

⁸ This tradition developed from the command to celebrate Sukkot with Palm branches, in Leviticus 23:40, in such close proximity with the command to build temporary booths (*sukkot*), in Leviticus 23:42.

⁹ Isaiah 50 includes what is, traditionally, called the third servant song. Isaiah 50 starts with the LORD speaking but then, without transition, another voice starts speaking in Isaiah 50:4. Isaiah 50:10 specifically speaks of the servant of the LORD. Who the servant is in the servant songs is often disputed. In Isaiah 50 there was no introduction nor was the identity of the servant mentioned, not even as the Messiah. However, there are clear allusions to Isaiah 50 found in the passion narratives.

¹⁰ No mention is made of exactly what that word in season might have been. However, Proverbs 15:23 might shed some light when it says, ‘To make an apt answer is a joy to a man, and a word in season, how good it is!’ The proverbs are Hebrew poetry in which many of the wisdom sayings are in parallelisms, so the apt answer is paired with a word in season. The servant will have the ability to provide good answers to any questions He is asked or challenged on.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Liturgy of the Palms and Passion, Sixth Sunday in Lent – Year B

(Mark 15:10), beaten on the face (Luke 22:63-65), mocked, and spat on (Mark 15:19-20). And, despite the obvious ill treatment, there was the confidence that the suffering one would not be abandoned by God for, “the Lord GOD is my help”.

According to Isaiah, God himself would enable the servant to succeed where the nation of Israel had not.¹¹ Where Israel had rebelled against God, the Messiah would be totally obedient. He would obediently offer his back to his persecutors and not hide his face from his oppressors. It was not with passive resignation in the face of abuse that Jesus endured, but with confidence and assurance that set his face “like flint” knowing that God will not put him to shame (Is 50:7).¹² In this light, we should humbly acknowledge our own disobedience and praise the Lord for His unswerving obedience during His passion.

Psalm 31:9-16. This psalm, composed by, or for, David, is widely known for its first verse, “In you, Lord, do I put my trust.” It appears that this was a well known psalm in antiquity as Psalm 71 quotes the first three verses from this psalm almost verbatim.

Psalm 31 is a lament and cry for help to God from a faithful person who is hard-pressed by trouble and enemies. It is easy to see why the psalm is attributed to David. Certainly there were many who plotted to take David's life, from Saul to his own family. However, the wording of the psalm is general and not specific to David. Hence it is also easy to apply it to any personal situation and how apt it is for inclusion in the Passion liturgy. The Psalm seems to have particularly resonated with Jeremiah as he quotes from it many times (Jeremiah 6:26, 20:3, 10,

¹¹ As noted in Isaiah 50:1-2a.

¹² Flint is a hard, sharp rock. In English, the phrase “[He] set his face like flint” has come to mean steadfast and resolute determination or even moving forward without mercy or thought towards others. Unfortunately, this is likely because of a focus on the English word rather than the Hebrew. Flint is translated from several Hebrew words, such as שַׁמִיר (*shamir*) found in Zechariah 7:12, “They made their hearts [like flint] lest they should hear the law and the words that the LORD of hosts had sent...” More commonly, flint is used for the Hebrew word *tzor*, צוֹר (rock) and צַר (flint) such as Ezekiel 3:9, “Like adamant [*shamir*] harder than flint [*tzor*] have I made your forehead. Fear them not, nor be dismayed at their looks...” This sounds very similar to our passage in Isaiah 50:7.

However, Isaiah 50:7 uses a third word, חֲלָמִישׁ (*Halamish*). Unlike *Tzor*, which is usually a generic word for rocks, *Halamish* is only used five times in the Scriptures. In all four of the other instances, the flint is a place of great blessing as it provides something precious. In Deuteronomy 8:15, water (the most precious of substances in the desert) comes out of the flint (*Halamish*). In Deuteronomy 32:13, God brings forth honey from the rock and oil from the flint (likely referring to olives). Job 28:1-10 states that all the good things come from the flint and rocks—silver, gold, iron, and copper, as well as precious stones and, of course, bread. Finally, Psalm 114:7-8 states that God brings forth a spring from the flint (possibly in reference to Deuteronomy 8 and possibly because of the aquifers that the springs of Israel come from—likely both). When the servant, in Isaiah 50:7, sets his “face like flint” it surely is referencing these blessings that come out of something hard.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Liturgy of the Palms and Passion, Sixth Sunday in Lent – Year B

46:5, 49:29 and Lamentations 2:22). The psalm presents the situation where people are trying to take the life from the author. But his steadfast trust in God concludes that, despite his distress, he can declare, “My times are in your hands” (Ps 31:15).

