

John 12:12-13

Twos the Week Before Easter

Main idea: The week before His resurrection included Jesus's darkest days. But because of those darkest days, all of eternity has its brightest.

Twos the week before Easter
And as Jesus came,
The people rejoiced,
And sang out his name.

He rode in on a donkey,
And the people in town,
Had large palm branches,
Which they waved all around.

I thought about preaching my whole sermon in poem form this morning, but I'm just not that clever. But what I will do is this: being the week before Easter, which is referred to as Passion Week according to the church calendar, I thought it would be good to look at several of the events that happened during the last week of Jesus's earthly life which led up to His death and resurrection. But as we do so, I want us to picture it not just as history, something that happened a long time ago, but as someone who was there, maybe as one of the disciples who saw all of these take place in such a short amount of time: just one week.

Now, we don't always know the exact days on which all of the events in the gospels took place, so we're going to go with Christian tradition for some of our history this morning. But it began, of course, with Palm Sunday.
John 12:12-13

The next day, when the large crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, they took palm branches and went out to meet him. They kept shouting: "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord —the King of Israel!" (John 12:12-13)

Father, as we prepare to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus next week, help us to see what Jesus went through for us. Help us not just to believe these things as history, but to accept them as our reality, trusting in Jesus as our Savior and King. In Jesus's name, Amen.

[Picture of The Triumphant Entry]



So on the Sunday before Easter, Jesus was welcomed into Jerusalem with rejoicing. The people cut branches off of palm trees, and some people waved them in the air, and others laid them down on the road, as if rolling the red carpet for Jesus. So go ahead and do that! Wave your branch in the air! And lay it down in the aisle as if Jesus were going to ride in on a donkey.

You see, the Jews all knew what Jesus was capable of. They knew He could heal the sick, raise the dead, teach with the authority of God, and He wasn't afraid of anyone. So they looked to Jesus as their King. And He was their king, but they wanted a king who would rescue them from the tyranny of the Romans, and they didn't at all expect that Jesus actually came to rescue them from their sin.

Because it's one thing to be freed from an oppressive government, and it's quite another thing entirely to be freed from ourselves. The first allows us to blame something out of our control for all that we don't like about the world and our lives, and the second forces us to take at least some of the blame ourselves.

This past week, we heard about yet another school shooting. Three adults and three children were killed at a private Christian school in Nashville on Monday. And whenever this kind of thing happens, I always get so sad, and so mad, and we all know that something needs to be done. And in the aftermath, republicans and democrats always blame each other for not doing what needs to be done. And I'm sure there are a variety of opinions even in this room about what needs to be done. But as Christians, I hope that we can all recognize at the very least that we need to share Jesus with a hurt and broken world.

But that's actually a much more offensive message than seeking to pass legislation, because it recognizes that each one of us has a darkness inside us called sin that is capable of horrible evil.

And this is actually what Jesus addressed on the second day of Passion Week. Mark 11:15-17.

They came to Jerusalem, and he went into the temple and began to throw out those buying and selling. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the chairs of those selling doves, and would not permit anyone to carry goods through the temple. He was teaching them: "Is it not written, My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations? But you have made it a den of thieves!" (Mark 11:15-17)

[Picture of Jesus in the Temple]



So on Monday, Jesus cleansed the Temple. He ran throughout the outer courtyard of the temple, flipped over the tables and chairs where the Jews were selling animals for sacrifices and ran them out.

Now, I used to think that this passage meant that we could never have a bake sale in the church, but that's actually not what Jesus was mad about. Jesus isn't condemning fundraisers.

Basically, because of the animal sacrifices that Jews were supposed to bring to the temple as a part of their worship, and because it wasn't practically for people to travel long distances with animals, there were people called money-changers who would sell animals to Jews coming from far away. They were actually providing a very helpful service, which I'm sure was why it was allowed in the first place.

But there were at least two things wrong with what the money-changers were doing. First, they were making a profit for themselves, which is why Jesus called them a den of thieves. And second, they were taking up space for Gentiles to come and worship. In the outer court of the temple, there was meant to be space not just for

Jews, but for all the nations to come and pray. So Jesus quoted Isaiah 56:7 to them, saying, “My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations!”

And anytime we exclude anyone, we’re guilty of the same thing. If you write someone off as too ungodly or too different to be accepted by God, Jesus would rebuke you in the same way. Because the gospel isn’t just for the Jews, or for Americans, but it’s good news of great joy that shall be for all the people.¹

You see, it’s incredibly important that we believe and teach what the Bible actually says, and not merely what we want it to say.

So on Tuesday, Jesus spent the day teaching. Among other things, on Tuesday, we hear Jesus teach on the Greatest Commandment, and tell the parable of the two sons, and rebuke the religious leaders for their hypocrisy, something that we need to continue to be careful to avoid today. Luke 20:45-47.

While all the people were listening, he said to his disciples, “Beware of the scribes, who want to go around in long robes and who love greetings in the marketplaces, the best seats in the synagogues, and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows’ houses and say long prayers just for show. These will receive harsher judgment.” (Luke 20:45-47)

[Picture of Jesus Rebuking the Pharisees]



So Jesus warned people of judgment, but notice that the harshest judgment wasn’t for those that we consider to be the worst sinners. We might reason that the worst torment in hell is reserved for people like Hitler, or Audrey Hale. But Jesus says that it’s for those who claim to be righteous, and who are often thought of as being the most righteous, people like the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus says that they will receive the harsher judgment.

