

Passion Week and Easter

April 5, 2020

[Palm](#) / [Passion Sunday](#)

INTRODUCTION

As always there is a choice to be made here: Palm Sunday is such a fun event for churches to celebrate; the temptation is to let the palms and the donkey and the parade and the crowd shouting “Hosanna” be the entire focus of the day. Some might argue that is the way it should be. Let the day be its own day. There are certainly many themes available to allow Palm Sunday the whole of the worship experience. Whether the focus is on the [Matthew story](#) or the enthronement [Psalm 118](#) and the assigned verses, it is easy to see that there is content to explore this event.

The problem, however, is not in the day itself, but in the attendance patterns of congregations. For many church members, Sunday is the only day of attendance for worship. Sunday to Sunday is the usual rhythm of the community of faith, but this week, something more is needed: the experience of the Passion of Christ – not necessarily an understanding, but the experience; a taste, perhaps, a glimpse. We are too far removed for the full experience, but something needs to jar our comfortable sensibilities with the awareness of what has been done for us.

This glimpse is what drives the Holy Week services. We could argue that if the community is faithful to attend Maundy Thursday and Good Friday worship, then Palm Sunday can be Palm Sunday. The problem is that in most churches, the weekday services are attended by a fraction of the congregation, which means that most folks will go from a parade to a party, from an enthronement to a Resurrection, without ever walking through the valley of shadow. The result is to blunt the power and glory of Easter and Resurrection. Life after death without the experience of dying seems an empty promise. Resurrection after the shadows draw near is an experience of power and grace.

Each faith community will need to determine how best to provide that experience. Many congregations will need to create a “slash” experience on Palm Sunday by putting two modes together in one service, in this case Palm/Passion

Sunday. To do this well requires careful planning as the congregation transitions from the exuberance of Palm Sunday into the heaviness of the Passion experience. In some settings, the gathering can be the reenactment of the Palm Sunday parade, with children and adults leading the whole body as they circle the sanctuary waving palms and singing Hosanna, processional hymns for the season, and then a reading of the gospel account of the event (Matthew 21:1-11 for Year A of the Lectionary Cycle), followed by a brief commentary on the event, perhaps a reflection on the word “Hosanna,” then a corporate prayer or litany. Here is where children would be dismissed to stay in worship and sit with their parents or to go to Sunday School or Children’s Church, depending on the tradition of the church.

An appropriate next move would be to celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion. Palm/Passion Sunday falls on the first Sunday of the month this year, and we recommend that if it is your habit to observe Communion on the first Sunday, to continue that practice this month. Even if you plan to celebrate Communion on Easter, plan to celebrate Communion on Palm/Passion Sunday also. Wesley believed you should offer the Lord’s Supper as often as you can. Palm/Passion Sunday is an opportunity to show how Communion can be observed in a variety of ways. The Passion Sunday observance is more focused on the sacrifice, for example, and the Easter observance is more focused on the grace of the gift. Even the methods of serving could be different, with Passion Sunday being a quieter, more reflective event, and Easter being a louder, more exuberant celebration.

The service of Holy Communion could be the hinge upon which the transition is made from Palm to Passion. The transition could be made musically, as a choir or ensemble or soloist prepares the body for confession before the Great Thanksgiving. The transition could be made through the words of the liturgy, the emphasis on confession and repentance. It could be done through the setting; the bright lights of the palm celebration are dimmed in preparation for the sacrament; the palms lie on the floor as the congregation moves forward to receive the elements. It is a moment, an experience to savor, even as the worship then turns toward the Passion.

Let's be clear: our tradition teaches that whenever the sacrament is celebrated, it is supposed to be the center of the worship. It is not preparation for anything, not a preliminary for something to come, sermon or drama. It is the apex of the service, the very real presence of the living Christ. At the same time, the sacrament is a part of the people's response to the Word. It is a moving forward to receive the gift that comes to us in our unworthiness, and it makes us worthy in our receiving.