This trust is not only built upon actual experiences that God delivers but also in his promises of salvation yet unseen. Jesus reminds us of this message—we are blessed when we have seen wondrous things, miracles or the hand of the Lord at work yet “more blessed is he who believes and has not yet seen” (John 20:29). On the cross, Jesus alludes to this psalm when he says, “Into your hands I commend my spirit” (Ps 31:5).¹³ Verse 5 continues and proclaims that God has redeemed the person who had placed his trust and submission to the Lord. The Hebrew word redeemed פָּדָה *pada* means to be ransomed or rescued from trouble. As Jesus was journeying through His last week in Jerusalem and coming to those final moments on the cross He maintained full trust and belief that His Father would not abandon Him to the grave.

Philippians 2:5-11. This passage begins with Paul providing insight into the mind of Christ and suggests that we too should have the same mindset.¹⁴ These verses openly declare the divinity of Jesus and his amazing sacrifice in becoming a man. As part of the Godhead, Jesus would be beyond the reach of death, yet he chose to become subject (obedient) to its power. The Greek uses the term $\mu\omicron\rho\phi\eta\ \theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon$, *morphe theou*, the “form of God,” which, despite many arguments to the contrary, does imply the preexistence of Jesus, the Messiah. The word *morphe* means the exact nature of something, having all the characteristics of the thing to which it is applied to, in this case to God.¹⁵ Jesus had the form of God in every sense. Jesus was never trying to become God during His ministry as He already was, and is, God.

Verses 5 and 7 provide an amazing contrast: having the form of God, Jesus chose to take the form of a servant. How was this possible? The idea of the divine choosing to become human is completely foreign to most other religions.¹⁶ Just as Jesus was *morphe theou*, actual God, now he became *morphen doulou*, an actual servant. We, along with the Philippians, should be amazed that Jesus became a servant as a man—something which had never been done

¹³ Stephen also follows in the example of Jesus, as seen in Acts 7:59.

¹⁴ Many scholars have suggested that the apostle Paul is quoting from an early Christian hymn or creed, referred to in the theoretical as *Carmen Christi*, rather than composing something new in these verses. This argument, while interesting, does not make this passage any less true. We do know that hymns and creeds were important parts of the liturgy of the early church and 2nd Temple period (our passage later, in Mark 14:26 mentions that Jesus and the disciples sang a hymn before going to the Mount of Olives).

¹⁵ $\mu\omicron\rho\phi\eta$ can be used to speak of the form of a creature, plant, deity, or monstrous being in Greek writings. But it isn't a created form or artistic rendition—it is the very thing that is spoken of. (See Strabo 1.2.11 or 5.4.13 for examples)

¹⁶ There are instances when a god or goddess would descend to take the form of a man, woman, or beast but it was invariably to fulfill a lust or matter of pride. Ephesians 2 speaks to Jesus doing the exact opposite.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Liturgy of the Palms and Passion, Sixth Sunday in Lent – Year B

before.¹⁷ Going back to the context, if we should have the same mindset, we will find it's one thing to have an understanding of what Jesus was thinking and doing, it's another thing to apply those lessons personally and intimately—to obey. Nonetheless, Paul encourages the Philippians towards this humility and is hopeful to hear good news regarding them.¹⁸

Finally, Paul gives additional hope and encouragement—having never before known death, Jesus willingly took the cross during his passion (suffering). The conjunction “therefore” (οὖν) in verse 9 reminds us that it was precisely this humility of Jesus that is the basis for his exaltation, with the Father giving him the name above all names. Jesus, though He took the form of a servant, is Lord.