As we practice our faith, we need to be very careful to not become hypocrites who believe the right things, and teach the right things, but continue to live however we please. We need to be extremely careful to not make a show of our faith, putting ourselves on a pedestal, acting like we have it all together.

So just so that it’s abundantly clear, I do not have it all together. I’m a sinner. I’m often lazy, gluttonous, prideful, judgmental, and I could go on and on. It’s only by the grace of God shown to me through Jesus’s death that I’m forgiven.

You see, knowledge puffs up, unless we keep the cross central to our theology. All of the Bible and all of history points us to Jesus on the cross. And in terms of Passion Week, it was coming very soon.

Wednesday was likely the day that Jesus was anointed for His burial. Mathew 26:6-13.

¹ Luke 2:10

While Jesus was in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, a woman approached him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume. She poured it on his head as he was reclining at the table. When the disciples saw it, they were indignant. "Why this waste?" they asked. "This might have been sold for a great deal and given to the poor." Aware of this, Jesus said to them, "Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a noble thing for me. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me. By pouring this perfume on my body, she has prepared me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her." (Matthew 26:6-13)

During the Super Bowl this year, there were several commercials about Jesus. They illustrated how Jesus knows what we're going through. He knows our pain. He knows our struggles. He gets us.

After the commercials were aired, a lot of people were highly critical of the commercials. They said, "It costs millions of dollars to put a commercial during the Super Bowl! They should have spent the money on the poor, feeding the hungry, or helping with some humanitarian need!" In effect, they were saying, "Why this waste?"

Now, the same people who spent money on those commercials actually also spend tons of money on humanitarian efforts as well, but I found it funny that they actually used the same argument that the disciples used against the woman in Matthew 26. "Why this waste?"

[Picture of The Alabaster Jar]



This was such a vivid illustration of the gospel that Jesus said that wherever the gospel is preached, this story would also be told. And it actually has a very simple reason. This is exactly what Jesus did for us. He spilled His blood for us, which is more costly than any expensive perfume or precious metal than you can imagine. And He did it because He loves you.

Jesus demonstrated that even more in the following days.

On Thursday, Jesus had the Last Supper with His disciples. After that, Jesus washed His disciples' feet, prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, and was betrayed by Judas. John 18:2-12.

Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. So Judas took a company of soldiers and some officials from the chief priests and the Pharisees and came there with lanterns, torches, and weapons. Then Jesus, knowing everything that was about to happen to him, went out and said to them, "Who is it that you're seeking?" "Jesus of Nazareth," they answered. "I am he," Jesus told them. Judas, who betrayed him, was also standing with them. When Jesus told them, "I am he," they stepped back and fell to the ground. Then he asked them again, "Who is it that you're seeking?" "Jesus of Nazareth," they said. "I told you I am he," Jesus replied. "So if you're looking for me, let these men go." This was to fulfill the words he had said: "I have not lost one of those you have given me." Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's servant, and cut off his right ear. (The servant's name was Malchus.) At that, Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword away!

Am I not to drink the cup the Father has given me?" Then the company of soldiers, the commander, and the Jewish officials arrested Jesus and tied him up. (John 18:2-12)

[Picture of Jesus Arrested]



And so, Jesus was charged with blasphemy, claiming to be the Son of God, when in reality, He is the Son of God, so it wasn't blasphemy. And even at this point, not even His disciples yet understood what Jesus came to do, because Peter sought to defend Jesus with his sword!

Jesus earlier said, "No one takes My life from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord."²

[Picture of Jesus on the Cross]



And so on Friday, Jesus was crucified. It says in Luke 23:33-35.

When they arrived at the place called The Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals, one on the right and one on the left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing." And they divided his clothes and cast lots.

The people stood watching, and even the leaders were scoffing: "He saved others; let him save himself if this is God's Messiah, the Chosen One!" (Luke 23:33-35)

Of course, what they didn't understand was that the Messiah didn't come to save His life, but to give His life in order to save us. And in doing so, He invites us to lose our lives, take up our cross, and follow Him. He calls us to forgive as we have been forgiven. He calls us to love as we have been loved. He invites us even to die to our old self, so that we might rise with Him in newness of life.

Well, on Saturday, Jesus was in the grave.

[Picture of the Tomb]

² John 10:18



Some say that He was even in hell. There are just a couple verses that may teach that Jesus descended into hell, not to experience torment, but to display His victory, but ultimately they're not conclusive. Perhaps the greatest argument that Jesus was in hell on Saturday comes not from the Bible, but from the Apostles' Creed, one of the oldest Christian confessions. It states:

He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. - The Apostles' Creed

Now, the Apostles' Creed was likely not actually written by the apostles, but it was meant to summarize what the apostles believed and taught, so it's just not clear whether it's true.

But what is abundantly clear is that the week leading up to His resurrection included Jesus's darkest days. But because of those darkest days, we have our brightest. Because on Sunday, well, that's next Sunday.

In the meantime:

'Twas the week Jesus died,
In His sacrifice, we see,
His great love for us,
And how we are set free.