

# HOLY WEEK WORSHIP PLANNING GUIDE

YEAR A

THE HOLY WEEK GOSPELS

'THE USELESS KING'



2026

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**GOD'S WORD IS LIFE**

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## INTRODUCTION

Let us be frank: humanity has always preferred useful gods.

We want a divinity who provides measurable outcomes. A deity who can secure borders, stabilize markets, guarantee health, and endorse our private moral résumé.

And then comes this Galilean.

When confronted with actual power, he declines to use it. When accused, he refuses the obvious rhetorical defense. When handed the opportunity to demonstrate authority in spectacular fashion, he demurs.

If this is kingship, it is a laughable parody.

One can almost sympathize with the exasperation of the Sanhedrin, Pontius Pilate and the people. Each demands something practical. Something effective. Something, in a word, useful.

But as Holy Week unfolds, the Lord's posture is a sustained refusal of usefulness.

Instead, the king allows himself to be tried, mocked, flogged, abandoned and executed. The supposed Lord of All hangs between petty criminals while bureaucrats wash their hands, theologians congratulate themselves on keeping the law, and his followers are nowhere to be found.

If one were constructing a religion designed to inspire confidence in divine utility, this would not be the blueprint. He came to be crucified. Jesus did not come to be useful in the law. And that is the offense.

Yet it is here, precisely here, that the divine purpose is revealed. For what appears useless to our calculations is mercy for the guilty. And in this world, mercy is not useful. It is dangerous.

A useful king would have negotiated with our competence, reinforced the strong and corrected the weak, asked something of us first.

But this king asks nothing of us because he knows what we are.

He sees the frightened loyalty of Palm Sunday, the betrayal of Maundy Thursday, and the cowardly violence of Friday. He knows the disciple who swears fidelity will soon swear ignorance. He knows the priests are afraid, Pilate is anxious, the crowd is unstable, and the human heart is divided against itself. He knows us. And still, he does not withdraw.

On the cross, he absorbs the verdict we fear. The law speaks its full accusation, and he does not silence it. He receives it, bears its full weight.

And when he cries out in abandonment, he enters the God-forsakenness we dread to name. The king who will not be useful to our projects becomes indispensable to our salvation. He does not come to assist the living in improving themselves. He comes to the dead. And dead people do not need improvement. They need resurrection.

Holy Week, then, is the unveiling of a hope that does not depend on us. The throne of this king is a cross. His reign is forgiveness. His power is not coercion but self-giving love. His victory is not survival but surrender. And when the stone is rolled away, it will not be to announce that the experiment succeeded.

It will declare that mercy has the final word. The Useless King saves precisely because he refuses to save Himself. For when it comes to salvation, the Lord of All is not useless.

We are.

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## PALM SUNDAY, MATTHEW 21:1–11

### Greek Text Study

#### Six Key Terms That Carry the Theology

##### 1. ἤγγισαν (v.1) “They drew near”

ἤγγισαν (aorist of ἐγγίζω) means “to draw near, approach.”

Matthew has already used this verb programmatically:

ἤγγικεν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν

“The kingdom of heaven has drawn near.” (3:2; 4:17)

Now the King himself *draws near* to Jerusalem. The movement is theological: what was proclaimed as near in chapter 4 is now physically arriving in chapter 21. The kingdom is not an abstraction; it comes embodied in the Son.

##### 2. πληρωθῆ (v.4) — “Might be fulfilled”

ἵνα πληρωθῆ τὸ ῥηθὲν διὰ τοῦ προφήτου

“In order that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled.”

πληρωθῆ (aorist passive subjunctive of πληρόω) is one of Matthew’s signature verbs.

Important features:

- **Passive voice** — God is the implied actor (a “divine passive”).
- **Subjunctive with ἵνα** — purpose/result.

This entry is not accidental enthusiasm. It is scripturally determined. Matthew roots the moment in the Book of Zechariah 9:9.

The king arrives as promise.

### 3. βασιλεύς (v.5) – “King”

ἰδοὺ ὁ βασιλεύς σου  
“Behold, your king”

**βασιλεύς** is politically charged. In Roman Judea, there is one king, Caesar.

But notice:

- It is ὁ βασιλεύς σου – *your* king.
- Covenant language. Intimacy. Claim.

Matthew places royal identity at the forefront before the Passion begins. The irony is already thick: the true king enters the city that will execute him.

### 4. πραῦς (v.5) – “Gentle / Meek”

πραῦς καὶ ἐπιβεβηκῶς ἐπὶ ὄνον  
“Gentle and mounted on a donkey”

**πραῦς** is decisive.

Matthew already used it in:

- 5:5 – “Blessed are the meek”
- 11:29 – “I am gentle and lowly in heart”

The king is defined by the same word that describes the blessed. **πραῦς** suggests controlled strength, power without aggression. It is not weakness; it is non-retaliatory authority.

Matthew’s Messiah does not conquer Jerusalem; he submits to it.

### 5. ὠσαννά (v.9) – “Hosanna”

ὠσαννά τῷ υἱῷ Δαυὶδ

**ὠσαννά** transliterates Hebrew – “Save, please!”

By the first century it functioned as both plea and praise.

The crowd cries for salvation, but more likely imagines political rescue.

Matthew heightens the tension:

- They shout “Hosanna!”
- Soon they will shout “Σταυρωθήτω!” (“Crucify him!” 27:22)

The word of praise contains within it the instability of misguided expectation.

#### **6. ἐσείσθη (v.10) — “Was shaken”**

ἐσείσθη πᾶσα ἡ πόλις

“The whole city was shaken”

**ἐσείσθη** (aorist passive of *σειώ*) means “to shake, quake.”

Matthew uses the same verb:

- 27:51 — the earth quakes at Jesus’ death
- 28:4 — the guards tremble at the resurrection

Palm Sunday is framed in seismic language. The city trembles at his arrival just as creation trembles at his crucifixion. The shaking signals eschatological disruption.