Mark 14:1-15:47. Our long passage opens with the temple leadership, the Sadducees, initiating their plot for the death of Jesus.¹⁹ As the scheme was being hatched, we have the anointing of Jesus occurring at Bethany, located on the southeastern slope of the Mount of Olives.²⁰ What is interesting about this anointing scene is the scandalous nature of having a woman involved.²¹ In the Gospels of Matthew and John, the woman is identified as Mary of Bethany (who is a disciple of Jesus, likely the same Mary who learned at his feet in the house of her sister, Martha). Traditionally, the action of anointing was usually conferred upon another by the priest or prophets of the community and not by a woman.²² This passage affirms the Jewish heritage of Jesus as He and His disciples prepare to observe and celebrate the Passover.

¹⁷ In verse 7 the Greek word to describe this process is ἐκένωσεν *ekenosin*, often translated as Jesus ‘emptying Himself’. The theological arguments surrounding Kenosis are varied and contentious, despite there not being a lot to work from. The clear and obvious purpose of the passage, however, is to state that we should act like Jesus and then to explain the vast depth of what the humility of Jesus looks like.

¹⁸ Epaphroditus, in Ephesians 2:25-29, is an example of someone who was willing to follow Jesus’ example, though ultimately spared death.

¹⁹ The Sadducees were very well-known for corruption, pettiness (that could result in violence against their fellow Israelites), and an unbelief in the supernatural. The Gospel writers were very clear that they, and not Israel, who sought to silence and kill Jesus. And before we assign blame on the whole Jewish nation—which is anti-Semitism—we should recall the ancient creed, “He suffered under Pontius Pilate,” not Israel. The early church did not blame the nation state of Israel for the death of the Messiah. If we were to blame the sins of a few corrupt leaders on all their people, the church would surely be lost and worthless.

²⁰ Bethany is a very familiar location for Jesus and His disciples. This was the home of Martha, who’s brother Lazarus was a much beloved disciple and friend of Jesus. It appears that Jesus guested with this family many times on His frequent visits to Jerusalem.

²¹ This passage also shows that giving an artistic offering to God can be an acceptable form of worship (rather than only those things which are pragmatic). This does not mean we can ignore the poor, an offering such as this is something we give back to God out of the excess He has given us.

²² Anointing is deeply messianic, as even the verb “to anoint” is the same root as messiah which means anointed one.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People Liturgy of the Palms and Passion, Sixth Sunday in Lent – Year B

Despite having friends, and likely even family, near Jerusalem Jesus sought hospitality from a seeming stranger.^{23 24} Using man-made traditions (such as reclining and the inclusion of wine) and Biblical commands surrounding Passover (such as bread and the lack of a lamb), Jesus continued to teach his disciples even on the eve of his passion.²⁵

²³ Many commentators identify the man who carries water as belonging to the Essene sect. This is because they would argue that carrying water was women's work in Jesus' time. That is, they are noting the fact that, because we are told it was a man and not a woman carrying water, this must be significant. However, I have not seen a written source confirming such statements. The Jewish historian Josephus does claim that the all-male group did have an enclave in Jerusalem and so it is possible to draw a conclusion suggesting the man carrying water was a member of the Essene sect. However, the theology of Jesus is not congruent with much of Essene theology, and I would hesitate to declare Jesus practised an Essene Passover. He almost certainly had the children and wives of some of His disciples joining them in the meal—the Holy days were always family affairs.

²⁴ In the time of the Talmud, there was already a cup of Elijah—the precursor to the tradition that the doors of a house on Passover should always be open to strangers in case Elijah should visit. Hospitality to strangers is incredibly important to God. Hebrews 13:2 even states, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”

²⁵ The Synoptic Gospels all record Jesus as reclining at the table once the meal was underway. The action of reclining is a tradition in the Passover liturgy in which Israel now identified herself as having been freed from slavery. The command for the Israelites in Exodus was to eat the Passover in haste, standing up and dressed ready to go at a moment's notice. Now, however, they were no longer required to eat standing—in haste as slaves—but could recline in freedom as other nations did at mealtimes.

