

Conversations before the Cross



Palm/Passion Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week. Undergirding the Palm/Passion narrative are different understandings of and responses to Jesus. The narrative illustrates the faithfulness of God and the wavering faithfulness of human beings, yet we are reminded in Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29 that God’s never-failing love can be trusted. We are not alone – we live and worship in community, which helps define and shape our relationship with God.

Focus scripture: Matthew 21:1–11 and 26:14–27:66

Matthew’s gospel seeks to demonstrate how Jesus’ life fulfills the Hebrew scriptures. In Matthew 21:5, we hear echoes of Isaiah 62:11 and Zechariah 9:9.

Matthew 21:1–11 starts in the relative quiet of a hillside and ends in the middle of the main city of Jerusalem amidst shouting and a melee of palms and pilgrims. The reading is full of anticipation, drama, and contrasts. The disciples and the crowd lay down their cloaks for Jesus in a powerful gesture of adoration and self-sacrifice. This gesture is reversed in Matthew 26:14–27:66 when the disciples cloak themselves in self-protection and denial. The adulation of Jesus stems from the crowd’s hysteria. It is that same hysteria that will prompt them to shout “Crucify.”

While some churches will celebrate this day as Palm Sunday, marking Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem with shouts of Hosanna, which means “save now, we pray,” other churches observe today as Passion Sunday. Matthew 26:14–27:66 forms the Passion narrative. Jesus experiences betrayal, physical and emotional violence, mockery, and ultimately, death. The Earth itself reflects the significance of what has happened: the curtain is torn, the temple is split in two, Earth shakes, and rocks are split. The foundations have been fractured. The whole Earth protests. It is an event of global significance. It would appear the forces of destruction have had the last say.

The question of Jesus’ identity reverberates through Matthew’s account. “Tell us if you are the Messiah.” As we reflect on the Passion narrative we might ask ourselves how we might have answered had we been there at the time, and what would we answer now? Has the answer changed for us during our lives?

Jesus leans on the scriptures that have preceded him. **Isaiah 50:4–9a** is part of the Servant Song and alludes to the mystery of suffering alongside obedience to God. “I listen to God,” says the author of this passage. I may and do suffer, but I know I can trust God and I shall hold to my faith knowing that God will honour my trust. I am persecuted, but God is with me, and that is my comfort. I will not allow shame to enter.

Like Isaiah, the writer of **Psalm 31:9–16** has come to the end of physical and emotional strength and feels an outcast. Body and mind are assailed: “Terror all around.” Jesus also experienced these emotions. Against this utter despair, the psalmist, like Isaiah, trusts God and turns to the light of God. In the face of scorn and rejection by humans, God is steadfast.

Philippians 2:5–11 At the core of Jesus’ identity is obedience and surrender to God, springing from his love for God and God’s love of him. Jesus did not exploit his relationship with God. Jesus models how to be human – we are to become like him, to utterly surrender to God and to shun exploitation of others. The author of the letter to the Philippians says Jesus accordingly has “the name above all names,” and everything in the universe is to be submitted to him. We are reminded of the cataclysmic impact that the crucifixion has on the world, as described in the gospel of Matthew.



God hears our lament as much as our praise. God will not desert us; God’s presence can be trusted. When have you felt compelled to raise your voice to God and to cry out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In what ways do your words and deeds declare trust and faith that God holds you during all your times?

Focus scripture
Matthew 21:1–11
Matthew 26:14
—27:66
or Matthew 27:11–54

Additional scriptures
Liturgy of the Palms
Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29
Liturgy of the Passion
Isaiah 50:4–9a
Psalm 31:9–16
Philippians 2:5–11

Holy God, you hear our words, you hear our hearts. Keep us in the grace of knowing we are known and heard, so deeply, so graciously, so constantly. In Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Lectio Connection links current events with this week’s scriptures. Go to www.seasonsonline.ca and click on the link.

The Focus for All Ages



This session is designed for all ages to come together for approximately one hour. Gather a group of leaders to plan and lead the sessions for this week and next. Invite youth or adult participants to be the storytellers for the engagement with the focus passage. Choose a variety of Respond activity zones to meet the needs of the age range of the group.

