

Palm Sunday - March 29, 2026

Matthew 21:1-11 , Matthew 27:11-54

“The view from outside the city walls”

1. For the Israelites, the walls around the city of Jerusalem had been a silent witness to periods of prosperity and of Exile, of peace and of War. (Our bulletin picture shows a gate at one of these walls as it appears today)
 - a. The walls were there for protection from outside military forces but they were also seen as a reminder of unity and cohesion within the community that was able to live withing its relative safety.
 - b. This tightly packed city with its narrow streets and alleys was built around a temple to God, the center of the worship life of the people. The city was always a bustling place.
 - c. In the time of Jesus, this walled city of Jerusalem was an island of identity of the Jewish people as well.
 - d. I say island because, as a reminder, the land of Palestine was at that time it has been occupied by the extensive Roman Empire for just under a hundred years.
 - e. By special arrangement, Rome had allowed the people to continue their worship at the temple (something Rome didn't do for other conquered people!)
 - f. But it was undeniable that the Romans were in charge otherwise. The walls around the city of Jerusalem were a witness to the conquering Romans establishing themselves in this ancient city.
 - g. Jerusalem was a city full of contradictions, full of tension, full of hope and also full of anguish. It was a city full of contrasts.
2. During Lent, we have focused on how Jesus encountered people in his journey to Jerusalem
 - a. Today we remember those encounters both as he entered on what we call Palm Sunday, and how he exited the city on his way to crucifixion
 - b. In that week we call Holy Week, in that city of Jerusalem, we learn that people were eager to re-discover what it means to be the people of God in a time of conquest and oppression framed within a fragile, tense peace.
 - c. We learn that the people were ready to rally around a figure like Jesus, to follow him as he would lead the fight against Rome, they hoped.
 - d. That's the electric feeling surrounded Jesus entering Jerusalem through the city walls

- e. Word about Jesus had preceded him, and the people who had encountered this teacher from Galilee saw him as a Faithful, Inviting, Compassionate Healer, truly Emmanuel (God with us)
 - f. What they were to find out was also that Jesus was a mold-breaker, that he would lead a resistance to the oppression they face, though not the way the people longed for.
 - g. That's why when Jesus prepared to enter that city, the people felt jubilant, they thought "our Savior has come!" and they shouted the words of the Psalms: Hosana! Save us! And they meant "Save us from these tyrants, these occupiers!"
 - h. And the city walls stood silently, witnessing the city abuzz, watching the joy and high expectations of the people, as they pinned their hopes on Jesus.
3. But the city walls could also sense a tide of resentment about the message Jesus brought had been building well before this celebrated entrance
- a. Jesus had been perceived as a threat to the way things were politically, socially, religiously, by low and eventually higher ranking Roman authorities (who alone had the power to crucify) and by those religious authorities who had made deals with the Romans for the safety of worship.
 - b. The plot against Jesus took shape and that fateful week was sprung into action
4. Traditionally this day we call Palm Sunday is also called Passion Sunday, as the liturgy compresses the week which started with celebration and ended with crucifixion
- a. The Romans reserved crucifixion for those they labeled traitors, rebels against the Emperor.
 - b. Condemned people were marched outside the city, to a few different cursed locations, to be crucified quite publicly, as a deterrent.
 - c. For Jesus, the sign posted above his head on the cross mocked his rebellion as "King of the Jews"
 - d. The curses people shouted at him echoed against the city walls
 - e. And when he died, this gospel tells of otherworldly events: the curtain in the temple tearing, an earthquake, and even tombs bursting open.
 - f. All deserted him, except his most faithful disciples, the women, who stood as steadfast as that wall and witnessed his death.
 - g. You and I know of course that the week starting only a couple of days later would begin with New Life.
 - i. As it turns out, those same city walls would witness a renewal outside the city like Jesus had predicted. But I am getting ahead of myself

5. In remembering this Holy Week week, we acknowledge the silent witnesses which have watched us in our ups and downs, in our doubt and belief, our stamina and exhaustion.
 - a. They have been the walls of our home, of a hospital room, of a prison cell, of this church, walls which can testify to the moments
 - i. When we thought we understood what God was doing in our lives, and moments when we wondered if God had completely forgotten about us.
 - ii. When we felt hope and despair.
 - iii. When we were humbled and restored
 - iv. They are our own version of those city walls, trying to keep us safe as well as trying to remind us that we are vulnerable.
 - b. Perhaps a way for us to think about this Palm Sunday, about this Holy Week, is to acknowledge that our journey and our growth in our faith mirrors the journey of those who followed Jesus and even those who turned on Jesus.
6. The teacher from Galilee, the Faithful, Inviting, Compassionate Healer, was truly Emmanuel (God with us), and he was the one who broke the constraints which kept us from experiencing God's love fully. May this week refocus us and strengthen us for the ups and downs of that journey.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sunday-of-the-passion-palm-sunday/commentary-on-matthew-2614-2766>

Reflection questions

1. Share a story of a time when your faith swung from despair to hope.
2. What stands out to you in the wild swing of the narrative of Holy Week (Matthew 21:1-11, Matthew 27:11-54)?
3. What new perspective on these well-know passages will you take with you this week as you anticipate the dawn of Easter?