Interestingly, none of the Gospels mention there being a lamb at the meal or that the disciples had purchased one in the city. Instead, Jesus identified the bread, rather than the Passover lamb, as His body. At the time of Jesus the majority of Jewish people still resided outside the land of Israel. This meant they had no access to the Temple and the sacrificial system. They would not have been able to Biblically offer a sacrificial lamb at Passover. Thus in the first century lamb was not consumed by the majority of world Jewry, only those who lived close to Jerusalem. The common element that was available to everyone at Passover was bread, hence its inclusion as a teaching metaphor in the Gospels and not lamb. The lack of lamb, however, did not diminish the meaning of the Passover remembrance.

In the Exodus narrative, there is no mention that Israel partook of wine on the night of Passover. The tradition of drinking four cups of wine during the Passover meal (called the Seder) is a later addition to the Passover liturgy (called the Haggadah). Jesus did not dismiss tradition but instead used it as a teachable moment, giving new meaning to something already very meaningful. Everything eaten at the Passover meal has a symbolic meaning. The bread was known as the Bread of Affliction, and each cup of wine had a name and a meaning. Luke records that the cup Jesus spoke of was the cup after the meal, which is known today as the Cup of Redemption. Jesus proceeded to give deeper meanings to these elements. The new covenant which God was making with His people (Jer 31:31), first for the Jewish people and then for Gentiles (Romans 1:16), must come through the Passion of the Messiah—his body afflicted and his blood redeeming. We can get so caught up in the symbolism and the meaning that we forget the simple command of Jesus to “Take and eat. Take and drink!” We must also partake in his sufferings, even as we know the power of his resurrection (Phil 3:10). We should also note the confidence Jesus had that

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People Liturgy of the Palms and Passion, Sixth Sunday in Lent – Year B

Unfortunately, the passion of Jesus began with desertion by his friends and followers. Abandonment and loneliness is more than an unpleasant emotion, it results in suffering. Jesus would find himself alone to face an illegal trial and His imminent death.²⁶ While in the garden, Jesus prayed to his Father for this burden to be taken away.²⁷ It wasn't, instead, the Father strengthened him for this task.²⁸

Charged with blasphemy, Jesus is beaten, humiliated and taken to Golgotha, which is Aramaic for the "Place of the Skull." This begs the question: whose skull? The New Testament does not invent the name of the place but rather records its existence. Historically, archaeologically, and

his impending death would not be final. He declared that He would drink again of the vine in the Kingdom of God (Mark 14:25). Passover will continue in the world to come as we will continue to remember the redeeming acts of our God.

²⁶ Almost everything about this trial is wrong. According to Mishnah Sanhedrin 4.1, trials involving capital law (as the trial of Jesus would be) must occur only during the daytime and the ruling must also occur during the day. The judges were allowed to acquit someone of a crime on the same day of the trial, but they were not allowed to find the defendant guilty on the same day—nor on the eve of Shabbat or a Holiday. Beyond that, while any witness could defend the accused, they were not allowed to all find the accused liable.

The witnesses that are brought to testify against Jesus are all accusatory, but they couldn't even get their testimonies to agree as they were false witnesses. God's commandment to Israel was "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour." This trial was a serious violation of the law and according to a Mechilta to Exodus 20:13 (the commandment on murder, not on false witness) bearing false witness against your neighbour was as serious as bearing false witness against God—even to the point of saying God did not create the world. In an even stronger statement, Maimonides stated that if false testimony was designed to cause death, the witness was to suffer the death they had tried to create.

The Sadducees chose this clandestine behaviour for fear of provoking a riot among the populace (Mark 14:2). We should note the enthusiastic crowd at the triumphal entry are not the same crowd that cries "Crucify him!" The palace of King Herod, the scene for much of the trial, has a limited capacity, and the crowd have been hand-selected by the chief priests. Many within the populace of Jerusalem were still looking towards Jesus as their Messiah and redeemer.