In fact, the Passion is a gift in our unworthiness. We recommend as a continuation of the sacramental moment that the Passion is presented --not expounded, not explained, but presented. Offer a simple reading of the Passion story from Matthew's Gospel; or consider having a variety of readers to enhance the drama -- a narrator and then various voices that speak from the verses in the text. Let the story stand on its own. Let the sacrifice be evident; let the injustice be heard; let the shame we all bear be presented, but simply, not overly dramatically, but clearly and passionately in presentation.

You know your congregation. You know how present they are likely to be for the full experience of Holy Week; you know how they prepare themselves for the glories of Resurrection Sunday on Easter. But don't allow them to miss the depths and the heights that our faith touches. The Lenten series "Selah" was, in part, about the visceral experience of the season, the emotions that accompany our journey to the cross. So, let that experience continue all the way to the cross and beyond.

PREACHING NOTES

It is true that in the introduction, the suggestion was made that preaching be at a minimum this day. However, should you determine that a space for the proclamation of the Word is important, let us suggest some considerations. The Gospel reading for this Year A, Palm Sunday, is Matthew 21:1-11. Matthew clearly sees in this event a fulfillment of prophecy and an echo of Zechariah's proclamation of God as the king of peace and victory restoring Israel to a position of prominence. This event lifts all the people of God, even those who don't realize it. Matthew points out that not everyone was on the bandwagon. There was a crowd, yes, but then the "whole city was in turmoil asking, 'Who is this?'" And

even the crowd calls him the “prophet who comes from Galilee, not the promised messiah or the king that such a ritual would announce. Yes, “Son of David” is a kingly designation, but apparently not a convincing one, according to Matthew. It isn’t Matthew, but Luke who includes the word from the cross, “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,” but Matthew implies that the crowd here doesn’t know what they are doing.

Yet, they shouted, Matthew claims, “Hosanna,” which translates as “Save us.” Some historians argue that by this time, “Hosanna” was merely a greeting, a salutation for those in power and that the translation no longer held meaning for those who lined the streets that day. Perhaps that is true, and yet, here again it was an appropriate shout to make to the one who rode into the city that day. They shouted more truth than they knew.

The preacher could also reference the preparations made for this event. Sending the disciples into the village to retrieve the donkey and the colt was not necessarily a supernatural event, but the result of a planned approach. Jesus was making his declaration to the city of Jerusalem, a final attempt to win their hearts to his mission and ministry. Audrey West, in *Feasting on the Word, (Year A, Volume 2, p.153)* says that this event “is to the crowds what Caesarea Philippi is to Peter: their confession that Jesus is the Messiah.” And in the moment, those who shout hosanna seem to have grasped some thread of the truth of this moment. How deeply they have grasped this truth is debatable, given how quickly the crowd turns on him this week.

Finally, some reflection on the statement is also appropriate. Jesus makes the declaration in a specific, recognizable way. By choosing the donkey as the means of conveyance, he declares himself to be a king of peace. He could have chosen a white charger, a war horse for a conquering warrior king. Instead, he chose a donkey and a colt to trot alongside as signs of vulnerability and peacefulness. Matthew’s message is that this wasn’t an accident, a happenstance on the road to Jerusalem one sunny day. Instead, it was a declaration then and now and an invitation to pledge allegiance to the king of peace.

The preacher could also continue the *Selah* theme for this sixth Sunday of Lent and present the Psalm. Psalm 118 is variously designated as an individual song of thanksgiving, or a kingly proclamation after a battle, or a liturgical procession

ending in the temple. It might be all this together, and it makes for a perfect complement to the Palm Sunday procession. The psalm contains many familiar words, as it is often quoted in the New Testament. There is a powerful celebratory mood in the psalm that will echo the procession of palm branches and shouts of “hosanna” in the sanctuary on this day.

A spiritual to partner with this psalm, should you choose to continue the theme, would be “Ride on King Jesus.”

*Ride on king Jesus / No man can a-hinder me / Ride on king Jesus / No
man can a-hinder me / In that great getting up morning / Fare ye
well, fare ye well / In that great getting up morning / Fare ye well,
fare ye well.*

Is the song about entering heaven? Yes, but it is also about a heaven on earth, a new kin-dom brought in by the king who rides in. “This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.” It is about this day, redeemed by the one who rides the dusty streets of Jerusalem, cheered by a crowd in celebration and affirmation.

