

## **Palm Sunday Intro to It Was On the Sunday 2019**

by Kathryn Matthews on the UCC's Samuel.org

Triumphant joy or ominous peace? Perhaps it's difficult for us to connect with what's happening in our Gospel today, even though we're familiar with the story. Think of the occasional parade welcoming a championship sports team back to their home city (in Green Bay, this is looks to be so far off right now that our imaginations are challenged); nowadays this is about the only time we can picture ourselves in a crowd eagerly watching the entry of someone who sparks such celebration. We've all seen old photographs from a time when ticker-tape parades were given in New York City for triumphant heroes of one kind or another. Can you imagine feeling so much hope and joy at the entrance into your city or town of someone who represents not a political, military or sports victory, but the coming of peace itself?

As it happens, if you were listening to this story almost two thousand years ago, when it was written, and of course you lived somewhere in the eastern Mediterranean ancient world, you would hear something more. It would sound familiar to you, very much like the ominous entrance into your city of a military conqueror, escorted by his troops.

In their wonderful book, "The Last Week," Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan begin their account of Jesus' last seven days with a colorful description of this procession by the King of Peace into one end of Jerusalem at the same time that the Roman Empire's representative, Pontius Pilate, full of brute power, enters at the other end. Picture this: Pilate has arrived to "keep the peace" in the city during the turbulent time of Passover, when the crowds always get a little unruly. He travels with troops and flags and weapons, all the signs of empire, very impressive, of course. And he rides in on a magnificent warhorse, in case the flags and weapons and troops aren't a sufficiently intimidating display of power.

A warhorse, or a donkey? On the other hand, Jesus – filled with a different kind of power – makes his entrance riding a humble donkey, surrounded by his somewhat ragged group of followers, and we know that he doesn't "keep" the same kind of peace Pilate and Rome intend to "impose," a business-as-usual kind of peace that benefits the empire and the folks on top. No, Jesus brings instead the peace that surpasses understanding, and much of what is about to unfold in the next few days will be the price he pays to bring it.

His disciples, of course, have seen things that have changed their lives forever and have raised their hopes sky-high. Maybe they still aren't sure exactly what to hope for, when their leader rides – of all things – a donkey, a humble work animal rather than a grand warhorse. What sort of signal does that send, what sort of statement is Jesus making? Of course, this particular donkey, like any animal suited for sacred use, has never been ridden, and that should tell them something. Something sacred is happening, right before their eyes. Yes, a common donkey may not be the sort of animal one rides to war or in conquest, but this is no triumphant warrior or conquering power coming into the holy city or into our hearts. This is the King of True Peace.

These disciples are, as usual, clueless. They don't know what's about to happen in the next few days; today, they're just full of joy and expectation. (Evidently, they haven't

been listening any of the times that Jesus said he had to suffer and die but would rise again.) But the Pharisees, like many religious leaders in all times, are worried. They seem to have better instincts than most folks about these things, and they can sense trouble brewing. They know about Pilate coming in the other gate of the city, and they're not ignorant of what can happen if Rome feels threatened even by a ragtag group of religious enthusiasts. Rome steps on people, brutally, and puts them in their place. So the Pharisees fret: "Teacher," they say, "tell your followers to hush. They're going to bring down the heel of Rome on all our throats. Don't be causing trouble now."

Misreading the Bible Alas, we Christians, we followers of Jesus, have not done such an excellent job of "getting" his message of compassion and love. Instead, for two thousand years, we've often been part of the same kind of brute power systems that stepped on those people of Jerusalem long ago. For centuries, once we got the upper hand, we participated in a whole array of horrors, from the Inquisition to religious wars, from witch-burnings to the repression of women and the selling of slaves, from colonial empires to the killing of Jews ... and we used a misreading of the Bible in every case to justify what we did, in the name of the God of love. And all of this time, the God of compassion and love must have wept.

And so, as we step in to this holiest of weeks, I have invited church members to read reflective poems about what happened each day of Jesus' last week, reflections that hopefully draw you in to this most profound time. My hope in doing so is that, by immersing ourselves, we may find our current context in the stories: are you the prophet upending tables and transforming systems? Are you the innocent falsely accused or the beloved friend abandoned when chips are down? Are you the one quietly walking away because the stakes are too high? Wherever you are, my invitation is to linger in the stories of Jesus' passion this week, join us for supper on Thursday, for song and scripture and light and darkness on Friday, and in doing so, prepare yourself for God's greatest promise: that of new life.

It was on the **Sunday**  
that Jesus took on the city.

Religious nuts usually appear in the desert  
urging people to come into the open air  
and find God through getting back to nature.  
God, the idea is, doesn't live in the city.  
God prefers the smell of a garden to that of a gutter.  
God likes to see children playing beside streams,  
not hanging out on the sidewalk.  
And far better in God's eyes are lovers lounging in the long grass  
than shacking up in a single bed.

The city is for sin.  
God doesn't go there.

The Lord is my Shepherd,  
not my social worker.  
He makes me to lie down in green pastures,  
not on shrinks' couches.  
He leads me beside still waters,  
not trickles of urine from a beggar's bladder.  
And on mountains are where the peace messenger's feet are beautiful,  
not in the middle of a conference room.

But Jesus knew that God was for the people,  
and so he took his message of justice and peace  
to where the people were.

It was on the Sunday  
that Jesus took on the city.

It was on the **Monday**  
that religion got in the way  
and Jesus turned the tables.

An outsider would have thought  
that it was a fire sale at a pet shop.  
And the outsider, in some ways,  
wouldn't have been far wrong.

