

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
March 29, 2026 – Palm Sunday  
The Passion of our Lord according to Matthew  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Of all the services in the church year, this is by far the one I find most difficult, almost unbearable. Because in the space of a few minutes we move from the joy of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem to the horror of the crucifixion and all that led up to it, and then it's back to "business as usual" after my sermon when we do what we do every Sunday, only ending with one final acknowledgement of the cross as we sing, "O sacred head, sore wounded."

Why is this the shape of today's service? Because as long ago as the 1970's when The Book of Common Prayer was being written, few people attended Holy Week services. If the Palm Sunday service was only about Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the next time people were in church was Easter Sunday, then critical actions of Jesus, incredibly significant events in Jesus' life and the manner of his death would have been skipped over. Every year attendance at Holy Week services here is much smaller than attendance on Easter Sunday. The writers of the Prayer Book were right. We need to have the whole story today for the sake of sacred remembrance.

We have just read what is called the Passion Narrative as it is written in the Gospel of Matthew. In this context the word "passion" refers to the story of what Jesus suffered. The word comes from the Latin word "passio," which means "suffered." I would encourage you to take your bulletins home and read through the entire passage from Matthew, perhaps in small sections. Read it slowly, think about it, pray, take the events into your hearts. And, if you can, attend services this Thursday and Friday as well. As followers of Jesus, friends of Jesus, we need to stay with him and pray with him. There is a haunting Taize chant with these words sung over and over again: "Stay with me, remain here with me, watch and pray, watch and pray."

Jesus knew, if he went to Jerusalem, that he was risking his life. He knew he was in danger because he had challenged the ruling powers too directly. The leadership of the Temple saw him as a threat to their

existence under Roman rule because only as long as the Jews didn't cause trouble would the Romans allow them to continue their religious practices. The Romans themselves had no tolerance for any political activity likely to spark a revolt among the general population.

Jerusalem at Passover was a dangerous place. It was crowded with Jews who came from all over the eastern Mediterranean to observe the most important festival of the year at the Temple. Passover commemorated the freeing of the Jews from bondage in Egypt more than a thousand years before. It was when the Jewish people had become a nation, under the leadership of Moses. It was when the armies of Pharaoh were defeated by the power of the Lord. This was the foundational story of Israel, and it involved throwing off the yoke of oppression of a foreign power and asserting their independence. The Romans – the foreign power currently oppressing the Jews – knew this. So, during Passover the Roman ruler, Pontius Pilate, moved into Jerusalem from the outskirts. He needed to be on the spot, so that he could react quickly if there was any trouble.

All during his life Jesus offered himself to God, to do God's will. His life was a life of self-giving love, his time and energy poured out for others as a sacrifice to God. In the events we recall today and later in the week, we see Jesus' final sacrifice, this time the offering of his very life. We know that in Gethsemane Jesus "threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not what I want but what you want.'" In offering himself up even to death, Jesus is making clear what he has been doing all along – making a continual offering of himself to God, an offering of love.

Jesus was indeed the fulfillment of God's law, the embodiment of obedience to the commandments he quoted from the Hebrew Bible:

"The first commandment is this: Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is the only Lord. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:29-31).

As we meditate on the last days of the life of Jesus, may this law of God enter our hearts ever more deeply. In Jesus' name. Amen.