Yet there are seeds of discontent, of the tragedy that is to come in our Passion story, even in this glorious hymn of thanksgiving and victory: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone” (v.22) The one acclaimed has been and will be rejected. And we will move, all too quickly from shouting “Hosanna” to crying “Crucify!” This is a move that must be made in worship, for all the reasons described in the introduction. If you choose to not go into full Passion Sunday mode, at least leave a pointer, a hint of what is to come. There will be some who can’t or won’t come to Holy Week services, and they need a taste of the journey that leads to the empty tomb on Easter morning.

At the very least, offer an invitation to join the community at the foot of the cross on Friday.

April 9, 2020

Maundy Thursday

INTRODUCTION

Here again there is a choice to be made: Do you create a Maundy Thursday experience or a Holy Thursday service? This might seem to be an argument about nomenclature and not really essential, and “Holy Thursday” might communicate better these days than does an obscure term like “Maundy Thursday.” But, in fact, there is something behind the differentiation. There is a difference in orientation.

“Maundy” comes from the Latin *mandatum*, meaning *command* or *order*. It refers to the upper room event recorded in [the Gospel of John](#). Chapter thirteen begins with a problem (well, two problems. Actually). The first problem is Judas and the devil in his heart. The second problem is that the normal rituals of hospitality were not performed. So, John says that Jesus rose from the table to perform the ritual washing of the feet (more on that in the preaching notes). But Jesus says he has performed the ritual as an example to show what love is in this relationship and in this faith. Then Jesus says, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” The “maundy” in Maundy Thursday comes from this verse. The new commandment is the commandment to love and to love in acts of service and hospitality.

Now, it isn’t really as simple as determining whether to do a foot washing or to focus on the sacrament of Holy Communion. But you might determine what is the focus of the experience of the worship event. The other three gospels do not mention the foot washing or the statement about a new commandment; instead, they describe the meal that is shared. Where, in other words, is the “maundy” coming from? How can the call to live in love as a community of faith be experienced in this service?

Foot washing is a powerful and sometimes unsettling ritual in the life of many churches. It provides an experience of humility and service. But does it convey for us what it conveyed for Jesus’ disciples in the upper room? It was a neglected act of hospitality for them. What might be an equivalent ritual for us today? How do we welcome people? How do we help visitors feel like guests and guests feel like family? How do we include those who’ve been excluded?

Certainly, the thrust of the service is to experience what Christ has done for us. It is to partake of this gift with humility and gratitude. But the “maundy” in Maundy Thursday seems to lay an additional burden on our shoulders and on our hearts. Perhaps this Holy Week, the worship planners should take special care to be

inclusive. How can the Communion meal be served in a way that welcomes all and enables everyone to feel a part of something larger and not put on the spot in an unfamiliar place?

The worship space is always an important consideration, but perhaps more so on Maundy Thursday. Consider meeting somewhere other than the sanctuary, if that space isn't flexible enough. Sit around tables, as though dining together; host each table so that all those who come for the sacrament are ushered into the sacred space you've created. You're creating community, a welcoming spirit that allows us all to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen and watch and lean in.

The Proclaimed Word, if there is one (see Preaching Notes) could come from the people, which either means the preacher is in the round with tables around him or her, or that the proclamation is shared by the whole community. Perhaps it is planned for different folks to share a reflection, or there is a leading question allowing some to respond in the moment. But on this night, the Word could be a word from underneath, or alongside, not from on high. This is a moment of intimacy.

Washing feet is personal, an act as intimate as you can imagine between a teacher and student, a leader and follower. Between a Lord and a disciple. It is difficult to capture in a ritual in most church settings. This is not to forbid or even recommend against foot washing during the service. You know what will have the most impact in your congregation. But consider the effect you wish to have. You do not want embarrassment, although there was embarrassment in the upper room. The discomfort there was about who was doing the foot washing, not that the foot washing was being done. How might you capture that mood, that humbled awe of what Christ is willing to do for you?

