

Sunday bloody Sunday

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The church suffers from a bit of schizophrenia about Palm Sunday. Should the focus be on Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the "Hosannas!" of the shouting crowd? Or should the emphasis be placed on the cross and the "Crucify him! Crucify him!" chants of the people? Is this a service of exultation or a service of passion? Furthering the complexity, the lectionary offers five texts, two of which are lessons from the Gospel of Matthew, the latter being a nearly two-chapter scramble through the most significant moments of Jesus' final days.

A common mistake in preaching is tackling too much in 20 minutes, leaving the congregation drowning in content without clear focus. Given the amount of material for this week, the preacher might do one of two things:

Preach a thematic sermon on the significance of this Sunday to the life of faith. One way to do this would be to place the events of Holy Week in the larger story of God's activity in Jesus. Sam Wells has suggested that God does three things in Christ: 1) *He comes to be with us*. Notably he does this for 30 years in Nazareth as a son, a brother, a congregant, a friend, a carpenter taking his place in daily fabric of community life. 2) *He comes to work with us*. This is his three-year public ministry of gathering a community about him, preaching and healing, and embodying the reign of God. 3) *He comes to work for us*. This is Holy Week, when Jesus takes our aspirations and dreams, our loneliness, grief, sin and betrayal into himself, for us and for our salvation.

The second option is to focus on a few verses of scripture that draw out a particular element of the story—a character, moment, or element of the passion narrative. Here are a few suggestions:

- Answer the question "What happened?" Why do the crowds shouting Hosanna at the beginning of the service call for his death at the end? The temptation is to see the first crowd as "us" and the second crowd as "them." The passion becomes more

personal when the sins that send our Lord to his death are the sins that he redeems.

- Develop the image of the “face.” Jesus sets his “face towards Jerusalem.” Isaiah says “he did not hide his face” and “set his face like flint.” Jesus’ face is full of love and compassion at the last supper, contorted with desperate grief in the garden, and wracked with horrible pain on the cross. Where do we see the different faces of God in the world around us?
- Focus on the peaceable kingdom in the midst of a bloody world. While the blood and gore of Mel Gibson’s crucifixion scenes in *The Passion of the Christ* may be over the top, the movie highlights Jesus’ command to his disciples to “put away the sword.” Jesus Christ does not counter violence with violence and does not allow his followers to either.
- Take us to the moment of Peter’s triune denial at the hands of a little servant girl. How does the foundation of the church cave so easily? Who, or what, causes us to fall from our creed when the chips are on the line? If your Holy Thursday sermon will focus on the institution of the Lord’s Supper, this could be a creative way to draw out our connection with Peter the rock.
- Do a Good Friday “lite” sermon. In our day the cross has become domesticated. It has become a cultural tool or symbol, something we manipulate for our own purposes. Push the congregation to see the cross as something we receive rather than use, something we bear rather than hang on the wall. Preach the cross as the Jesus way of life and the pathway to reconciliation with God and one another.