

## **Palm Sunday Sermon**

In his book, *Praying Shapes Believing*, Leonel Mitchell refers to Episcopalians as “liturgical theologians.” Meaning that we are a collection of believers who publicly worship God. And not just that, but a people for whom the language and actions we use when talking to God, and about God, is a living tradition. Furthermore, it is from within that tradition that we respond to the world around us.<sup>1</sup>

Our Liturgy is “sacramental. Outward and visible realities are used to express the inward and spiritual realities of God's presence in our lives. Liturgy reflects the belief of incarnational theology that tangible and finite things may reveal divine grace and glory...Liturgy is a public and social event. It engages our lives and faith, our thoughts, feelings, hopes, and needs-especially our need for salvation in Christ. Liturgy includes actions and words, symbols and ritual, scriptures and liturgical texts, gestures and vestments, prayers that are spoken or sung. It is also shaped by the seasons, feasts, and fasts of the calendar of the church year and the lectionaries for the Holy Eucharist and the Daily Office (BCP, pp. 15-33, 888-1001). Liturgy is to involve the various members and ministries of the church so that all are drawn together into one living expression of divine worship.

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<sup>1</sup> Mitchell, Leonel. *Praying Shapes Believing*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1985.

It expresses what we believe and know [to be true] about God, including belief and knowledge that cannot be completely stated in words.”<sup>2</sup>

And so, it is armed with the knowledge that “the Church is most itself when it worships,”<sup>3</sup> that we take time this morning to review this season, the meaning of Holy Week, and why we do what we do, in the hope of enriching our prayer and strengthening our belief.

## **Holy Week**

The liturgies of Holy Week and the Triduum (the one service lasts three days from Maundy Thursday to Easter) are not meant to merely represent something, but to celebrate something: our life, in all its own contradictions, gathered up in the Crucified and Risen One. In short, this week is at the core of the Christian faith.

“Now, as we approach the...remembrance of our Lord’s death and resurrection, we are [also] approaching the moment in which we embrace, again, our own identity, caught up in the life of Christ. By these liturgies we enter into the Paschal Mystery, practicing the servanthood that is our calling in foot washing and Eucharist; venerating the cross as the way of life; lingering at the tomb precisely because we know that it was, in the end empty, as will be the tombs of our own

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/glossary/liturgy>

<sup>3</sup> Mitchell, Leonel. *Praying Shapes Believing*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1985.

journeys; and rejoicing at his resurrection, knowing that we are now one with him who was wounded and broken, and share in his Life as promise.”<sup>4</sup>

## **Palm Sunday**

Palm Sunday, the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent and the 1<sup>st</sup> day of Holy Week, “is one of the longest liturgies of the year. It is a [full] of contradictions: the blessing of the palms and shouts of hosanna give way to a gospel in which the shouts of “Crucify him!” are heard.”<sup>5</sup>

“The Liturgy of the Palms, is a triumphal procession” in which “everyone in the congregation participates in carrying the palm branches...into the church in celebration of Christ’s entry into Jerusalem.”<sup>6</sup> Again engaging our words, bodies, and actions in the work of worship and the telling of the story of who we are as the people of God.

One of the markers of Holy Week, is the hearing and experiencing of the Passion Narrative. Palm Sunday kicks off the retelling of this “drama” which brings the story of Christ’s Passion and death to life in the most unique way. We cannot help but be moved in our hearts as we listen to this great and terrible story,

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<sup>4</sup> *Planning for Rites and Rituals: A Resource for Episcopal Worship, YR C, 2018-2019*. New York: Church Publishing Inc., 2018.

<sup>5</sup> *Planning for Rites and Rituals: A Resource for Episcopal Worship, YR C, 2018-2019*. New York: Church Publishing Inc., 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Mitchell, Leonel. *Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and the Great Fifty Days: A Ceremonial Guide*. Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1996.

the story of our salvation, won at such a cost out of Jesus' unfathomable love for us.

## **A Service of Healing and Reconciliation**

Reconciliation is a sacramental rite which "stands as spiritual medicine for those wounded on the journey."<sup>7</sup> The church's ministry of reconciliation is from God, "who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18). The ministry of reconciliation has been committed by Christ to the church. It is exercised through the care each Christian has for others, through the common prayer of Christians assembled for public worship, and through the priesthood of the church and its ministers declaring absolution (BCP, p. 446).<sup>89</sup>

"From ancient times the laying on of hands has been a symbol for the conveying of God's power. Among the gifts received from God by this means is that of healing. In Scripture we see this practice commonly used and the healing which ensued. The Gospel of Luke reads "He called the Twelve together and gave them power and authority to cure diseases and sent them out to heal." (Luke: 9:1-3)<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Mitchell, Leonel. *Praying Shapes Believing*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1985.