The setting is simple, more like a dining room than a sanctuary. The lighting is dim, so as not to distract from what is taking place within the circle. Let the focus be on the bread and the cup, the bowl and the basin. Let the focus be on grace and on sacrifice and service. Music can bring us into that place if it is reflective, plaintive, present. Whether performative or participatory, the music is to draw us closer together, into the moment where Christ resides and kneels at our feet and washes off the dust of our journeys, our sinfulness, our separation, our selfishness. Maundy Thursday isn't really about convincing the attenders of the

history of that day; it isn't about a re-enactment of a long-ago moment. It is a now-moment, a grace moment, and a challenge moment to be the foot-washed disciples of Jesus Christ. Whether you call it Maundy Thursday or Holy Thursday, it can be an invitation to enter into the embrace of the one who loves you enough to wash you clean.

FOOTWASHING LITANY

(inspired by John 13: 1-20)

Here is a litany for a service of foot washing (on Maundy Thursday or other occasions) written by Reggie M. Kidd,

(If you use material from this blog, please be careful to credit the original author and source)

O Prince of Peace, O Friend of Sinners,
we praise you and give you thanks,
because you laid aside your power as a garment
and took upon yourself the form of a slave.

You became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

You allowed yourself to be born to die in our place,

You allowed your own feet to be anointed for death.

You allowed a sinner to wash your feet with her tears.

**For God chose what is low and despised in the world
to bring to nothing things that are.**

Therefore, with the woman who gave you birth,

**with the woman who anointed you for death,
with the woman who worshiped you with her tears,
and with all our fellow sinners
who have loved and served you from that time till now,
we praise you, Lord Jesus.**

O Eternal Father, blessed is our brother Jesus,
who on that night before Passover,
rose from the Supper, laid aside his garments
took a towel and poured water,
and washed his disciples' feet, saying to them:
"If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet,
you also ought to wash one another's feet.
If you know these things,
blessed are you if you do them."

**Come now, mighty Spirit of God,
wash us and make us one body in Christ,
that, as we are bound together in this act of love,
we may no longer be in bondage
to the principalities and powers that enslave creation,
but may know your liberating peace
such as the world cannot give. Amen.**

PREACHING NOTES

As hinted at in the introduction, we can debate whether a sermon is necessary on this occasion. Like Ash Wednesday before it, the service speaks clearly and loudly, and the attempt to frame meaning through a sermon might be more distraction than help. But there is space for preaching on Maundy Thursday. The intent would be to help capture the mood and mode of the service without attempting to force interpretation too narrowly.

So, if we choose to bring a word of some sort, what shall we preach on Maundy Thursday? The lectionary gives us some wonderful possibilities. If we start with the Hebrew Scriptures, we have some instructions on the Passover meal: [Exodus 12:1-4 \(5-10\) 11-14](#). It looks like a secret code printed in invisible ink on the back of some ancient scroll. All those numbers. When you read them, you wonder what might this list of instructions for the people of God from ancient times have to do with my twenty-first-century church of Christ followers? Well, they are certainly not instructions to follow to the letter. A re-enactment of the Passover meal is considered by many to be cultural appropriation. If you do decide to depict this sacred ceremony, consult a rabbi from a nearby Jewish community to come and explain to you the practice and interpretations. View it as a learning exercise and an interfaith exchange. But respect your neighbors enough to not simply take over their sacred rituals.

So, do we just move to the New Testament and leave these instructions behind? Before you do, take another look. See what was given on that terrible night of salvation. This is God in full vengeance mode. It is hard for us to reconcile this God with the God of love that we prefer. But in the end, it is not God's actions that should be our focus here, but rather God's instructions. To borrow Howard Thurman's description of the marginalized, what is asked of the people of God when their backs are against the wall?