## **Palm Sunday**

### **A Commentary on Matthew 21:1–11**

#### **Verses 1–3 — The Deliberate Approach**

*“As they approached Jerusalem...”*

The first movement is toward the city. Jesus is not swept into events. He directs them. He sends disciples ahead. He arranges for the colt. He orchestrates the moment. This is not a spontaneous parade. It is intention.

Already we see something crucial: the Passion does not happen to Jesus. He is not drawn into it. He walks into it.

The borrowed animal is telling. The king who owns nothing commands everything. He does not need visible resources to exercise authority. A simple word is enough. There is quiet sovereignty here. Hidden, if you will.

#### **Verses 4–5 — Fulfillment, Not Improvisation**

*“This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet...”*

Matthew wants us to see that this is promise unfolding, not theater. The citation from Book of Zechariah declares:

*“See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey.”*

Not mounted for war. Gentle. This word is decisive. It reframes kingship itself. The king does not approach with coercion. He approaches with vulnerability.

And that vulnerability is not weakness. It is descriptive of Christ’s mission.

#### **Verses 6–8 — The Crowd’s Enthusiasm**

The disciples obey. The cloaks are laid down. Branches are cut. The road becomes a carpet.

The crowd does what crowds do when hope surges. They enact expectation physically. They make the moment larger than life. Collective emotion always inflates the moment, for good or ill.

But notice: nothing in the text suggests Jesus encourages the spectacle. He receives it, but he does not escalate it.

There is a tension here. The people are right to celebrate. He is the king. And yet they celebrate a kingship they do not yet understand. And that misunderstanding is dangerous.

### **Verse 9 — The Cry of “Hosanna”**

*“Hosanna to the Son of David!”*

“Hosanna” means, “Save us.” It is prayer wrapped in praise. The title “Son of David” signals royal hope. They are reaching for messianic fulfillment. They are invoking ancient promises of restoration.

But the content of their salvation is unspoken — and therein lies the danger. They likely imagine national deliverance. They are crying out for rescue.

What they do not yet see is that rescue will not look like conquest. It will look like crucifixion. The irony is painful: the right words can carry the wrong assumptions.

### **Verse 10 — The Shaken City**

*“When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred...”*

The word suggests shaking, agitation. The city trembles. This is not peaceful acceptance. It is disturbance. Jerusalem senses that something disruptive has entered its gates.

Religious equilibrium is about to be unsettled. Power structures feel pressure. Whenever the gospel arrives, systems tremble. The question arises: “Who is this?”

It is the central question.

### **Verse 11 — The Incomplete Answer**

*“This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee.”*

Not king. Not Messiah. Prophet. The answer is not false but it is insufficient.

To call him prophet is to reduce him to messenger. But he is more than one who speaks God’s word. He is the Word made flesh.

Misunderstanding overshadows Holy Week. The city that cheers does know whom it is cheering.

To make of Jesus anything less than the Word made flesh is to prefer a Jesus who talks about God to a Jesus who is God for us. A prophet leaves us with instruction. The Word made flesh leaves us with himself.

## **THE KING WE DID NOT ORDER**

### **Sermon for Palm Sunday**

#### **Matthew 21:1–11**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Human beings are tireless manufacturers of deliverance. We produce deliverance schemes with astonishing consistency. Political rescue, economic rescue, therapeutic rescue, relational rescue. We speak constantly of “change,” “renewal,” “restoration.” The vocabulary varies; the impulse does not.

But our longing carries a clause hidden in the fine print. We want deliverance on our terms.

History is littered with movements that began with hosannas. Crowds swell quickly when the promise of rescue aligns neatly with expectation. We are not difficult to mobilize when someone appears useful to our hopes. And that is precisely what makes Palm Sunday so searching.

The crowds cry, “Hosanna to the Son of David!”

Save us. Please.

There is nothing wrong with the plea. It is deeply biblical. It is human.

But what they mean by “save” is the question.

They see a man who heals, who speaks with authority, who unsettles religious elites, who draws crowds. They see possibility. They see momentum. They see the faint outline of a throne. They do not yet see a cross.

So, they spread cloaks. They cut branches. They lift ancient psalms into the air like banners. The city trembles with excitement. The air feels charged with destiny.

And in rides Jesus on a borrowed donkey.

If ever there were a moment to project strength, this would be it. If ever there were a moment to clarify a platform, consolidate supporters, ignite revolution, this would be the time. Instead, he comes gently. And that gentleness is the great offense. Because gentleness does not fit our blueprint for deliverance. This is the King we did not order. He does not enter Jerusalem to seize it. He enters to surrender in it. He does not come to overthrow Rome. He comes to be handed over to Rome by his own people. He does not mobilize resistance. He absorbs rejection. And yet, this is not weakness. This is divine resolve. To our eyes? Madness.

But Jesus is not caught in events. He directs them. He arranges the colt. He fulfills the prophet. He knows exactly what lies beyond the city gate. He rides toward his own execution. Why?

Because the deliverance we think we need is not the deliverance we actually require. We assume our primary problems are external: corrupt leaders, the wrong politics, unstable systems, hostile forces. And those things can wound and trouble us.

But Scripture dares to expose something deeper. That beneath the politics and the volatility lies a more ancient fracture: the human heart curved inward, bent toward self-justification, fearful, anxious for control, allergic to mercy, to grace, to gentleness. So, the King rides in not to confirm our expectations but to dismantle them. He comes not to strengthen our illusions but to expose them. He comes not to save us from discomfort but to save us from ourselves.

That is why Palm Sunday contains such tragedy.

Because a king who refuses to save himself cannot be used by us.

And we do prefer a useful God.

But this king will not negotiate.

He rides in knowing the volatility of human expectations. He rides in knowing that our praise is fragile. He rides in knowing that betrayal always waits in the shadow of every heart.

He rides in anyway.

That is the mercy of Christ.

He comes to us with our conditional hosannas and our carefully edited hopes and he does not turn back. He brings forgiveness as an act accomplished through suffering freely embraced. He will not descend from the cross to prove his power. He will remain on it to defeat sin, death and the power of evil. And to prove his love.