²⁷ Hebrews 5:7 states that God heard Jesus' prayers. There is little differentiation between hearing and acting in Hebraic thought. If God heard Jesus' prayers, could it also mean that God would have acted on Jesus' prayer to remove the cup? God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit as Trinity is a mystery, but their everlasting love and unity is once again shown as both the Father and the Son are willing to do the will of the other. Ultimately, Jesus submitted himself to the will of the Father.

²⁸ Mark chooses to focus more on Jesus and the disciples in this passage while Luke 22 gives more detail on the interaction between God and Jesus, including that an angel was sent to strengthen Him.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Liturgy of the Palms and Passion, Sixth Sunday in Lent – Year B

literarily the Holy Sepulchre has the strongest claim as the actual location.²⁹ One interesting Jewish exegetical tradition said that the dust of Adam, by which God created him (Genesis 2:7), was gathered from Jerusalem and that he was also buried in Jerusalem (for you are dust, and to dust you shall return) and that the site was well known and even labelled as such. Pictorially, we see the last Adam (Jesus) dying and taking death out of the world at the same site where the first Adam brought death into the world. Whether or not this tradition contains historical truth, the theological implications are indeed eternal truth.³⁰ The Passion of Christ brought redemption to the world. The darkness that shrouded Jesus at his death was dispersed by the light of His resurrection. If only for a brief moment, Jesus went to a place he had never been to before, the realm of the dead. That is a humbling thought indeed.

Hebrew Perspective. Traditions are not only the activities passed down through time but also the values and beliefs of those who participate in them. Tradition is neither good nor bad. It is simply something we all inherit based on our participation in the culture we come from. But tradition is a way to transmit and safekeep those things that we believe to be important (*tradere* in Latin). Traditions usually change due to culture, value, or belief differences over time but, again, sometimes for good and sometimes for bad.

Many Christians view tradition with a fair amount of skepticism or suspicion. One objection against religious traditions comes from a fear that they can supersede or displace the written instructions of the Bible. Jesus scolded the Pharisees for doing this when He says, “You nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down” Mark 7:13. This does not mean that all Jewish tradition is bad or has no value.³¹

The New Testament records several Jewish traditions that entered the culture by the first century that Jesus participated in quite happily. Traditions surrounding the Passover became quite prominent in Jesus' life and teaching and Jesus gave no indication that the traditions had superseded or displaced the written instructions of the Bible.³² Hebraic tradition is not something

²⁹ The Garden Tomb was argued to be the location by Protestants because of a rock feature that had the appearance of the face of a skull. However, this is purely a weather feature that has existed only for the past several hundred years, the feature is mechanically weathering due to wind and rain, with the nose falling off several years ago. The face of the skull was not there during the time of Jesus and will likely not be there when He returns. Many Protestants continue to prefer the ‘Garden Tomb’ in Jerusalem to be the site of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus and not the Church of the Holy Sepulchre—usually purely for aesthetic reasons and a strong anti Catholic bias.

³⁰ Paul often used Jewish tradition to make theological arguments. Romans 5:12-21 may be using this tradition to make an even greater theological statement.

³¹ One of the most important traditions in both Judaism and Christianity is the canon of Scripture, that is, the choosing of which books are actually in the Bible to be considered the Word of God. This is a tradition of the church handed down to us from the 4th Century. The Scriptures themselves do not inform us which books should be included in the canon of Bible.

³² See footnote 25.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Liturgy of the Palms and Passion, Sixth Sunday in Lent – Year B

that should be rejected outright. Rather, it should be studied and appreciated when it assists in our understanding of the context of the Scriptures.³³

ACNA Readings

Isaiah 52:13-53:12. This is the fourth and final Servant Song.³⁴ These songs reveal a royal figure who is also gentle and meek. He is a servant who will faithfully bring about the true witness of God to the world, remove the sins of the people, and bring blessing to the nations. In this last poem, the servant is disfigured, marred and smitten by God.³⁵ Yet it is this seeming defeat that actually ends in victory as the servant intercedes for transgressors.