Palm/Passion Sunday offers an opportunity for children, youth, and adults to explore some of the challenges faced by Jesus and the disciples during the days leading up to Jesus' death. The story stations will help participants explore Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and the events which happened afterwards, stories of his arrest, trial, death, and burial. Travelling through the stories of Holy Week invites us to experience

the emotions of these events. Consider how you might help the youngest members of the group to hear the stories at their level, while also providing space for older children, youth, and adults to deepen their faith through this journey with Jesus. Pray that as participants hear the stories of these Holy Week events they will come to a clearer understanding of the message of Easter.

Prepare

Before the session

- ❑ Read and prayerfully reflect on this week's scriptures, Psalm 31:9–16; Isaiah 50:4–9a; Matthew 21:1–11; Matthew 26:14–27:66; Philippians 2:5–11, and [biblical background](#) material (p. 43).
- ❑ Bring [basic supply kit](#) (p. 2) and, if possible, *Seasons Growing Faith (SGF) Songbook*, *Seasons Growing Faith (SGF) Music CD*, *Seasons Songbook (Volume 6)*, and *Seasons Music CD (Volume 6)*, and CD or MP3 player; downloadable sheet music and MP3 recordings are available at www.seasonsonline.ca.
- ❑ Prepare a worship space with red fabric, a Bible with a bookmark placed in the focus passage, a candle, matches, and offering basket.

Gather

- ❑ Bring self-adhesive name tags.
- ❑ Bring, if possible, song "Jesu Tawa Pano/ Jesus, We Are Here" (p. 24 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 6; #14 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 6).

Engage

- ❑ Bring copies of resource sheet "[Holy Week Stations](#)"; prepare seven stations,

each with one of the symbols listed on the resource sheet, and invite youth and adults to be the storytellers for each station; save resource sheet and symbols for next week.

- ❑ Bring bread and juice.

Respond

Choose from the following activities and bring materials to set up the chosen zones.

- ❑ **Art zone:** variety of art materials (finger-paints, watercolours, felt markers, glitter paints)
- ❑ **Craft zone:** pieces of dark-coloured card stock cut into cross shapes, scraps of colourful tissue paper, yarn or ribbon
- ❑ **Activity zone:** copies of resource sheet "[Palm Crosses](#)," strips of paper (6 mm/¼ in x 32 cm/13 in); make a sample
- ❑ **Quiet zone:** copies of resource sheet "[From Palms to Passion](#)," pieces of card stock; option: recording of meditative music
- ❑ **Discussion zone:** copies of [biblical background](#) page (p. 43)

Bless

- ❑ Bring, if possible, "As We Go Now" (pp. 6–7 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 6; #28 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 6).



Conversations before the Cross

Scripture

Matthew
26:14—27:66

FOCUS To explore together the stories of Holy Week

Gather

Welcome participants as they arrive, introducing guests and newcomers. Distribute name tags and invite group members to print their first names and decorate their tags. Help younger children as needed.

Opening ritual

Call to gather Invite participants to gather in the worship space. Explain that this is the last Sunday in the season of Lent.

If the colour red has been used explain that this colour means that this is a special Sunday. We call it Palm/Passion Sunday, a time when we remember Jesus' last week in Jerusalem. Ask a volunteer to light the candle and receive an offering.

Sing or listen to, if possible, the song "Jesu Tawa Pano/Jesus, We Are Here" (p. 24 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 6; #14 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 6).

Pray O God, this is a week of remembering. Be with us as we listen to stories about Jesus' last week with his friends. Amen.

Extinguish the candle to signify the end of the gathering worship.

Connecting with the focus

If participants have experienced a processional during the worship service to celebrate Palm Sunday, invite them to recall what they saw and heard. Explain that the first of the Bible stories we hear today describes something that was like a processional or parade. Encourage conversation about experiences being part of or seeing a parade. Ask:

- What did you see and hear at the parade?
- What do you like best about a parade?

