

“Walking with Jesus Along the Paths of His Passion”

Mark 14-15

March 29, 2015, Palm/Passion Sunday

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The Scripture readings and Meditations for Palm Sunday reflect the Passion portions of Holy Week. Five short meditations are woven in between the story of Jesus' Passion beginning with the Thursday night dinner in the Upper Room and ending with Jesus dying on the cross and being buried in a tomb. What follows are the Meditations and the Scripture readings beginning with Mark 14:1 and ending with Mark 15:47.

Meditation: Before the Plot Against Jesus

Palm Sunday was near enough the happiest day of Jesus' life. If you think about it, he did not have many happy days. He was whisked off as a baby to Egypt for safe keeping. He was hauled up to Nazareth when he was a young boy. It appears as though he missed his childhood. The single story in the Bible about his boyhood was when he was twelve and appeared lost to his parents. They found him in the Temple with the Hebrew scholars talking about his “Father’s business.” Sounds religious enough, but twelve year old boys are supposed to be boys, playing pranks, doing soccer and learning how to grow up.

As Holy Week draws us in the heavenly handwriting was on the wall. He sensed it was going to end in a final cataclysmic rejection. He kept saying to his disciples, “I am going to be rejected. Every last one of you are going to desert me.” “Never,” they said, “never!”

Well, we will see they are on the path, Jesus and his disciples on the path to Jerusalem from Jericho and there is no turning back. Pilate is concerned at the number of Passover pilgrims. Caiaphas and others are plotting hoping for someone to help them. A centurion is ready for the next execution. All eyes are on one figure—Jesus.

Let us enter his passion and observe. Let’s follow Jesus on his final journey, and maybe by observing him, we may learn how to make ours.

Reading:

It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; for they said, 'Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.'

While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. But some were there who said to one another in anger, 'Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three

hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.' And they scolded her. But Jesus said, 'Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.'

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give him money. So he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to him, 'Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?' So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, "The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?" He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.' So the disciples set out and went to the city, and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.

When it was evening, he came with the twelve. And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.' They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, 'Surely, not I?' He said to them, 'It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the bowl with me. For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.'

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, 'Take; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.'

When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

And Jesus said to them, 'You will all become deserters; for it is written, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered." But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.' Peter said to him, 'Even though all become deserters, I will not.' Jesus said to him, 'Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.' But he said vehemently, 'Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.' And all of them said the same.

Meditation: Before Jesus Prays in Gethsemane

It's nearly midnight when they leave the upper room and descend through the streets of the city. They pass the Lower pool and exit the Fountain Gate and walk out of Jerusalem. The roads are lined with the fires and tents of Passover pilgrims. Most are asleep, heavied with the evening meal. Those still awake think little of the band of men walking the path to the gardens on the Mt. of Olives.

Somewhere within the city walls the twelfth disciple darts down another path. His feet have been washed by the man he will betray. He runs to find Caiaphas.

Imagine, for a moment, yourself in this situation. Your final hour with a son or daughter about to be sent overseas. Your last moments with your dying spouse. One last visit with your parents. What do you say? What do you do? What words do you choose?

Disciples have always had a hard time staying awake with Jesus. Most of us approach Jesus' reality like the coal miners who used to take a canary down in the mines with them to test the air. When the canary started to die, it was time for the miners to surface and think things over. This kind of testing for self-interest is what usually drives our relationship with Jesus—but Jesus' passion continually surprises us. What words would you choose?

Jesus chose to pray. He chose to pray for us. "I am praying for all people who will believe in me." As Jesus stepped into the garden, you were in his prayers. As Jesus looked into heaven, you were in his vision. As Jesus dreamed of the day when we will be where he is, he saw you there. His final prayer was about you. His final passion was you.

As they sang hymns that might let us sing Hymn 97, *Go to Dark Gethsemane*.

Reading:

They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.' He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.' And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.' He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, 'Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.' And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. He came a third time and said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.'

Immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard." So when he came, he went up to him at once and said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him. Then they laid hands on him and arrested him. But one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to them, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled." All of them deserted him and fled.

A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.