The New Testament is not the only Jewish text that links the Suffering Servant with the Messiah. The Dead Sea Scrolls community likewise saw the images in this prophetic portion to be representative of a suffering messianic figure. Fragments of a hymn (4QHe) link the images seen in Isaiah to a divine-like messiah who suffers and at the same time is “reckoned with the angels.”

Psalms 22:1-21. The superscript to the psalm cites David as the composer but it resonates with many. Psalm 22 is best known for the opening verse, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It is poignantly used today as an anguished lament for Jesus on the cross. The opening verse expresses the deep distress felt when a person receives no relief or respite from pain nor obvious answers to prayers. This psalm is a prayer of innocent suffering which should not solely be attributed to Jesus (or David).³⁶ We, like Jesus, are called to share in His passion—His suffering. We need to take and drink from the same cup. But, in dying with Him, we will also rise with Him. The psalm acknowledges that, though we often feel left alone or abandoned by God, the truth is that God has already proven that He can be trusted.

Addendum: Liturgy of the Palms

Hebraic Context. The gospels make mention of Jesus asking his disciples to locate a colt near the villages of Bethphage and Bethany. The reference to untying the colt in Mark 11:4 might

³³ In a similar way, our Christian traditions, starting with the celebration of Palm Sunday (which God does not command us to celebrate) can also assist us in remembrance and worship and should not be thrown away simply because it is a tradition.

³⁴ The Servant Songs are poems that appear in Isaiah 42:1-9, 49:1-13, 50:4-11 and 52:12-53:12.

³⁵ The third servant song, Isaiah 50:6 also speaks of the servant being smitten and spit upon.

³⁶ Jewish tradition also inserts these words into the prayer of Queen Esther at a moment she did not feel the presence of God. The loss of God's presence led Esther, according to the story, towards repentance (even from unintentional sin). Only after that was she able to make intercession for the Jewish people against the threat of wicked Haman (Tractate Megillah 15b:7-9, Babylonian Talmud).

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Liturgy of the Palms and Passion, Sixth Sunday in Lent – Year B

allude to Jacob's prophecy over Judah, in Genesis 49:11, which refers to a tethered donkey and colt. The context of Jacob's prophetic blessing over Judah is strongly messianic, where the previous verse 10 says the sceptre shall not depart from Judah until Shiloh comes.³⁷ Jacob's final blessing over Judah binds a tethered donkey to a coming messianic figure. Whether this was Jacob's original intention, the deliberate untying of the donkey may have become a very public proclamation and self identification by Jesus that He was the ruler spoken of by Jacob.³⁸

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29.³⁹ While there is no author attributed to this psalm it has been traditionally ascribed to David.⁴⁰ After calling on the people to praise the Lord for His steadfast love, the psalmist moves on to describe a personal testimony of God answering his call for help and his rescue from distress. The final verses of the psalm (verses 19-29) lend themselves easily to liturgical worship during a festive procession—movement into the gates,⁴¹ joy and gladness, a call for God's salvation, and the blessing of God by the people in return.⁴²

The Egyptian Hallel became part of the sung liturgy during Passover and was obviously on the lips of the crowds who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem. Verse 22-23 describe workmen involved in some construction in which the craftsmen reject some particular stone as unsuited for its original purpose. However they were wrong in their appraisal of that particular rock. Many English translations use the word 'cornerstone' for the פִּנֵּה לְרֹאשׁ פִּנָּה *Rosh Pina*. While the word פִּנָּה *Pina* does indeed mean corner, when its combined with רֹאשׁ *Rosh* the word for head, it actually implies a unique stone called a Capstone which is the top stone of a structure, usually an arch, which supports the weight of the building. There are several cornerstones but only one load bearing capstone, highlighting its uniqueness.

³⁷ Who or what is meant by the word Shiloh is difficult to understand from the literal reading of the text. The Dead Sea Scrolls community understood this person to be the Messiah (4Q252) as did some of the later rabbinic commentators like Rabbi Rashi on his commentary to Genesis.