Two things stand out: community and movement, with remembering as a constant third. The instructions say that this meal, this act, is to be done together. This meal is not undertaken by individuals acting alone, but as a family or even a collection of families. The grace and mercy of God is meant to be shared; so too is the judgement and vengeance of God. Verse eleven says, "eat it hurriedly." This meal is fast food; it is an eat-and-run situation. But people aren't to run their

separate ways after inhaling the food, as happens all too often in our homes today. Instead, the family eats and runs together, impatient for the next thing, ready to go where sent, ready to follow God's call. That is the underlying message here: go where you are sent. Always be ready to go. The people of God are not a settled people, but a pilgrim people, a missional people, ready to go and proclaim, ready to go and invite, ready to go and tell the story anywhere to everyone. The people of God are ready to go and tell what they remember. Remembering is what we do when we gather. This day is a day of remembering. From the Exodus text, the preacher could remember with the congregation Holy Weeks of the past. The preacher could recall those who had dined with us but are no longer here. He or she could remember experiences of grace at the table and moments of salvation. The pastor could recall how many times people have risen from the table with renewed hope and have gone out into the night trusting in the protection of the blood of the lamb.

If it is the meal that centers the evening's experience, then you need to go to Paul. The Epistle text is the only explicit telling of the ritual of Communion in the lectionary. [1 Corinthians 11:23-26](#) is a brief retelling of the sacrament. Paul doesn't unpack it or command it; he just tells it. He tells it as if it were to be a way of life. One wonders whether our turning the sacrament into an occasional ritual would bother Paul and whether what he really meant and thought what Jesus really meant was that whenever we ate, we ate aware of the presence of Christ among us; that the act of eating bread and drinking from the fruit of the vine was partaking of the body and blood of Christ every time. "Do this, as often as you drink it . . ." As often. Perhaps Paul was calling us to live aware of the body of Christ, to live aware of the redemption from the blood of Christ.

It's not wrong to practice the ritual, to formalize our remembering with the ancient words and ritual acts. Surely something holy happens in our gathering. But it would be wrong if it stayed there; if that were the only time we remembered; if that were the only time we were aware of what Christ has done. Perhaps the preacher could invite members of the congregation to share moments when they have become aware of what Christ has done as they ate with their family or friends or even strangers. Perhaps they could talk about how the body became something more than an idea or concept, but a reality around a

table. Maybe reconciliation happened; maybe grace was extended or accepted. What stories might we tell around a table that help us remember Christ?

The Gospel text, [John 13:1-17, 31b-35](#), could lead us to a similar conversation. Who has washed your feet? As mentioned in the introduction, washing of feet isn't a normal cultural practice for us. So, translate it. What humble act of service has been performed for you in such a way that it embarrassed you and then made you grateful? Is there such a thing? Can we imagine such a thing?

This is the new commandment, *mandatum*, that titles the day: "Love one another, as I have loved you." Loving one another is hard enough, but we can imagine ourselves doing it most days. But Jesus added that proviso; we aren't called to love as we want to love, to love from a distance, to love from safety, to love with the idea of the other. No, we are called to love as Jesus loved. And if we thought we could wiggle out under even that description, Jesus shows us exactly what he means by loving. It is with humble acts of service and hospitality. It is to include, not just say "come on in," but to go out and gather them in. Whoever the "them" is that is hardest to gather for you, those are the ones you are called to love as Jesus loved.

And remember, as if we could forget, these are the parting words of Jesus. He might as well have said, if you forget everything else, remember this. Or, it all comes down to this. All the rules, all the rituals, all the understandings of his teaching and example, won't amount to a hill of beans if we don't love one another as he loved us. And then to cement the image of what this love is like, Jesus left that place and suffered and died a horrible death, for love's sake. There is nothing, he proclaimed with his wounds and his blood, that I won't do for love.

Perhaps you're captured by the Lenten series *Selah* and want to carry it through Holy Week. The Psalm assigned for Maundy Thursday is [Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19](#). "What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me?" (v.12) Does it seem odd to have a psalm of thanksgiving assigned to Maundy Thursday? Perhaps, but hear the determination in the psalm. "I will lift up the cup of salvation . . . I will pay my vows to the Lord." I will. "I will" echoes through the psalm. Yes, it is a response to what has been done in the life of the psalmist. But it is also a clear commitment to carry through and hold on. That's the spiritual that springs to mind on this evening. Hold on, keep your hand on the plow and hold on. The agony in the

garden is yet to come; it follows this meal in the upper room. The gospel writers give us a clear indication of the cost of this sacrifice on the person of Jesus of Nazareth. We hear the cry for release: let this cup pass from me. We see the sweat like great drops of blood. But we also know the determination, “nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done.” I will lift up the cup of salvation. I will keep my hand on the plow and hold on.

