

As We Begin Holy Week...

When I think of Holy Week at CUPC, I think of the children parading around the sanctuary with palms. Sharing the Lord's Supper with our brothers and sisters at the Methodist and AME churches. Joining with people from our community in our own sanctuary as we extinguish candles and turn the lights off until we are sitting in darkness as we remember the arrest, trial, crucifixion, and death of Jesus Christ. And then the Easter cantata, that brings together our own congregation as well as many visitors.

But this year, we can't do that. Right now, along with many in our country, we are staying home and away from others as much as possible to help keep our hospitals from overflowing. It's surreal. The streets are almost empty. There are daily press conferences. Phrases like "social distancing" and "flattening the curve" are commonplace in our vocabulary. And to think...less than a month ago, we were enjoying breakfast together before Lenten Sunday school, and then shaking hands and hugging each other as we walked into the sanctuary to worship. So much has changed.

But Jesus has not. I don't mean to sound trite—it's easy to rattle off "God is in control" yet still feel like the rug has been pulled out from under you. But Jesus has not changed. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have not changed. And though our means of worship has changed, the *fact* that we worship has not.

Going from Palm Sunday "Hosanna!" to Easter Sunday "He Is Risen" without observing Holy Week deprives us of an important part of our faith. We move from celebration to celebration and miss the teaching, the gathering of the disciples, the betrayal, the arrest, the trial, the crucifixion, and the death of Jesus.

This is why I have put this Holy Week newsletter together. (I am using larger font because several of our members use large-print devotionals, and this keeps them all the same.) On Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday, we will have our usual Facebook Live service at 10:30am. But from Monday-Friday we will walk through Holy Week together even though we have to stay apart. Please join me—read the passage in advance, read the accompanying devotional, and then join me Monday-Friday evenings on Facebook Live at 7pm as we look more deeply at each night's theme. (Studies will be posted on our YouTube channel each night by 8:30pm.)

With you on the journey,

Anne

Monday — Jesus Clears the Temple

Read Matthew 21:12-17

Join me on Facebook Live @ 7pm

On Monday morning of Holy Week, Jesus went with his disciples to Jerusalem. Along the way, he cursed a fig tree because it had failed to bear fruit. When Jesus arrived at the Temple, he found the courts full of corrupt money changers. He was angry—one of the few times we see Jesus angry—and he overturned the tables. But his anger was a righteous anger, as they were turning the house of prayer into a place of profit.

That evening, Jesus stayed in Bethany again.

— adapted from Holy Week Timeline by Mary Fairchild

The first place Jesus came to was the outer courts, which was a massive area of open space for people to pray. But there was something else going on. The courts were filled with merchants selling animals for people to sacrifice in the temple. Not only that, they were doing it dishonestly. Every person who came to offer sacrifices had to have their animal inspected to be sure that it passed the criteria for sacrifices—most importantly, it had to be unblemished. The priests who were inspecting would look for reasons not to pass the animals. Then people would then be forced to buy an “acceptable” animal at inflated prices, sometimes twice the amount the animals were worth. And, of course, the priests got a cut from the merchants.

Jesus was angry—this is the only time we really see his anger. He overturned their tables and benches, drove out the moneychangers and merchants, removing the problem and placing prayer back in the place it rightfully belonged. As we know, Jesus placed a high priority on prayer throughout His personal ministry. Over and over again we see Jesus teaching about prayer and praying to the Father several times.

Of course, Jesus wants the church to be a place of ministry, but if we want Christ to bless our ministry efforts, we must first be committed to prayer. Ministry is good, but we don't want to fill our time *doing* things. Never have we understood that as well as we do now. Programs are cancelled, and ministry has a new look — phone calls, texts, live-streaming. One of the first things I sent out to you was our congregational prayer list and prayer resources, because that is the most important thing. Though we have some different needs, we all are going through this pandemic together. We all need prayer.

Tuesday — The Withered Fig Tree

Read Matthew 21:18-46

Join me on Facebook Live @ 7pm

On Tuesday morning of Holy Week, Jesus and his disciples returned to Jerusalem. As they passed the now-withered fig tree, Jesus gave a lesson about faith. When they arrived at the Temple, they found the religious leaders up in arms because of what Jesus was saying about his authority—who was this man who claimed to fulfill scripture? Later, Jesus went with his disciples to the Mount of Olives and talked about the end of the age. This was also the day Judas Iscariot went to the Sanhedrin to betray Jesus. Jesus and the disciples returned to Bethany to stay the night.