This King who saves by Word and water, bread and wine, saves you whether you ordered him or not. Palm Sunday is not an invitation to admire his humility or improve your hosannas; it is the announcement that your deliverance does not depend on your understanding, your stability, or your terms.

He rides into your sin knowing it killed him, and he rides in anyway. You do not need a useful God to assist your projects; you need a crucified King who lets your pride, your illusions, and your self-justifying religion do their worst to him and exhaust themselves there. The Law has its say at the cross; your negotiations end; and when there is nothing left to leverage or defend, there is Christ, given for you. Not useful. Given. The King you did not order is the King you have been given. In him, forgiveness has already arrived – for you.

May the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds  
in Christ Jesus our Lord.

## MAUNDY THURSDAY - MATTHEW 26:17–30

### Greek Text Study The Last Supper

#### 1. πάσχα (v.17) — “Passover”

Ποῦ θέλεις ἐτοιμάσωμέν σοι φαγεῖν τὸ πάσχα;

**πάσχα** anchors the meal in Israel’s exodus story. It is the feast of deliverance. The night of judgment passing over because of blood. Matthew wants no ambiguity: what is happening is not a generic farewell dinner. It is Passover.

The old deliverance frames the new one. Egypt stands in the background. So does blood.

#### 2. παραδίδοται (v.21) — “Is being handed over”

εἷς ἐξ ὑμῶν παραδώσει με  
“One of you will hand me over.”

The verb **παραδίδωμι** means “to hand over, deliver up, betray.” Notably, in the broader Passion narrative, the same verb is used for:

- Judas handing Jesus over,
- The leaders handing him to Pilate,
- God handing him over (implicitly).

The word carries both treachery and divine purpose. What looks like betrayal is also part of a larger handing-over that will culminate at the cross.

#### 3. διαθήκη (v.28) — “Covenant”

τοῦτο γάρ ἐστιν τὸ αἷμά μου τῆς διαθήκης  
“This is my blood of the covenant.”

**διαθήκη** can mean covenant or testament.

At Sinai, covenant blood sealed Israel to God. Here, Jesus speaks of a new covenant reality not sealed by animal sacrifice, but by his own blood.

The relationship between God and his people is being reconstituted around the Christ.

#### 4. ἐκχυννόμενον (v.28) — “Being poured out”

τὸ περὶ πολλῶν ἐκχυννόμενον

“Which is being poured out for many.”

The present passive participle signals impending action. The blood is “being poured out”, already interpreted in sacrificial terms before the crucifixion occurs.

The imagery evokes:

- Sacrificial libation,
- Isaiah’s Suffering Servant (cf. Isa 53:12 LXX).

The meal anticipates the cross.

#### 5. ἄφεσις (v.28) — “Forgiveness”

εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν

“For the forgiveness of sins.”

**ἄφεσις** means release, remission, cancellation.

It is the word used earlier in Matthew 1:21 — “He will save his people from their sins.” Now the means is named. The blood is not symbolic encouragement. It effects forgiveness. The death of Jesus accomplishes release.

The purpose clause (εἰς ἄφεσιν) makes the goal explicit: the cross is about sin.

#### 6. καινὸν (v.29) — “New”

οὐ μὴ πίω... ἕως τῆς ἡμέρας ἐκείνης

ὅταν αὐτὸ πίω μεθ’ ὑμῶν καινὸν

“Until that day when I drink it new with you...”

**καινός** means new in kind, not merely recent.

This looks forward. The Supper stands between cross and consummation. There is a future drinking in the renewed fellowship in the kingdom. The meal is both sacrificial and eschatological.

## **Maudy Thursday**

### **Commentary on Matthew 26:17–30**

#### **Verses 17–19 — Preparing the Passover**

The disciples ask, “Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the Passover?”

It sounds practical and quite ordinary. But Passover is never merely ordinary. It is the feast of deliverance. Blood on doorposts, judgment passing over, a people walking free because a lamb has died. And now Jesus directs the preparations himself. He is not drifting toward tragedy. He is arranging it. The room is prepared. The table is set. The old story of rescue is about to be fulfilled in a way none of them yet understands.

#### **Verses 20–21 — Betrayal at the Table**

“As they were eating, he said, ‘Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.’”

The announcement lands in the middle of supper. And it does not land gently. The law never does.

One of you.

The betrayal is not outside the circle. It is within.

And they are deeply distressed. One by one they ask, “Surely not I, Lord?”

The text does not allow us to isolate Judas comfortably. The fragility of faith is shared. The capacity to fall is universal.

And yet Jesus does not cancel the meal.

#### **Verses 22–25 — The Traitor Named**

“The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me.”

Intimacy becomes the setting for treachery. This is an old story, often told.

“The Son of Man goes as it is written of him.”

There is mystery here. Human guilt and divine purpose interwoven. Judas acts freely and wickedly. Yet the path of the Son is not accidental. He walks where Scripture foretold he would walk.

“Woe to that man...”

Sin is real. Responsibility is real. But the narrative does not turn into a theological lecture. It moves toward gift. Even Judas, the evil betrayer, remains at the table.

### **Verses 26–27 — The Bread and the Cup**

“While they were eating, Jesus took bread...”

He does not wait for the table to stabilize, because the tables where sinners sit are never stable. “This is my body.” No explanation. No metaphor unpacked. Just gift. Then the cup. “Drink from it, all of you.” All of you. There has never been a more defining moment of inclusion. The meal is not a reward for loyalty. It is mercy given in advance.

### **Verse 28 — The Meaning Declared**

“This is my blood of the covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

Here God’s purpose is named plainly. Forgiveness. Rescue. The covenant is not sealed with animal blood tonight. It is sealed with his own.

And notice the order: the promise of forgiveness is spoken before the arrest, before the cross, before the denial. The gift precedes the collapse. He gives himself to those who will fail him, while they are yet sinners. He gives himself to us.

### **Verse 29 — The Future Promise**

“I will not drink again... until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

There is horizon beyond the garden. Beyond the suffering and the cross. This meal stretches forward into the kingdom. There will be another table, another cup, a fellowship restored. But first, he must drink the bitter cup alone.