³⁸ Another reading could be that "until Shiloh comes" is an allusion to the future departure of the Ark of the Covenant from Shiloh during the tenure of Samuel the prophet. In a short time following the Philistine sack of Shiloh, the tribe of Judah replaced the tribe of Ephraim as the tribe to hold the presence of God. Either reading is still suggestive of the supremacy of the royal line of David be that holding the literal Ark of the Covenant or bearing the future messianic lineage or both.

³⁹ Psalm 118 is the final psalm in the collection of psalms known as the Egyptian Hallel (Psalms 113-118).

⁴⁰ Ezra 3:10-11 notes that during the dedication of the 2nd Temple they sang songs "according to the hands of David, king of Israel" adding that they sang responsively what appears to be the opening verse of Psalm 118, "giving thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever."

⁴¹ The "gates of righteousness" (Psalm 118:19) became synonymous with the gates of Jerusalem and the Temple (Psalm 118:26-27).

⁴² One of the ways to bless God, as noted in Psalm 118:27, was to offer a sacrifice. It may be true that "to obey is better than to sacrifice" but it is also true that to sacrifice was to be obedient to God.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Liturgy of the Palms and Passion, Sixth Sunday in Lent – Year B

There is a midrash on Psalm 118 that describes the building of the Temple of Solomon. The construction was done in as much reverential silence as possible, so all stones for the Temple were cut and dressed off site and brought to Jerusalem (I Kings 6:7). Once the stones arrived they were set in place by the workmen. One particular stone arrived but did not seem to fit anywhere. Not in the walls and not in the foundations, thus it was cast aside as a mistake. As the Temple drew near to completion the workers discovered they needed one final stone to place in the last supporting arch. This arch would hold the whole Temple together, it was called the capstone or the *rosh pina* in Hebrew. As they looked around for a stone that would serve they discovered the stone they had initially rejected was indeed the one they actually needed.

Mark 11:1-11. The triumphal entry, Jesus' spectacular public entrance into Jerusalem, is recorded in all four Gospels. Prior to His arrival at the Mount of Olives Jesus ordered His disciples to go ahead and locate the foal of a donkey for Him to ride on. The action of collecting a foal to enter the city is an intentional fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9. There is no indication within the Gospels that the animal has been pre-arranged but, nonetheless, Jesus chose to send His disciples in order to make this messianic claim.

Donkeys were not an unknown method of transportation in late antiquity. Due to the prophetic nature of the animal it's possible that several devout Jewish folk on the Mt of Olives kept donkeys, not only for their value as transport, but as potential use for the coming Messiah. The disciples are charged to answer why they are taking the animal with "The Lord has need of it" which adds weight to the notion that such donkeys were indeed kept locally for this very messianic purpose.⁴³ Jesus had spent time in Bethany before with His beloved friend Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary. Jesus was likely quite familiar with the village of Bethany and may even have seen these donkeys on previous visits. Rabbinic commentary from a few centuries later stated that, should Israel be worthy, messiah will come on the clouds, but if not worthy, then he will appear on a donkey (Sanhedrin 98a:13). Regardless of whether this comment was contemporary with Jesus, the crowd understood the messianic significance of seeing Jesus on the donkey and responded with palms, cloaks, praise, and prophetic words from the Psalms.

In the Galilee Jesus had dissuaded people (and demons) from public proclamation of Him as Messiah, however not this time. As Jesus entered Jerusalem and the people called *Hosanna*,

⁴³ Jewish theology invariably had to have a functional practice. So, even if it seems far-fetched to our own cultural minds, the king and the colt in Zechariah 9 and the LORD and the Mount of Olives in Zechariah 14 would easily be connected to a Jewish mind in the 2nd Temple period. How can a Jewish person living on the Mount of Olives make that practical? Perhaps by having a colt available for use by the king.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Liturgy of the Palms and Passion, Sixth Sunday in Lent – Year B

(save us) He did not quiet them as He proceeded in His plan to save them.⁴⁴ The triumphal entry took place just before the Passover festival—which recalls the redemptive exodus from Egyptian oppression. Many in Jerusalem longed to see the end of Rome's oppression and perhaps saw Jesus as the messianic character to bring about such a redemption. The crowd shouts הוֹשִׁיעָה־נָא 'Hosanna' which is a cry to save or rescue in the imperative form.