His determination becomes our commitment, our desire. We too will lift the cup and break the bread. We too will drink and eat; we too will offer ourselves to the will of our loving Creator. Yes, we will fail. Again and again, we will fall back; we will drop our arms; we will hold back our praise and our offerings. Or maybe we won’t. Maybe we will hold on at last, not by our strength, but by his. Thanks be to God.

April 10, 2020

Good Friday

INTRODUCTION

There are so many ways to do a Good Friday service. Perhaps you are feeling as though you have tried them all. What will speak to our modern congregations in a transforming way? What will bring an experience of the pain and the promise in this event? What will help us wrestle with why we even call such a horrific day “good”?

The general rule for worship from the perspective of the Worship Team at Discipleship Ministries is engagement, entering in to the experience and letting the community participate in all the movements of worship from gathering and call, to experiencing the Word, to responding to that Word and then being sent into the world to live that Word enfleshed in our human witness of living. We believe that to not hear the voice of the people in singing and speaking, in testimony and witness, is to miss out on the power of worship to transform and make disciples. Worship is always interactive.

Except perhaps today. Perhaps, because there are actions that congregations can do that can make real the depth of Christ’s sacrifice for us. Some churches, for

example, have placed a wooden cross on the chancel steps and invited congregation members to come and drive a nail into the wood, additionally nailing a piece of paper on which have been written sins or brokenness that Christ will take away. The sound of hammering drives home the reality of the nails and the pain in a tangible way. Other ritual acts of movement, or confession, or weeping, can also be powerful tools for capturing the “good” in Good Friday.

However, this day is not our day, but his. For us, yes But it is his act, his blood, his death. Sometimes the best way to worship on Good Friday is as a spectator, to stand or sit at the foot of the cross and simply watch. In shame and in hope, guilty and redeemed at once, we watch as blood is shed on our behalf. We are powerless, helpless under this weight. All we can do is watch and listen, as even here he speaks a word to us.

We are recommending a return to an old model for Good Friday observance: the service of the seven last words from the cross. In the African American tradition, this was done over a three-hour span, the traditional length of time Jesus hung on the cross. The seven words are divided up and assigned to different preachers who come and bring a word and a song – a hymn or anthem by the choir of the pastor’s church. The congregation comes and goes over the course of the time; few will stay the whole three hours. But the community keeps vigil; the worship covers the time. Maybe there is a possibility your community could do this ecumenically. Maybe it is already being done by other churches, and your church hasn’t been a part. Maybe it is time to investigate the possibilities of uniting the church divided by race and tradition and worship together, as we all stand powerless before the cross.

It would be a rare local church, however, that could sustain a three-hour Good Friday service. But perhaps there would be a way to shape a worship experience around the seven words. Various Tenebrae services are built around these words. Our *Book of Worship* includes a model that can be used and/or adapted (*BOW*, p. 354. See also *BOW*, p. 362, “A Service for Good Friday”). They can also function as modified stations of the cross, with each word being a moment in the service to pause and listen and reflect in awe of what is transpiring. The congregation is taken on a journey through the sacrifice of the Lord. You can go to the search

function on the www.umcdiscipleship.org website to find a variety of services using the words “Good Friday” or “stations of the cross.”

Drama is another way of observing Good Friday. There are effective ways of depicting the power and passion of this day without veering into the voyeuristic. Dramas that focus not on the person of Jesus on the cross, but on those who stand by and watch, or those who can’t watch, can provide powerful insight in the life-changing effect of this event. There are resources, such as the “Skit guys” (skitguys.com), that provide both videos of such dramas and scripts by which you can produce your own live presentations. Perhaps there is someone in your congregation whom you could cultivate into becoming the dramatist or the performer who helps the congregation observe and experience the power of Good Friday.

Finally, music was central to the Selah series we presented for the season of Lent. Good Friday is an appropriate place for silence. But music can also bring us into the experience of the Passion on many levels. Look at the music suggestions to find hymns and anthems that would help carry the theme and mood of the service. You might also listen to “Last Words (Tenebrae)” by Andrew Peterson from the *Resurrection Letters: Prologue* (Centricity Music: 2018) album. Peterson simply weaves the seven last words into a musical tapestry that is profound in its simplicity.