### **Verse 30 — The Hymn and the Night**

“And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.”

Christ sings with his sinners. The promise has already been spoken. The body and blood already given. Forgiveness already declared.

Now they walk into the dark. The Law will expose them before morning. The courtyard will hear their oaths of denial. The garden will witness their flight. But the promise has already been spoken.

**GIVEN BEFORE THE FALL**  
**Sermon for Maundy Thursday**  
**Matthew 26:17–30**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is striking that on the very night when everything begins to unravel, Jesus does not gather his disciples for strategy or defense, but for a supper, for the old Passover meal of deliverance, as though what is about to happen is not an interruption of God's plan but its fulfillment.

And while they recline at the table, the bread within reach and the cup already poured, he speaks quietly of betrayal, not in the abstract but in the room itself: "One of you will hand me over." And the question passes around the table not as accusation but as fear: "Is it I, Lord?" Because somewhere beneath bravado each one knows how fragile his loyalty really is.

And that question does not remain in that upper room. It crosses the centuries. It enters this room. Because if we are honest, we know something of divided hearts, of promises made and broken, of faith and devotion that evaporate under pressure. The Law presses us here. It does not allow us to stand at a safe distance from Judas or Peter. It asks, quietly but relentlessly: *Is it I?* And the truthful answer is not flattering. *Yes, it is.* Our faith is thinner than we pretend. Our courage is conditional. Our love is unstable.

And yet, before a single disciple runs, before Peter denies, before Judas kisses him in the garden, Jesus takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it, saying, "This is my body," and then the cup, "This is my blood of the covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

And the order matters. The gift comes before the failure, the promise before the collapse, the new testament before the scattering. The Lord does not wait to see who will remain faithful. He does not retract the meal when he names the traitor. He does not postpone forgiveness until repentance has proven itself. He gives himself into the hands of those who will soon let him go, in fear and abandonment.

The Passover once remembered blood on doorposts shielding Israel from judgment, but now the blood is placed into their hands and pressed to their lips; not as memory alone but as covenant, as new testament, as declaration that forgiveness will not depend on their steadiness but on his surrender.

Tomorrow he will drink a different cup. He will drink the cup of wrath. And he will drink it alone.

Here the Gospel stands unmistakably clear. Your betrayal does not surprise him. Your weakness does not revoke the promise. Your failure does not nullify the promise that God made to you in your baptism. The Law exposes you at the table but the Gospel feeds you there. The same mouth that asks in fear, "Is it I?" is invited to eat and drink. The same hands that will scatter are given his body. The same lips that will deny are given his blood.

And after he has spoken this promise, knowing full well that darkness is already moving toward the garden, they sing a hymn and walk out into the night, carrying in their mouths the very body and blood that will hold them when everything else gives way. The same Lord who carries you.

Maundy Thursday is not about gathering around our shared devotion. It is about the strange, stubborn devotion of God in Christ, who gives himself to a broken community, who binds forgiveness to bread and wine so that when our vows disintegrate and our courage thins, there remains something outside of us, solid and spoken, given and poured out, not because we hold fast, but because he does.

Tonight, therefore, you do not leave with instruction. You leave with Christ, whose body and blood are given for you, for the forgiveness of your sins.

May the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in  
Christ Jesus our Lord.

# GOOD FRIDAY

## Greek Text Study

### Matthew 27

#### 1. ἔνοχος (v. 4) – “Guilty”

Judas confesses:

ἡμαρτον παραδούς αἷμα ἀθῶον

“I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.”

Though the specific adjective ἀθῶον (innocent) appears here, the trial context circles around guilt. Jesus is declared worthy of death, yet even Judas names his innocence. Matthew’s irony sharpens: the innocent one stands in the place of the guilty. The judicial machinery condemns the only truly righteous man in the room.

#### 2. βασιλεὺς (vv. 11, 29, 37) – “King”

Σὺ εἶ ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων;

The title “King” becomes accusation and mockery:

- Pilate’s interrogation,
- The soldiers’ parody coronation,
- The inscription above the cross.

Kingship is not denied. It is derided. The crucifixion becomes a grotesque enthronement scene: robe, crown, scepter, proclamation.

Matthew presents the cross not as contradiction of kingship, but its revelation.

#### 3. σταυρωθῆναι / ἐσταύρωσαν (vv. 22-23, 35) – “Crucify”

From σταυρόω – to crucify.

The crowd cries:

Σταυρωθήτω!

“Let him be crucified!”

The passive imperative expresses demand; the active verb later describes the act. Crucifixion is Roman execution for rebels and slaves. The supreme display of public humiliation. Matthew does not embellish the suffering; he states it starkly. There was absolutely nothing religious about this moment. The horror lies in the fact itself.

The Messiah’s enthronement is crucifixion.

#### 4. ἐγκατέλιπες (v. 46) — “You have forsaken”

Θεέ μου, Θεέ μου, ἵνατί με ἐγκατέλιπες;

From ἐγκαταλείπω — to abandon, forsake.

This cry from Psalm 22 is the theological abyss of the chapter. The one called “Son of God” experiences abandonment. Matthew does not soften it. Darkness covers the land. The cry is loud. There is no immediate consolation in the text.

Here the Passion reaches its deepest mystery: the righteous one enters God-forsakenness.

#### 5. ἐσχίσθη (v. 51) — “Was torn”

καὶ ἰδοὺ τὸ καταπέτασμα τοῦ ναοῦ ἐσχίσθη

“And behold, the veil of the temple was torn.”

ἐσχίσθη (aorist passive of σχίζω) signals decisive divine action.

The tearing of the temple veil signifies access opened, judgment rendered, old barriers ruptured. The passive voice implies God as actor.

The cross is not defeat. It is cosmic rupture. God in Christ has entered death to defeat it from within.

## **Good Friday**

### **Commentary on Matthew 27**

#### **Verses 1–2 — The Morning Decision**

“When morning came...”