<sup>8</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church*. New York, Church Publishing Inc., 1979.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/glossary/reconciliation-penitent>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.trinitynola.com/page.aspx?pid=801>

“Anointing provides a vivid, sacramental expression of God's love in time of sickness and misfortune. While anointing is usually administered for physical illness, we also anoint for the healing of mind, body and soul. The New Testament makes it clear that anointing, accompanied by prayer, was used for healing.” The book of James, chapter 5 states, "Are any of you in trouble? Are any of you sick? Then call for the elders of the church and have them pray over those who are sick and anoint them with oil in the name of Christ. And this prayer offered in faith will make them well, and Christ will raise them up." (James 5: 13-15)<sup>11</sup>

### **The Way of the Cross**

“The devotion known as the Way of the Cross is an adaptation to local usage of a custom widely observed by pilgrims to Jerusalem: the offering of prayer at a series of places in that city traditionally associated with our Lord’s passion and death. There are 14 stations in total. Eight are based directly on events recorded in the Gospels. The remaining six are based on inferences from the Gospel account or from pious legend.”<sup>12</sup> For each station, a cross or artistic representation maybe

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.trinitynola.com/page.aspx?pid=801>

<sup>12</sup> *The Book of Occasional Services 2003*. New York, Church Publishing Inc., 2004.

erected inside the church or outdoors. Weather permitting our Stations this year will be outside.

## **Taize**

This service models the worship of the ecumenical monastic community of Taizé, in the rolling hills of Burgundy, France. Meditation, reflection, readings, and singing are integral to this service of prayer. The experience is enriched by the active participation of all assembled, by letting go of our temporal needs and concerns, by focusing on the light of Jesus Christ that shines within each of us, and by deepening our faith through the power of prayer.

The church is lit with candles and illuminated with ambient light. Simple songs are sung repeatedly, allowing our minds to focus on the text and connect with our hearts. The readings are read slowly, so that we may all have a deeper understanding of the word of God.

There are numerous times when long periods of silence will be offered to settle our hearts. Participants are invited to come forward, light a candle, and pray before the icons as they so desire.

Our prayers are freely offered aloud or in the silence of our hearts, as the community reaches out to all those whom God has created and continues to love.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Marti Rideout

## Maundy Thursday

“Maundy Thursday links the sacramental strengthening of the Eucharist with the servanthood of those who follow Christ.”<sup>14</sup> “The distinctive elements of the liturgy are the washing of feet, the reservation of the Sacrament for Good Friday communion, and the stripping of the Altar.”<sup>15</sup>

There are two explanations of the ceremony of washing feet.

One is that it is a dramatic portrayal of the actions of Jesus at the Last Supper. The Book of Occasional services describes the foot washing as “an act of humble service.” The second focuses on passages from the Gospel of John. (John 13: 14-15- )“So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought also to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” In this explanation the washing of feet is the outward and visible sign of the love of Christ, which we are commanded to share with one another. We therefore wash one another’s feet as Christ commanded that we all may share in that love. It is not an acted parable to be watched, but an action in which all are invited to participate. Ultimately, we are called to both love and humility.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Planning for Rites and Rituals: A Resource for Episcopal Worship, YR C, 2018-2019*. New York: Church Publishing Inc., 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Mitchell, Leonel. *Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and the Great Fifty Days: A Ceremonial Guide*. Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1996.

<sup>16</sup> Mitchell, Leonel. *Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and the Great Fifty Days: A Ceremonial Guide*. Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1996.

The “Stripping of the altar – removing all ornaments, linens, candles, plants, flowers, etc. – is an ancient custom of the Church. Congregations mark the way Christ’s life was stripped from him by stripping the altar of all signs of life and beauty during a special service. This almost-bare worship space reminds us of the bareness of life without the hope of Christ that we have through his resurrection.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Gethsemane Watch**

St. Patrick’s like many churches erects an “altar of repose”, that is, a table of rest, in a separate place at some distance from where Holy Communion has just been celebrated. Traditionally, watches, a period of “staying awake” for spiritual reasons, have been kept before the Blessed Sacrament on the night of Maundy Thursday. “The movement from one place of worship to another recaptures a sense of the journey by the disciples from the upper room to the place called Gethsemane.” This space is transformed into a minimalist garden in which one can pray and keep watch with Christ. While the hour can seem like a daunting task, it can be a wonder-filled, grace-filled blessing.<sup>18</sup> Prayer and meditation guides are provided. The term derives in part from Christ's question to his disciples at Gethsemane, "Could you not watch with me for an hour?" (Mt 26:40).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.buildfaith.org/maundy-thursday-at-home/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.buildfaith.org/the-gethsemane-watch/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/glossary/watch>