Hebraic Perspective. Palm Sunday begins the Christian festival of Easter which is celebrated all over the world by most denominations. However, there are many well meaning believing Christians that refuse to participate with the Easter celebrations and challenge the nature of Holy Week due to its supposed pagan roots. Most anti Easter claims stem from the misconception that Easter is named after a pagan fertility goddess. The common archetypes are Ishtar of the Babylonian pantheon or of the Germanic goddess of Spring called Eostre. To be blunt this is simply not true. Unfortunately, through popular repetition, but a lack of research, it has become an accepted truth. We keep saying it and hearing it so it must be true without anyone challenging and verifying the source.

Ishtar is indeed a fertility goddess of the Babylonian and Assyrian pantheon. Note that Babylon is in the East, in the lands of Iraq and Iran today. The Christian community that resides in the East is the Orthodox Church. The Orthodox community has been there since the first century celebrating the resurrection of their Lord, including many descendants of the first believers in Jesus. In the Orthodox Church the word used for Easter is not Easter, it's Pascha. Pascha is the Aramaic of the Hebrew word Pesach (Passover). So the Christians who live in the land where the pagan goddess Ishtar comes from don't actually call the festival after her at all, they refer to the festival by its Jewish roots, the Pascha or the Passover.

Meanwhile, over in the West, the first recorded written account of the Germanic spring goddess Eostre comes in the 8th Century by the Venerable Bede. She has nothing to do with rabbits and/or chocolate eggs (which didn't start getting sold by Cadbury, a Christian family, until the 19th Century). However, people in the Christian world were writing about Pascha/Easter long before Christianity ever became wide-spread in the Germanic nations. In the 2nd Century, Melito of Sardis, a Jewish believer and Bishop of the community in Sardis, wrote a defense of Pascha in which he argued for the date of Pascha/Easter to be the 14th of Nisan. That is, he was arguing that Pascha/Easter should be celebrated at Passover and not the Sunday following Passover, which is the Orthodox tradition to this day.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Luke records an objection to the shouts of praise by the local religious leaders of the Temple to which Jesus answered, "I tell you that if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out." Luke 19:40. Nothing was going to silence the enthusiasm of the crowd nor the adoration of Jesus at this time.

⁴⁵ Nisan, by the way, is the Jewish month in which Passover falls and it really is named after a Babylonian god. Interestingly, the majority of the current Jewish calendar is named after Babylonian gods and neither the Rabbis nor the Bible (in the book of Esther) argue against this calendar name.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Liturgy of the Palms and Passion, Sixth Sunday in Lent – Year B

Easter is only called Easter in two language groups, German and English (which partly comes from German). Most other languages call the season of Easter after Pascha or Passover. For example, in French you say Pâques, in Dutch its Pasen, in Indonesian its Paskah etc. Even in Latin, the traditional language of the Catholic Church, Easter is called Pascha. Easter comes from the old German root word for East or Spring. Austria is called in German Østerreich, the East land or Spring land. The festival season of Passover became known as Eastertide, the spring festival in the West (as Passover is also sometimes known as the spring festival in Hebrew) and the word Easter entered our language.⁴⁶

Easter is an eight day holiday from Palm Sunday to Resurrection Sunday. Why eight days? This tradition we inherit from the Jewish People who have eight day festivals like Succot, Hanukkah, and Feast of Unleavened Bread. The tradition of celebrating the life of the Messiah and His passion for eight days was given to us by the early Jewish Believers in Jesus and it had nothing to do with a pagan god.

⁴⁶ Celebrating the redeeming work of Jesus during the month of March (named after a Roman god), does not diminish Jesus work or our desire and, indeed, need, to remember that Jesus humbled Himself, lived on earth (experiencing pain), died, and rose from the dead any more than celebrating it during a month loosely named after the spring (and a goddess associated with spring)..