The leaders bind Jesus and deliver him to Pilate. The night trial becomes daylight policy. Religion hands him over to politics. The problem must be managed efficiently. Notice how controlled it feels. This is not mob violence yet. It is procedure. Administrative clarity. The King is bound. And yet, he is the only one not acting out of self-preservation and fear.

#### **Verses 3–10 — Judas and Innocent Blood**

Judas returns the silver. “I have sinned,” he says, “by betraying innocent blood.” The irony is unbearable. Judas sees the innocence of Jesus more clearly than the court does. He names what the system refuses to acknowledge. “Innocent blood.”

Matthew wants us to hear that phrase. The only righteous one in the room is condemned. Religion shrugs. “What is that to us?” The machinery moves on.

#### **Verses 11–14 — Before Pilate**

“Are you the King of the Jews?”

The question is direct. The title remains central. Jesus answers but refuses defense. He will not argue his case. He will not preserve himself. Pilate is amazed. He is accustomed, as we are, to leaders who grasp for survival. Here stands a king who does not. Silence itself becomes the sign of sovereignty.

#### **Verses 15–23 — Barabbas or Jesus**

The choice is offered: Barabbas or Jesus. A violent insurrectionist or a gentle, useless king. The crowd chooses the one who fights Rome’s way. The one who uses force. The one who looks useful.

“What shall I do with Jesus?”

“Crucify him.” The cry is chilling in its simplicity. Palm Sunday has evaporated.

### **Verse 24 — Washed Hands**

Pilate washes his hands. The gesture is theatrical innocence. But Matthew will not let us imagine that guilt can be rinsed away so easily. Everyone participates. Religion hands him over. Politics condemns him. Crowds demand blood. Soldiers execute. Humanity is unanimous in its verdict: Away with him.

### **Verses 27–31 — The Mock Coronation**

The soldiers stage a parody. Scarlet robe. Crown of thorns. Reed scepter. It is cruel comedy. They kneel and mock and slap him around for good measure: “Hail, King of the Jews!” And yet, Matthew lets us see the deeper truth. This is a coronation, only not one we recognize or value. The thorns are fitting. The robe is fitting. The kingship is real. The throne will be a cross. In dying he will reign triumphant.

### **Verses 32–44 — The Crucifixion**

They crucify him. There is no graphic description. The ancients required no elaboration of an event that was all too familiar. Just the fact of it was enough.

Above his head: “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.” The charge is meant to ridicule. But it remains the truest sentence in the chapter. The mockers repeat the final temptation: “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.”

Here is the heart of the matter. Satan throws the word one last time. “If”.

Come down.

Prove it.

But if he comes down, we remain under judgment. The refusal to come down is the act of salvation. “He saved others; he cannot save himself.”

No. He *will not* save himself.

### **Verses 45–50 — Darkness and the Cry**

At noon, darkness falls unexpectedly. Creation participates in the suffering.

And then the cry: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

The King enters abandonment with lament. No visible comfort answers him. No immediate reversal interrupts the darkness. He stands where sinners stand under the wrath and silence of God. This is not divine theater. This is death, real and raw.

### **Verse 51 — The Veil Torn**

And then he dies. And the veil of the temple is torn from top to bottom. The barrier between holy and unholy is ruptured. The direction matters: from top to bottom. God acts. The cross does not close access. It opens it. Access to grace is secured.

### **Verses 52–54 — Earthquake and Confession**

The earth shakes. Tombs open. The centurion confesses:

“Truly this was the Son of God.” The first full confession comes not from his disciples, but from an executioner. At the foot of the cross, clarity dawns. Not through triumph but through death. It is there, in the shadow of judgment, that faith is born not from spectacle, but from the trembling recognition that this suffering One stands in our place.

The cross does not dazzle the eye; it pierces the heart, and in that wound, hope begins to breathe.

### **Verses 57–66 — The Tomb**

The body is buried. The stone is rolled into place. Guards are posted. The system believes it has secured the outcome. The useless King lies in a borrowed tomb, as he once rode a borrowed donkey.

It appears finished.

And it is.

But not in defeat, in accomplishment at the right time, for the ungodly.

## **THE KING WHO STAYS**

### **Sermon for Good Friday**

### **Matthew 27**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

There is something in us that still believes God must justify himself. That is the logic of Good Friday. It is not spoken only by soldiers or passersby. It is spoken by the human heart. “Come down from the cross.”

Prove it. Demonstrate it. Vindicate yourself in a way that leaves no doubt. But the cross refuses that logic.

Good Friday is not the story of a promising movement collapsing. It is not the tragedy of a misunderstood prophet. It is the place where God ends the argument by submitting to it. The King is handed over. Bound. Accused. Mocked. Stripped. Nailed.

Religion finds him dangerous. Politics finds him inconvenient. The crowd finds him disappointing. Everyone, in one way or another, finds him unusable. And so they crucify him.

We must not soften that word. Crucifixion is not poetic suffering. It is brutal, state-sponsored humiliation. It is meant to strip a man of dignity, of breath, of life. It is meant to demonstrate who rules. And there he hangs with the charge above his head: “King.”

Pilate meant to ridicule both Jesus and the Jews. But it is the truest sentence in the chapter. Because here is where his kingship is revealed. Not in descending with angels. But in staying.

“He saved others; he cannot save himself.”

That is not mockery. That is theology. If he saves himself, he does not save you. If he comes down, the verdict remains. You remain in your sin.

Good Friday is not about Roman cynicism and cruelty alone. It is about the collision between human righteousness and divine mercy. It is about the exposure of what we trust to justify ourselves and God’s useless mercy.

We want a God who assists our moral project. We want reinforcement for our virtue. We want strength added to our strength. The cross says no. The cross says your project ends here.

When darkness falls at noon, it is not simply atmospheric. It is revelation. The lights go out on every human claim to self-justification. The Law has its full say. Accusation reaches its limit.

And in the center of that darkness, the cry rises:

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

There is no quick explanation inserted. No visible answer descends. The Son enters abandonment. This is not performance. He stands where sinners stand, under accusation, under judgment, under the silence of God. The innocent one becomes the condemned under the verdict of the law.