Only, it wasn't household pets,  
it was pigeons that were being purchased.  
And it wasn't a fire sale;  
it was a rip-off stall in a holy temple, bartering birds for sacrifice.  
And the price was something only the rich could afford.  
No discounts to students, pensioners,  
or social security claimants.

Then he,  
the holiest man on earth,  
went through the bizarre bazaar  
like a bull in a china shop.  
So the doves got liberated  
and the pigeon sellers got angry.  
And the police went crazy  
and the poor people clapped like mad,  
because he was making a sign  
that God was for everybody,  
not just for those who could afford it.  
He turned the tables on Monday . . .  
The day that religion got in the way.

It was on the **Tuesday**  
that Jesus let them have it.

If you had been there  
you would have thought  
that a union official was being taken to task  
by a group of mobsters.  
Or that the chairman of a multinational corporation  
was being interrogated by left-wing activists  
posing as shareholders.

They wanted to know why  
and they wanted to know how.

They were the respectable men,  
the influential men,  
the establishment.

The questions they asked  
ranged from silly schoolgirl speculations  
about whether you would be a bigamist in heaven  
if you had married twice on earth,  
to what was the central rule of civilized behavior.

They knew the answers already . . .  
or so they thought,  
otherwise they would never have asked the questions.

And like most of us  
they were looking for an argument  
with no intention of a change of heart.

So he filetted them with his tongue . . .  
those who tried to look interested  
but never wanted to be committed.

And that was on the Tuesday . . .  
the day when he let them . . .  
let us . . .  
have it.

It was on the **Wednesday**  
that they called him a wasteful person.

The house smelled like the perfume counter  
of a department store.

It was as if somebody had bumped an elbow  
against a bottle  
and sent it crashing to the floor,  
setting off the most expensive stink bomb on earth.

But it happened in a house,  
not a shop.

And the woman who broke the bottle  
was no casual afternoon shopper.  
She was the poorest of the poor,  
giving away the only precious thing she had.

And he sat still  
while she poured the liquid all over his head . . .  
as unnecessary as aftershave  
on a full crop of hair and a bearded chin.

And those who smelled it,  
and those who saw it,  
and those who remembered that he was against extravagance,  
called him a wasteful person.  
They forgot  
that he also was the poorest of the poor.

And they who had much  
and who had given him nothing,  
objected to a pauper giving him everything.

Jealousy was in the air  
when a poor woman's generosity  
became an embarrassment to their tight-fistedness . . .

That was on the Wednesday,  
when they called him a wasteful person.

It was on **Thursday** that he gave them himself.  
Nothing less.  
So much more.

He offered grace without blemish  
as they left behind the years  
of loneliness, grief, and estrangement,  
promising to follow him  
into a future unknown.

It was a night when salvation drew near.  
He knelt to serve us,  
trying to ready us  
for all that would happen,  
all that it will mean to follow him.  
In humility, he washed their feet  
so they might follow him down  
the dusty road of death;  
in love, he transformed a simple meal  
into a feast of unfathomable grace.

It was on Thursday that he drew us near  
to one another and himself,  
becoming God's most intimate covenant with us:  
a covenant to become as intimately a part of us  
as the food we eat and the cup we drink.

It was on the **Friday**  
that they ended it all.

Of course,  
they didn't do it one by one.  
They weren't brave enough.  
They would have to throw all the stones at the one time  
or throw no stones at all.

They did it in crowds . . .  
in crowds where you can feel safe  
and lose yourself  
and shout things you would never shout on your own,  
and do things you would never do if you felt the camera was watching you.

It was a crowd in a church that did it,  
and a crowd at a game that did it,  
and a crowd in a street that did it,  
and a crowd on the hill that did it.

And he said nothing.

He took the insults,  
the bruises,  
the spit on the face,  
the thongs on the back,  
the curses in the ears.  
He took the sight of his friends turning away,  
running away.

And he said nothing.

He let them do their worst  
until their worst was done,  
as on Friday they ended it all . . .  
and would have ultimately ended it for themselves  
had he not cried,  
"Father, forgive them . . ."

And began the revolution.

It was on the **Saturday**  
that the world stood still.

There was deep rest around the grave of Jesus.  
On the seventh day, when the work of creation was completed, God rested.  
“God blessed the seventh day and made it holy,  
because on that day he rested after all his work of creating,” (Genesis 2:3).

On the seventh day of the week of our redemption,  
when Jesus had fulfilled all he was sent by his Father to do,  
he rested in the tomb,  
and the women whose hearts were broken with grief rested with him.

Of all the days in history, Holy Saturday –  
the Saturday during which the body of Jesus lay in the tomb in silence and darkness  
behind the large stone that was rolled against its entrance –  
is the day of God’s solitude.

It is the day on which the whole creation waits in deep inner darkness.  
It is the day on which no words are spoken, no proclamations made.

The Word of God through whom all had been made,  
lay buried in the darkness of the earth.

This Holy Saturday is the most quiet of all days.  
Its quiet connects the first not-yet-knowing world – the Temple –  
with the new worship in the Spirit,  
the sacrifices of blood  
with the sacrifice of bread and wine,  
the Law with the Gospel.

This divine silence is the most fruitful silence that the world has ever known.  
For from this silence, the Word will be spoken again and make all things new.  
(Henri Nouwen)

It was on the Saturday  
that the world stood still.

Each poem was written by Ruth Burgess except for It Was on Thursday which was adapted from the writings of Thom Shuman and It Was on Saturday which was written by Henri Nouwen and adapted to our format. The introductory pages were written by the Rev. Kathryn Matthews.