PREACHING NOTES

Consider a service built around the words from the cross. Whether this is a Tenebrae or Stations of the Cross service, the guiding word is the scripture itself. If a sermon or a meditation is needed and there isn’t time to divide up the service among seven different preachers spread out over three hours, the preacher and worship team could select one or two texts, or words, to be the focus, and the others are read throughout the service. The words are usually done in this order: First Word: “Father, forgive them . . .” (*Luke 23:34*); Second Word: “Today you will be with me in paradise” (*Luke 23:43*); Third Word: “Woman, here is your son” (*John 19:26-27*); Fourth Word: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (*Matthew 27:46 or Mark 15:34*); Fifth Word: “I am thirsty” (*John 19:28*); Sixth

Word: "It is finished" (*John 19:30*); Seventh Word: "Father into your hands . . ." (*Luke 23:46*).

Bishop William Willimon's book *Thank God It's Friday: Encountering the Seven Last Words from the Cross* (Abingdon, 2006) provides a unique slant on interpreting these words to modern congregations. Should the preacher choose to focus on one or more of these words, a brief homily and reflection on the word would be appropriate.

A more traditional approach would be to turn to the lectionary readings assigned to this Holy Week service. The Hebrew Scripture text assigned for Good Friday is [Isaiah 52:13-53:12](#), the suffering servant passage. This is the fourth Servant Song in the prophet's writing. It comes from what many scholars call Second Isaiah. There is general agreement that the book should be divided up into two, or even three, distinct parts that reference different historical periods. Second Isaiah (chapters 40-66) references the exile and even the early post-exilic period of Israel's history.

Who the servant in the passage referred to at the time of writing is often debated. It is clearly messianic language, but some believe that the prophet had in mind the whole people of Israel living in to the images described. Surely there was hope that their humiliation would be redeemed, that the injustice against them will be made right, and that their suffering would be the means of bringing holiness to the whole world.

For us Christians, however, the reference is clear. The Redeemer who fits the images in this passage is the crucified one. He is the one who has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases. He is the one wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole. Here again, what might be needed on this day is not an interpretation, or explanation, but simply a proclamation. Read this text, slowly and clearly, perhaps with images of the cross projected or printed on the bulletin. Consider having meditative music playing in the background. Let the word be a call to stand at the foot of the cross as the Lord of life dies as first fruits of Resurrection.

Similarly, the Passion story from John speaks for itself. Rather than offering an interpretation or exegesis of these words, [John 18:1-19:42](#), simply presenting

them to the congregation accompanied by art or music might be the most effective proclamation for Good Friday.

If you desire an interpretation, then turn to the epistle text. [Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9](#) boils down the sacrifice to its barest element. It was the priestly aspect of the crucifixion that saves us. Christ stands in the gap between us and God and brings us back into relationship. As high priest, Jesus grants us access to the presence of God. Through him, through his sacrifice, we are able to approach the Creator of all things and find mercy and grace in time of need. This is the good in Good Friday, the redemption in this suffering.

It is also possible to quote the verses that Jesus quoted as he died that first Good Friday. The lectionary gives us [Psalm 22](#) as our text, and it is hard to imagine a more experiential passage that would bring us right in to the heart of the crucifixion. Even the gospel account seems objective and dispassionate beside this word. Attributed to David and titled “The Deer of the Dawn,” Psalm 22 carries the text of the fourth word from the cross. The first consideration is whether these are simply the best words to capture Jesus’ felt experience in that moment, or whether in his last breath he turned to this hymn as a memory exercise or a personal devotion. The gospel writers only put the first sentence in his mouth that dark and terrible day. But to read this psalm is to dive down into the depth of Jesus’ pain and loneliness. “All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads” (v.7). “They divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots” (v.18). It is a first-person retelling more horrifying than the third-person accounts in the gospels. But at the end, as is true of most of the psalms, there is confidence in resolution; there is hope, even in this horrible reality. Good Friday has to carry a seed of Easter; death has to point toward Resurrection to keep us putting one foot in front of another.