We spend our lives trying to avoid that verdict. We deny it, disguise it, manage it, distract ourselves from it. We construct systems, identities, reputations, theologies, all to keep the verdict at bay.

Good Friday removes the disguise in a way law-gripped world cannot imagine.

The verdict falls but it does not fall on you. It falls on Christ Jesus. The innocent one is condemned. The righteous one is forsaken. The King is executed. And when he breathes his last, something tears. The veil splits from top to bottom. The direction matters. We do not tear our way to God. God tears his way to us.

Access is not achieved. It is opened by mercy. The barrier is not negotiated. It is ripped apart by grace.

The cross does not show you how to climb to reach God. It shows you how far in love he has descended to reach you. Down into betrayal. Into mockery. Into abandonment. Into death. For nothing short of death will end your old story, the old story where you justify yourself, where you defend your righteousness, where you negotiate terms with God.

Good Friday ends that story. The Law speaks its final word at the cross. And when it has finished speaking, when there is nothing left to accuse, nothing left to threaten. When the law has spent its last word, God will speak. That Word is Jesus Christ. Given for sinners, that they may be forgiven.

Given for you.

May the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds  
in Christ Jesus our Lord.

# EASTER SUNDAY

## THE USELESS KING LIVES

### Sermon for the Resurrection of Our Lord

#### Matthew 28:1–10

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We begin where Easter begins, and where we live; with fear. After the Sabbath, toward dawn, two women go to a cemetery. There is no expectation of miracle in their steps. They are going to mourn. To tend a dead body. This is how reality behaves. The stone is sealed. The guards are posted. Jesus is dead.

And then the earth shakes.

Heaven interrupts the normal arrangement. Death's machinery of control collapses. And the angel speaks the most unreasonable, audacious words ever uttered at a tomb: "He is not here. He has been raised."

No explanation. Just declaration.

Now let us be candid. Resurrection is not an idea that politely cooperates with modern sensibilities. You may wonder about it, too. Dead people do not rise. History does not reverse entropy.

And yet the text does not argue possibility. It proclaims what happened. The women are told, "Do not be afraid." Which is precisely what God persists in saying, all throughout Scripture, when fear is the only rational response.

Because if this is true, if the crucified one lives, then something more than a miracle of hope has occurred. A verdict has been vindicated. The Useless King lives.

Remember him? On Friday he appeared ineffective, disruptive, and he was publicly humiliated. A king without utility.

But Easter is not the correction of Good Friday. It is its confirmation. The resurrection is not God changing his mind about the cross. It is God declaring that the cross was a completion. "He has been raised."

That passive verb carries thunder in it. He did not resuscitate himself. He was raised. The Father has spoken. The judgment that fell on Friday has been answered not by reversal of the cross, but by vindication of the crucified Jesus.

This is where Easter becomes dangerous.

Because if the crucified Jesus lives, then the entire human project of self-justification collapses. The One the world declared useless has been enthroned. The One condemned has been declared righteous. The useless One who would not save himself has been vindicated as Lord of All.

The old self in us does not object to religion in general. It objects to mercy. It objects to being forgiven rather than improved. It would rather contribute something, add something, secure something, than receive a gift that exposes its helplessness.

The cross strips away our competence. It says you cannot fix this. You cannot negotiate this. You cannot redeem yourself. And that feels like uselessness.

Because mercy does not give us anything to manage.

It does not flatter our strength. It does not reward our effort. It does not make us indispensable. It renders us recipients.

The old sinner in each of us would rather have a project than a pardon.

But listen to what happens next.

The women leave “with fear and great joy.”

That combination is not accidental. Easter is not calm reassurance. It is holy disruption. Fear, because something ultimate has happened. Joy, because the One who was dead now stands beyond death.

And then Jesus meets them with an understated greeting.

“Greetings,” he says. They take hold of his feet, not a metaphor of a memory, his feet. A body.

The same body that was nailed. The same body that was wrapped. The same body laid in Joseph’s tomb. The Useless King stands before them.

And what does he say?

“Do not be afraid.”

That is the first word of the risen Christ because resurrection is not a demand placed upon you. It is a declaration of mercy spoken over you.

Let us be clear: Easter is not the reward for strong faith. The disciples are not present. Peter is not restored yet. Thomas is not convinced.

There is only promise.

The resurrection does not depend on them, and it does not depend on you.

The women are told to go and tell the brothers, the ones who failed and fled.

The risen Christ still calls them brothers. That is the Gospel.

The Law spoke fully on Friday. Sin was not excused. Judgment was not ignored. The King was crucified.

And when he was raised, it was not to revise the verdict over your sin. It was to announce that the verdict has already been carried, nailed to the cross.

If he remained in the grave, then Good Friday would be tragedy. But because he lives, Good Friday is the triumph of useless, gracious, extravagant mercy.

You sit beneath this Word today fully and completely free.

Free.

Death does not have the final word over you. Sin does not have the final word over you. You do not have the last word over you.

Your fears, your failures, your unfinished, lackluster sanctification, none of these are ultimate.

The resurrection is God's unambiguous "Yes" to Jesus cry, "It is finished."

And that "Yes" is not advice. It is verdict.

You are not left with instruction.

You are given baptism, a death and resurrection.

You are given absolution. You are handed a promise.

The Useless King, the one who would not come down from his agony, who would not negotiate, who would not defend himself, has been raised for you. And because he lives, you live.

What he has begun in you, he will finish. Not because your grip holds fast, but because his does. Not because your faith is steady, but because his mercy is. And mercy is only of use to sinners.

How do you leave this place today? With a task list, a new burden, a demand lingering in your conscience? No. You may leave in the joy and freedom of faith.

Christ is risen! And because he lives, you are his; forgiven fully, finally, and forever.

May the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds  
in Christ Jesus our Lord.

## **PRAYERS FOR HOLY WEEK**

### **PALM SUNDAY**

Lord Jesus Christ,

You enter not as the king we imagined but as the King we need.

You come without spectacle, without force, without the armor of triumph.

You come gently, and we do not understand You.

We confess that we, too, cry “Hosanna” while secretly hoping You will serve our plans.

