



Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent  
Rev. Jonathan Stepp  
April 7, 2019  
John 12:1-8

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

A man woke up one Sunday morning and told his wife “I’m not going to church today! Those sermons are so long and boring, the liturgy takes forever, and nobody likes me there.” His wife said “you have to go, you’re the priest!”

I bring this up because we are rapidly approaching Holy Week – the time of the Christian year when we have the largest number of worship services in the shortest period of time. Basically, we’re in church every day for four days in a row. By the time it’s all said and done we’re probably all going to feel a little bit like the priest in the joke.

I thought it would be helpful for us to pause now, a couple of weeks before our church marathon begins, and think about why we do what we do in Holy Week. One way to understand it is to think about the simple and poignant statement that we hear from Jesus in today’s gospel story. In response to Judas’s self-righteous and self-serving criticism of Mary’s worship and adoration, Jesus says simply “I will not always be with you.” All of our worship, whether a Sunday Eucharist, a Monday night Evensong, or the special services of Holy Week, is, in some sense, an expression of our need to connect through the Holy Spirit with the risen and ascended Christ. He lives within us and his presence permeates the whole universe, yet we often need to pause, gather with other believers, and enter into worship in order to remind ourselves of his presence and hear his voice.

Our calling is to be more like Mary and less like Judas. God invites us to consider that the love and salvation we have experienced in Christ merits the outpouring of all that we have – not only our valuable possessions like Mary’s costly perfume but also our valuable time on a Thursday, Friday, or Saturday night in April.

When Holy Week comes around each year the Church asks us to make a sacrifice of worship that, in a small way, echoes Mary’s sacrificial worship. The Church asks us to come to more than just our usual Sunday

Eucharist so that we may join together as a family in telling the story of what God has done for the world in Christ. The story of Jesus' last supper with his disciples, of his crucifixion, and of his resurrection is a story that is too big and too important to try to tell in one 10-minute sermon on April 14<sup>th</sup> and another 10-minute sermon on April 21<sup>st</sup>.

The story we gather to tell in Holy Week is the story of how the whole universe was changed forever when God became human and walked among us. It is the story of how we responded to God's love by trying to kill him but our violence and hatred could not extinguish his love – instead God used our violence and hatred as the doorway through which to enter into our sin, bondage, and death, and break the chains of our slavery to evil. We gather in Holy Week to tell the story of how God used our rejection to reveal his acceptance and used our hatred to reveal his love.

To think more deeply about how the worship of Holy Week tells this story, let's take a moment to look at the schedule of services on the insert in today's bulletin. (Found on the last page of this manuscript). I have chosen to not list the services in exact date order. Rather, I have grouped them according to their significance in telling the story. So, at the top you have what the Church calls the Paschal Triduum. "Paschal" is a form of the Greek word for Passover. Passover is the Jewish festival which celebrates their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, it is the festival at which Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem, and the Christian Passover – our Paschal Feast – is our celebration of humanity's deliverance from slavery to sin and death. "Triduum" is a Latin word that means "three day period."

So, the principal way that we in the Episcopal Church tell the story of how Christ changed the world is through the three services of the Paschal Triduum. On Maundy Thursday we tell the story of the Last Supper and Jesus washing the disciples' feet. On Good Friday we tell the story of Jesus' crucifixion. And then, at sundown on Holy Saturday, we proclaim and celebrate Christ's resurrection in the Great Vigil of Easter.

Because it has been a few years since we as a Parish have celebrated the Great Vigil, I want to briefly say a few words about it. First of all, notice that it is not an all-night vigil – this is a worship service prescribed by the Prayer Book that will last about an hour and fifteen minutes. It is designed to be a service that rehearses God's great saving acts through history and provides us with the earliest opportunity to proclaim the resurrection. That's because in the time of Jesus' a day was calculated from sunset to sunset not midnight to midnight. So Sunset on Holy Saturday is the beginning of Easter.

Now, what I'm about to say next about the Easter Vigil is going to seem strange to you, but technically, according to the doctrine and practice of the Episcopal Church, the Great Vigil is more important than Easter Sunday morning. Almost all of us have usually thought of Easter morning as the big service you don't want to miss – and, of course, it is a big and important time of worship – but beginning with the 1979 Prayer Book the Episcopal Church has sought to recover the ancient practice of Christianity and place the emphasis on proclaiming and celebrating Christ's resurrection at the earliest possible moment: as soon after sundown on Saturday as practical.

That's why on this schedule I have the Great Vigil grouped with the other two services of the Triduum while our prayer walk for Good Friday, our Holy Saturday service, and our Easter morning service are all grouped together in the next set. They are also valuable times of worship but they are supplements to the Triduum – the Triduum is the heart of how we as Episcopalians tell the story of Christ's death and resurrection. And then, at the bottom, you see two opportunities we have to join with other Christians in Holy Week worship.

What you're basically looking at on this schedule are the 8 services that I will be leading or participating in between Thursday and Sunday. If you'd like to join me at all eight of them I'd love to see you there, but if you're going to pick just certain ones to go to then I would strongly urge you as your priest to be sure that you are at the three services of the Triduum. They represent the heart and soul of how we Episcopalians do Holy Week.

How difficult would it be to come to church four times in the four days between Thursday evening and Sunday morning? Well, in one sense that is a lot of church for anyone – even a priest! On the other hand, the services themselves are each only about an hour so you're actually only talking about 4.5 hours out of a 96 hour period. There's still plenty of time in there for golf, shopping, and pickle ball. If you've never experienced the full worship of the Triduum, or if it's been a long time, I think you owe it to yourself and to the health of your soul to at least give it a shot this year. If you don't like it then you skip some of it next year.

Finally, I'll make you this deal: if you come to church every day from Thursday through Sunday that weekend then I'll give you a special dispensation to skip church on Sunday the 28<sup>th</sup> and take a well-earned vacation day. Sounds like a pretty good deal – can I get an “Amen”?

It's a deal. Amen.

# Easter Worship 2019

All Saints Episcopal Church

## The Paschal Triduum

Maundy Thursday, April 18, 6:30 p.m. St. Agnes Chapel

Good Friday, April 19, 6:30 p.m. St. Cyprian Chapel

The Great Vigil of Easter, Saturday, April 20

7:30 p.m.—8:15 p.m. St. Agnes Chapel

## Worship Services

Prayer Walk 4:00 p.m. Friday, April 19, St. Agnes Chapel

(We will walk a one mile route through downtown,  
stopping to pray along the way for our community.)

Holy Saturday service of Remembrance

Saturday, April 20, 10:00 a.m. St. Cyprian Graveyard

Easter Sunday Morning Worship

Sunday, April 21, 10:15 a.m. St. Agnes Chapel

Followed by lunch and Easter egg hunt

(No 8:00 a.m. service that day)

## Community Worship

Community Good Friday Service, 12:00 noon.,

First United Methodist Church

Community Easter Sunrise, 7:00 a.m.,

First United Methodist Graveyard with breakfast at First Presbyterian