— adapted from Holy Week Timeline by Mary Fairchild

The passage about the fig tree seems...strange. But it is important for us to understand as we go through Holy Week, as the lesson is about where we place our faith.

Jesus traveled from Bethany to Jerusalem and came upon a fig tree. He was hungry and hoping to find figs on the tree. There were leaves but no fruit, so Jesus cursed the tree. That seems odd.

Once we understand fig trees, though, it makes a little more sense. Fig trees produce leaves and early figs at about the same time. Those figs weren't as sweet as the later ones that were harvested, but there should have been some early fruit if there were leaves. Finding "only" leaves meant something was wrong.

But why would Jesus curse the tree? The action was symbolic. The leaves (external) meant there should have been figs (fruit) as well. But it was false advertising—it was inconsistent. Therefore, those who pretended to be religious but weren't...would be cursed.

Some people of Israel felt that because they were the chosen people in the Old Testament, they would get into heaven by keeping the law and doing their good works. And remember how Jesus called the Pharisees whitewashed tombs? They were clean on the outside (leaves), but on the inside they were dark and dead (no fruit). Jesus was saying that it wasn't about the law, or about how good we looked on the outside. What mattered was where we placed our faith. When people look at us, can they see the fruit in our lives that is consistent with the fact we call ourselves Christians?

Wednesday — The Ten Bridesmaids

Read Matthew 25:1-13

Join me on Facebook Live @ 7pm

We don't know what Jesus did on the Wednesday of Holy Week. Jesus and his disciples may have rested in Bethany in anticipation of Passover. Because Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead there, many people had placed their faith in him. He was welcome there, and he may have stayed with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

— adapted from Holy Week Timeline by Mary Fairchild

Today, since we assume this is a day Jesus rested, I wanted to talk about one of my favorite passages—the ten bridesmaids. Five of them were prepared, and five ran out of oil. What does it mean for us to store up “oil” in our lives of faith?

The bridegroom was delayed—Jesus hasn't returned to earth yet. But when he comes...will we be prepared? In other words, do we continue to cultivate a close relationship with Christ or are we satisfied with simply professing Christ as Lord and Savior and getting our ticket to heaven? One passage we looked at in Bible study last week was the parable of the sower—the seed fell on a path, a rocky place, among thorns, and then finally...some fell on the good soil, where it produced fruit. As Christians, we want Christ to work through us as we seek to love our neighbor and help others through outreach and service.

Five of the bridesmaids had enough oil to light their lamps for a while. They looked good on the outside. They were doing what they were supposed to be doing, which was lighting the path (in Matthew 5 we are called to be salt and light). But they didn't have enough oil to sustain them.

The other five trimmed the wicks of their lamps, and most likely added oil at that point. They had extra with them. Meaning, they did not take their faith for granted. They cultivated a relationship with Christ.

What are ways we can do that as we are staying and home? Again, I realize many in our congregation are working at home or are still going to work—so by no means am I suggesting adding one more thing to already-busy schedules. But as we are inundated with news that is often fearful, what can we do to lean in to God?

A few ways:

- Spend time worshipping God daily with music. There is plenty of worship music free on the web, and many of you have your own collection. But this is a way to

Maundy Thursday — The Last Supper

Read Matthew 26:17-30

Join me on Facebook Live @ 7pm

On Maundy Thursday, Jesus (still in Bethany) sent Peter and John ahead to the Upper Room in Jerusalem to make the preparations for the Passover Feast. That evening, Jesus washed his disciples' feet, demonstrating how believers should love one another. Then he shared the feast of Passover with his disciples, and established the Lord's Supper. Later, Jesus and the disciples went to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed in agony to God the Father. Late that evening in Gethsemane, Jesus was betrayed with a kiss by Judas Iscariot and arrested by the Sanhedrin. He was taken to Caiaphas, the High Priest, where the whole council had gathered to make their case against Jesus.

— adapted from Holy Week Timeline by Mary Fairchild

This is a Passover meal, the same meal faithful Jews celebrated every year. The Passover celebrated the deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt. The night before they left Egypt, God spared the lives of those who put (an unblemished) lamb's blood on their doorways. Though the disciples didn't understand the significance this night, Jesus would soon become the Passover Lamb, the sinless sacrifice for our sins.

In John's version of this night, Jesus washed the disciples' feet. Here, we move right to the table. One of you disciples, Jesus said, will betray me. He knew it was Judas, and Judas now knew that Jesus knew. Two days before, he had gone and negotiated a price with the Sanhedrin. How much will you pay me to betray him?