We want deliverance, but on our terms.

We want salvation, but without surrender.

Ride into our restless hearts as You rode into Jerusalem.

Displace our illusions.

Unseat our pride.

Be our King, not as we would design You, but as You truly are.

The One who reigns from a cross. Amen.

### **MONDAY OF HOLY WEEK**

Holy Lord,

You receive the costly perfume and defend the waste of love.

We calculate. You give.

We measure worth. You pour out mercy without restraint.

Help us to see that grace is not efficient.

It is abundant.

And in its abundance, it offends our careful religion.

Break our obsession with usefulness.

And bring us to rest in the extravagance of Your mercy. Amen.

## **TUESDAY OF HOLY WEEK**

Righteous Judge,  
Your words expose hypocrisy, and we tremble beneath them.  
We build facades of devotion and hide fear behind piety.

Your “woe” is not cruelty.  
It is truth.

Speak Your Law fully to us.  
Strip away our defenses.  
Bring to light what we conceal.

And when all pretense collapses,  
stand with us as our only righteousness. Amen.

## **WEDNESDAY OF HOLY WEEK**

Lord of hidden hours,  
On this quiet day of plotting and betrayal,  
we see how silently evil advances  
and how calmly You endure it.

We confess how easily we trade faithfulness for safety,  
truth for advantage,  
love for silver.

Hold us fast for we cannot hold ourselves.  
Let Your patience toward sinners be our only hope. Amen.

## **MAUNDY THURSDAY**

Gracious Savior,  
On the night You were betrayed, You gave Yourself.  
Before denial, before flight, before the rooster's cry,  
You placed bread into trembling hands.

We come with fragile faith, divided hearts, fainting courage.  
And still You say, "Take. Eat. Drink."

Let Your body and blood silence our self-accusation.  
Let Your forgiveness precede our failure.  
Bind us to Yourself not by our devotion,  
but by Your promise. Amen.

## **GOOD FRIDAY**

Crucified Lord,  
We stand beneath the cross and dare not look away.

Here our pride is judged.  
Here our sin is named.  
Here our illusions die.

In Your abandonment, You enter ours.  
In Your silence, You bear our sentence.

You have promised that the final word over us is not accusation but mercy.  
Keep us in your love, love that would not come down from the cross.

Amen.

## **HOLY SATURDAY**

Hidden God,  
We do not know what to do with silence.  
We prefer noise to waiting.

While Christ was held in death's cold grip,  
You were at work beyond our seeing,  
preparing the dawn we cannot yet imagine.

Your promise does not expire in the grave.  
Your unseen work sustains us when we cannot see Your hand.

Amen.

## **EASTER SUNDAY**

Risen Lord,  
You stand where death once ruled,  
and You speak peace to those far and near.

Because You live, we live.  
Because You were forsaken, we are received.

Because You were condemned, we are forgiven.  
Let no fear overrule this joy.  
Let no accusation silence this hope.

Christ is risen.  
He is risen indeed. Amen.

## **HYMNS FOR HOLY WEEK**

### **PALM SUNDAY**

**Theme: The Gentle, Misunderstood King**

- **All Glory, Laud, and Honor**
  - LBW #108
  - ELW #344
- **Ride On, Ride On in Majesty**
  - LBW #121
  - ELW #346
- **My Song Is Love Unknown**
  - LBW #94
  - ELW #343
  -

### **MONDAY OF HOLY WEEK**

**Theme: Costly Mercy / Contemplation**

- **O Sacred Head, Now Wounded**
  - LBW #117
  - ELW #351
- **When I Survey the Wondrous Cross**
  - LBW #482
  - ELW #803
- **Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence**
  - LBW #198
  - ELW #490
  -

### **TUESDAY OF HOLY WEEK**

**Theme: Judgment / Exposure**

- **Ah, Holy Jesus**
  - LBW #123

- ELW #349
- **Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted**
  - LBW #116
  - ELW #350
- **Restore in Us, O God**
  - LBW #295
  - ELW #328
  -

### WEDNESDAY OF HOLY WEEK

**Theme: Betrayal / Repentance**

- **O Lord, Throughout These Forty Days**
  - LBW #99
  - ELW #319
- **Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart**
  - LBW #325
  - ELW #750
- **Jesus, I Will Ponder Now**
  - LBW #345
  - ELW #345
  -

### MAUNDY THURSDAY

**Theme: Given Before the Fall**

- **At the Lamb's High Feast We Sing**
  - LBW #210
  - ELW #362
- **Soul, Adorn Yourself with Gladness**
  - LBW #224
  - ELW #488
- **Draw Near and Take the Body of the Lord**
  - LBW #214
  - ELW #472
- **Go to Dark Gethsemane**

- LBW #109
- ELW #347

## GOOD FRIDAY

### Theme: The King Who Will Not Come Down

- **O Sacred Head, Now Wounded**
  - LBW #117
  - ELW #351
- **When I Survey the Wondrous Cross**
  - LBW #482
  - ELW #803
- **Were You There**
  - LBW #92
  - ELW #353
- **A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth**
  - LBW #104
  - ELW #358
  -

## HOLY SATURDAY

### Theme: Christ in the Strong Grip of Death

- **O Darkest Woe**
  - LBW #115
  - ELW #353 (often paired in Passion section)
- Psalm 88 (ELW Psalter)

*(Minimal instrumentation recommended.)*

## EASTER VIGIL

- **Christians, to the Paschal Victim**
  - LBW #190
  - ELW #361
- **This Is the Feast of Victory** (Canticle)

- LBW p. 101
- ELW p. 140

## **EASTER SUNDAY**

### **Theme: The Useless King Lives**

- **Jesus Christ Is Risen Today**
  - LBW #151
  - ELW #365
- **Christ the Lord Is Risen Today; Alleluia!**
  - LBW #128
  - ELW #369
- **Now All the Vault of Heaven Resounds**
  - LBW #143
  - ELW #367
- **Thine Is the Glory**
  - LBW #145
  - ELW #376

# Guardrails for Preaching Holy Week

## A Personal Note

The following “guardrails” were not formed in a moment. They were shaped over years of preaching. Not only in Holy Week, but week after week in ordinary time. They emerged more clearly through mistakes, excesses, overcorrections, and the realization that whenever I drifted from these patterns, the sermon drifted from Christ.