## **Good Friday**

“Good Friday commemorates the death of Christ as paradoxically, the doorway to hope. We read the account of his death but respond to it with prayer, veneration,” and communion from the reserve Sacrament. “Our prayer, in the Solemn Collects, is for the whole world, every conceivable need, conforming our intercessions to that of Jesus who is Victim but also Priest, who prayed the “High Priestly Prayer” in John’s gospel before he was crucified.”<sup>20</sup> We participate in the Veneration of the Cross showing honor and respect through by bowing, kneeling, or lying prostrate on the floor.<sup>21</sup> “Our veneration of the cross itself, an instrument of brutality and resistance to God, [transforms] into the way of Life and [a] symbol of God’s undefeatable power to save.”<sup>22</sup> You are invited to join the clergy at the foot of the cross.

## **Holy Saturday**

“The Holy Saturday liturgy is a brief office, focusing on the burial of Jesus. It compels us to linger with the mystery of Christ’s death as the source of our new life.” The service is “quiet, simple, unadorned, as the church itself has been since

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<sup>20</sup> *Planning for Rites and Rituals: A Resource for Episcopal Worship, YR C, 2018-2019*. New York: Church Publishing Inc., 2018.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/glossary/veneration>

<sup>22</sup> *Planning for Rites and Rituals: A Resource for Episcopal Worship, YR C, 2018-2019*. New York: Church Publishing Inc., 2018.

the conclusion of the Maundy Thursday service. The mood is thoughtful, even meditational, commemorating the time Jesus spent in the tomb. The gospels describe the entombment, but the other readings invite us to quiet contemplation.”<sup>23</sup>

Another special part of this morning is the *Blessing Over Food at Easter*. The Easter blessings of food finds its roots in namely, meat and dairy products, including eggs, having been forbidden in the Middle Ages during the Lenten fast and abstinence. So, when the feast of Easter brings the rigorous fast of Lent to an end, the people show their joy and gratitude by first taking the food to church for a blessing. It’s tradition!<sup>24</sup>

## **Easter Vigil**

The Great Vigil of Easter is the first service of Easter Day. It is to be celebrated at a convenient time between sunset on Holy Saturday and sunrise on Easter morning and normally consists of 4 parts.<sup>25</sup> Ours will be at 8pm.

A new fire is kindled in the memorial garden next to the columbarium. Light has come into the world, and it is by this new light we hear our story. A story comprised of a people of faith learning about the relationship between God and

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<sup>23</sup> *Planning for Rites and Rituals: A Resource for Episcopal Worship, YR C, 2018-2019*. New York: Church

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/liturgicalyear/prayers/view.cfm?id=1028>

<sup>25</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church*. New York, Church Publishing Inc., 1979.

humans, humans and their creator, one another, and one's self. We have a mixed history, but we see in these stories the continuing faithfulness of God and God's people. We'll move from darkness to light, baptizing those who come to him in faith, and ultimately share in the joy and glory of our Risen Savior.

The Rt. Rev. Neil Alexander proclaims that "The Great Vigil of Easter is the crown of the Triduum, and yet confirms the Paschal Mystery that has been the heart of each of the liturgies already: Life breaks forth in the midst of loss, the tomb cannot hold it. A love stronger than death draws us in, and it becomes our life."<sup>26</sup>

## **Easter Day**

"Easter is, of course, the highest and holiest feast of the liturgical year. It is, by any reckoning, the day toward which, and from which, everything else moves. The church will celebrate Easter much in the same way as it keeps any other Sunday of the year" but with some major ceremonial elaborations. We will enlarge the processions, enrich the music, and decorate our space with significant extravagance. The vestments for Easter Day will be the finest the parish has to offer in gold and white.<sup>27</sup> Through this week long intensive engagement with our

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<sup>26</sup> *Planning for Rites and Rituals: A Resource for Episcopal Worship, YR C, 2018-2019*. New York: Church Publishing Inc., 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Alexander, J. Neil. *Celebrating Liturgical Time: Days, Weeks, and Seasons*. New York, Church Publishing Inc., 2014.

worship, now culminated in the Celebration of our Risen Lord, our praying will have shaped our believing as we come to see in the resurrected light of Christ that power and violence do not win. We will no longer live in fear of death. Love will have conquered all. The Lord has Risen Indeed!

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