And then, we have what is known as the Last Supper. These are the words I speak before we partake together—and regrettably, we can't do this today. But here Jesus explains that this bread is his body, and the cup is the blood of the covenant, poured out for the forgiveness of sins. It is only through the blood of Jesus that we can be forgiven. Nothing we can do can earn it.

There was nothing significant about the bread and wine up until that point. Those were regular staples at a meal. But Jesus made them significant by reinterpreting them. This is my body. This is the blood of the covenant.

As Presbyterians, it is not about the elements—we can use regular bread and grape juice. It is about the act. Do this in remembrance of me.

Good Friday — The Death of Jesus
I will read Matthew 26:31-27:54 this evening
Join me on Facebook Live @ 7pm

Peter denied knowing Jesus three times before the rooster crowed. Judas Iscariot hanged himself. Jesus endured false accusations, beatings, and abandonment. He was sentenced to death by crucifixion. Soldiers tormented and mocked him. Jesus carried his cross to Calvary where Roman soldiers nailed him to the cross. At the ninth hour (3 p.m.), Jesus breathed his last and died. Friday evening, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea took Jesus' body down from the cross and laid it in a tomb.
— adapted from *Holy Week Timeline* by Mary Fairchild

The cross is placed on the ground and the man is placed on it with his shoulders against the wood. Someone drives a heavy nail through his wrists and deep into the wood. The cross is then lifted into place. The left foot is pressed backward against the right foot, and with both feet extended, toes down, a nail is driven through the arch of each, leaving the knees flexed.

As he sags down, fiery pain shoots along the fingers and up the arms. As he pushes himself upward to avoid his torment, he places the full weight on the nail through his feet. Again he feels the searing agony of the nail tearing through his feet. With these cramps comes the inability to push himself upward. He fights to raise himself in order to get even one small breath.

Hours of this—twisting cramps, intermittent partial asphyxiation, searing pain as he moves up and down against the rough timber of the cross. Then another agony begins: a deep, crushing pain deep in the chest as the pericardium slowly fills with serum and begins to compress the heart.

It is now almost over. The loss of tissue fluids has reached a critical level. The compressed heart is struggling to pump heavy, thick, sluggish blood into the tissues. The tortured lungs are making a frantic effort to gasp in small gulps of air. He can feel the chill of death creeping through his tissues. Finally, he can allow his body to die.

All this, the Bible records with the words, “And they crucified him.”

Author Unknown

Holy Saturday — The Transformation of Nicodemus

Read John 3:1-21; 7:45-52; 19:38-42

NO Facebook Live tonight

On Saturday, which was the Sabbath, Jesus' body was guarded by Roman soldiers. When the Sabbath ended, his body was treated for burial with spices purchased by Nicodemus. Nicodemus had lived as a secret follower of Jesus, afraid to make a public profession of faith because of his prominent position in the Jewish community. However, he now boldly carried 75-100lbs of spices to the tomb (a small fortune!), because he now knew that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah.

— adapted from Holy Week Timeline by Mary Fairchild

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, which was a 70-member Jewish ruling council. This group made the religious laws. This group harassed Jesus when he was teaching. This was the group that eventually put Jesus on trial.

Nicodemus first came to Jesus by night—he did not want to be seen with Jesus, but spiritually he also was living in darkness. Jesus taught him what it means to be born again. Nicodemus reappeared in chapter seven. The Pharisees wanted Jesus arrested...but then Nicodemus said, “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?” Nicodemus publicly stood up for him. He didn’t openly *agree* with Jesus, or say that he is the Son of God, but he said, in essence, “Let’s give this man a chance.”

And then we saw him in John 19, giving his all. Jesus had died, and Joseph of Arimathea came and removed his body. Nicodemus followed him, staggering under the weight of 100lbs of burial spices of myrrh and aloes. It was worth about \$10,000. By now, Nicodemus didn’t care who saw him or what they thought. He didn’t stop to count the cost. He was going to help bury his Savior.

Did he understand that Jesus would rise again from the dead? Perhaps not. But he did understand what it meant to live a life of extravagant devotion to Jesus. Physically, Nicodemus moved from skeptic to fully-devoted follower. Spiritually, he moved from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light and life. Are we extravagant followers, like Nicodemus was?

Join me tomorrow morning at 10:30am on Facebook Live as we hear the Easter story — Christ is Risen!