They took Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes were assembled. Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the guards, warming himself at the fire. Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none. For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree. Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'" But even on this point their testimony did not agree. Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, "Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?" But he was silent and did not answer. Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" Jesus said, "I am; and 'you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power', and 'coming with the clouds of heaven.'"

Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?" All of them condemned him as deserving death. Some began to spit on him, to blindfold him, and to strike him, saying to him, "Prophesy!" The guards also took him over and beat him.

While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came by. When she saw Peter warming himself, she stared at him and said, "You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth." But he denied it, saying, "I do not know or understand what you are talking about." And he went out into the forecourt. Then the cock crowed. And the servant-girl, on seeing him, began again to say to the bystanders, "This man is one of them." But again he denied it. Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, "Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean." But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, "I do not know this man you are talking about." At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, "Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down and wept.

Meditation: Jesus before Pilate

The most famous trial in history is about to begin. The judge is nervous dressed in expensive clothes. His graying hair trimmed and face beardless. He is apprehensive about being thrust into a decision he can't avoid. Two soldiers lead Jesus down the stone stairs of the fortress into the broad courtyard. Shafts of morning sunlight stretch across the stone floor.

A regal chair is placed on a landing five steps up from the floor. Pilate ascends and takes his seat. The accused is placed below him. A convoy of robed religious leaders follows.

Pilate looks at the lone figure. "Doesn't look like a king," he mutters.

Something about the country rabbi appeals to Pilate. He's different from the leaders with the chest-length beards who one minute boasts of a sovereign God and the next beg for lower taxes. His eyes are not the fiery ones of the zealots who are such a pain in the *Pax Romana* he tries to keep. He's different, this up country Messiah.

Reading:

As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. Pilate asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' He answered him, 'You say so.' Then the chief priests accused him of many things. Pilate asked him again, 'Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.' But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. Then he answered them, 'Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. Pilate spoke to them again, 'Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?' They shouted back, 'Crucify him!' Pilate asked them, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Crucify him!' So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

Meditation: Before The Soldiers Make Fun of Jesus

Pilate's question is ours. "What will I do with this man Jesus?" You can reject him. That is an option. You can, as have many, decide that the idea of God becoming a carpenter is too bizarre—and walk away.

Or you can accept him. You can walk the paths with him. You can listen for his voice amidst the hundreds of voices and follow him.

Pilate could have. He heard many voices that day—he could have heard Jesus' voice. Had Pilate chosen to respond to this bruised Messiah, his story would have been different.

When you talk about what Jesus gave up for us, Good Friday comes to mind, when he gave up his life! But he gave up an awful lot before that. He had no family, no children, no one who understood him, no business success. He never wrote a book; he never made a dollar. He sacrificed everything. Religious leaders ridiculed him and turned the crowds against him ... and you know the rest. The prophecy, "A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief," came true. I hope he had one close dear friend that he could talk to and believe in; but if so, it is not mentioned in the pages of the gospels. It ends with a somber note, "They all forsook him and fled."

Reading:

Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. And they began saluting him, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. The inscription of the charge against him read, 'The King of the Jews.' And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!' In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.' Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'Listen, he is calling for Elijah.' And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.' Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where the body was laid.

Meditation: Final Thoughts—the Hidden Thoughts

At the heart of the Christian symbol of the cross has been a kind of paradigm of human suffering—wherein bodies are destroyed, minds ravaged, and spirits broken, in the agonies of human history when people subjugate peoples, families are rent asunder by abuse and starvation and everywhere there is a relentless dying. This is not the kind of suffering that can be romanticized. This is the kind of suffering that one person called “affliction”—for it is always both physical and spiritual. In its ultimate forms this kind of suffering includes experience of God—forsakenness that makes one cry out as Jesus did: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

It is hard for us to imagine that Jesus was buried there in a tomb. Not Jesus, anyone but Jesus, right? No, he died as we all will die and was buried. God put himself in a dark, tight room and allowed them to seal it shut. The Light of the World was shut away. The Hope of Humanity was locked in a tomb.

The next time you find yourself entombed in a darkened world of fear, remember that. The next time pain boxes you in a world of horror, remember the tomb. The next time a stone seals your exit to peace, think about the musty tomb outside of Jerusalem.