It took time for them to become firm. It took discipline to resist the urge to impress, to persuade, to fix, or to soften. But gradually they became less like restraints and more like freedom.

The Word of God does not require embellishment. The Law must be allowed to speak, and the Gospel must be declared clearly and without condition.

What follows are not theoretical principles. They are patterns hammered out in the pulpit. They helped to steady my preaching. I offer them not tentatively, but firmly, with conviction born of necessity, in the hope that they may steady your preaching as well.

Not as a better technique, but as the death of your control over the sermon.

Pastor Mark Anderson

### **1. Do Not Turn the Week into Advice**

There is a persistent temptation to convert every text into instruction. Because, frankly, people want to be told what to do. What happens?

Palm Sunday becomes: Be more loyal than the crowd.

Maundy Thursday becomes: Love one another better.

Good Friday becomes: Feel sorrow for your sin more deeply.

Easter becomes: Live victoriously!

This is not preaching. It is motivational speaking. Holy Week is not about anyone's improvement arc. It is about God's decisive action in Christ. If the sermon ends with manageable steps, the cross has been domesticated. If the hearers leave with a to-do list rather than a verdict spoken over them, the Gospel has been displaced. Let the text accuse. And then let it give.

## **2. Resist Emotional Manipulation**

There is enough gravity in these texts without theatrical assistance. You do not need to manufacture an emotional atmosphere. You do not need to heighten the agony with graphic embellishment. You do not need soft music swelling behind your rhetoric. The message of the cross is weakened by artificial exaggeration. The restraint of Scripture is instructive. The evangelists state the horror plainly and move on. They trust the event itself to carry its weight. So should you.

## **3. Do Not Protect the Congregation from the Law**

Holy Week is not gentle because reality is not gentle. The unfolding events do not flatter the human condition, they reveal it. The instability of the crowd, the fear of the disciples, the collapse of Peter, the betrayal of Judas, the calculated cruelty of Pilate are not anomalies in history; they are mirrors in which we see ourselves. And the cross stands in the center of that exposure as stark confrontation.

If you soften this, you rob the law of its diagnostic power. The fragility of the people in the Upper Room in Jerusalem is the fragility of the people in your church sanctuary. The volatility in the crowd is the volatility in them.

Do not rush to comfort before the exposure has done its work. Let the question "Is it I, Lord?" linger. Because the answer is always, "Yes, it is."

## **4. Do Not Leave Them Under the Law.**

The purpose of exposure is not to leave people in despair or send them up the spiritual ladder but to end self-justification. Once that illusion collapses, and the sermon has dismantled the props we use to sustain ourselves, do not leave the congregation in suspended accusation

under the guise of providing something to do. This is what, quite frankly, much preaching actually does. Do not confuse the rigor of the law with the relief of the gospel.

Holy Week is not the occasion to stoke the furnaces of religious sincerity. It is the week of divine mercy.

### **5. Keep the Focus on Christ's Action**

Scripture is filled with characters and Holy Week is no exception. To make any of them the subject is to miss the point. When preaching drifts into psychological analysis of secondary characters, the center shifts. Keep returning to him.

Holy Week, from beginning to end, is about what Christ does. Ask yourself:

What is he doing?

Who is he addressing and why?

What is he giving?

What is he finishing?

### **6. Do Not Turn the Cross into Example**

It is theologically fashionable to describe the cross as the ultimate demonstration of love, the supreme moral example, the pattern we are now invited to imitate. But here we are faced with an insurmountable problem: If that is all it is, then we are left precisely where we began; inspired, perhaps, but still guilty, still captive to the same forces that nailed him there. Inspiration cannot absolve and raise the dead.

If the cross is preached as primarily illustrative, it ceases to be proclaimed as salvation.

The cross must be preached as the place where the chaos of human rebellion is actually judged and actually borne in the body of Jesus, or else it is simply an example we admire on Sunday and abandon by Friday when we have failed to live up to it.

### **7. Guard the Sacrament from Sentimentality**

On Maundy Thursday especially, resist turning the Lord's Supper into a celebration of community cohesion. The table is not primarily about how well we love each other. It is about how Christ binds himself to sinners who are, in fact, bad lovers.

Preach the gift as gift, not as symbol of shared devotion, but as the concrete giving of Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

### **9. Let the Verdict Be Clear**

Holy Week does not gather itself into a grand bundle of lessons to be applied. It gathers itself into a gracious word spoken over us.

Preachers are inclined to look for instruction at the end. “Therefore, let us . . .” Some quiet exhortation, some dignified appeal to greater faithfulness, some gentle urging that now, having witnessed such love, we must surely do better. But that is not how the story ends. Not then, not now.

At every stage, Christ Jesus is declared, given. Not set up as an example to be negotiated into our doing.

This is not the hour for improvement strategies. It is the hour for a verdict to be announced: *“It is finished.”*

You are baptized. You are dead. You are alive.

Forgiven.

And when that word falls upon the hearers, Holy Week has reached its true conclusion in mercy spoken into fearful, willful, trembling hearts.

### **10. Remember Your Own Position**

The first ears your sermon must hit are your own. You preach as one inside the story. The pulpit always stands beneath the cross. Holy Week will undo you before it steadies anyone else. Let it. Because the same mercy given to the disciples at the table, the same forgiveness accomplished at the cross, the same hope sealed in the tomb is given to you as well.

So, we preach as those who have been killed by the Law and made alive by the Gospel. We preach as those who have nothing to prove and everything to receive. We preach not from our strength, but from His gift.

Because if the verdict has not already stripped us of every other motive; ambition, performance, the need to be right, the hunger to be admired, then we have no business

standing in the pulpit at all; for the only ground on which a preacher may stand is the mercy of the crucified Jesus Christ who rendered the final judgment for sinners before we ever opened our mouths.