Engage

Preparing for the story

Invite a child to bring the Bible from the worship space and use the bookmark to open it to the gospel of Matthew. Explain that at the beginning of today's story we are told that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and the crowds were very excited to see him. It was like a parade, with people waving branches and shouting "Hosanna! Hooray for Jesus!" They treated him like a king. But Jesus wasn't popular with everyone. Some of the leaders didn't like the things that Jesus had been teaching and doing.

The Bible story

Explain that today we will hear stories about what happened after Jesus arrived in Jerusalem. Point out the stations that have been set up around the room, each one telling a part of the story about

what happened to Jesus and his friends during the week after they arrived in Jerusalem.

Holy Week stories Distribute a copy of the resource sheet "[Holy Week Stations](#)" (based on **Matthew 26:14—27:66**) to each storyteller and have them take their places at the stations. Introduce participants to the process of moving through the stations and gather at the first station. If there are more than 12 participants, form another group or two, each one beginning after the previous group leaves the first station.

If you are telling these stories to a group of children, invite their questions after each story, before moving to the next station. Be open to anything they wish to discuss. Some of the stories may be new for younger children. At the last station, remind them that this is not the end of the story,

and we will hear more next week, on Easter Sunday.

If you are telling these stories to a group of youth or adults, invite them to pause after each one for a moment of silent reflection before moving to the next station. Invite questions and discussion if desired.

The Bible story and us

After all have finished hearing the stories, gather again as a whole group and share the bread

and juice as a way of remembering the last time Jesus ate with his friends before he died. Discuss together the following questions and/or invite other questions, being open to what participants want to discuss.

- **What do you wonder about when you hear these stories?**
- **Why do you think it is important for us to remember these stories?**

Respond

Review the choices of activities and invite the group to choose one or more zones in which to participate. Encourage older group members to help younger group members in each zone.

- **Art zone: Abstract art** Sometimes we can express the emotions in the Holy Week stories through art more easily than through words. Review together the different emotions described in these stories: fear, confusion, worry, loneliness, sadness. Invite participants to choose from the variety of art supplies, choosing colours and media with which to create abstract images. Create a display of the images, if desired, in the church hall.
- **Craft zone: Cardboard crosses** (*for younger children*) A cross can be a reminder of the Holy Week stories. Distribute cross shapes cut from cardboard and notice the dark colour. This can represent the sadness of Jesus' death. We can also remember that the death of Jesus was not the end of the story. Invite participants to decorate their cardboard crosses with brighter colours as a reminder of this. Have them cover the shapes with white glue and layer scraps of tissue paper over the glue, covering the whole shape. Use a hole punch to make holes in the top of the crosses, and thread lengths of yarn or ribbon as hangers.
- **Activity zone: Folded crosses** (*for older children, youth, and adults*) Invite participants to make crosses as symbolic reminders of the story of Jesus' passion. Distribute copies of the resource sheet "[Palm Crosses](#)" and strips of paper. Show the sample cross and invite participants to follow the instructions for folding the paper to form crosses. If time permits, encourage participants to make additional crosses to give away to others on Good Friday.
- **Quiet zone: Holy Week reflection** (*for youth and adults*) Invite participants to make meditation cards to reflect on the stories of Holy Week during the coming week. Distribute copies of the resource sheet "[From Palms to Passion](#)." Encourage an individual time of reflection on the Sunday section. Option: play quiet meditative music in the background. If desired, invite some sharing of thoughts in pairs. Then invite participants to cut apart the rest of the sections and glue each one onto a piece of card stock, preparing meditation cards to be used throughout the coming week. 
- **Discussion zone: Holy Week readings** (*for older youth and adults*) This zone is particularly for those who would like to explore all the lessons for this day. Distribute Bibles and copies of the [biblical background](#) material. Invite a volunteer to read the commentary on the focus passage. Discuss: What new thoughts come to you? What is surprising in this commentary? What is affirming? Then invite other volunteers to take turns reading **Psalm 31:9–16**, **Isaiah 50:4–9a**, and **Philippians 2:5–11** and the commentary for each passage. Discuss: How does each of these passages connect with the stories of Jesus last week? 

Bless

Gather again in the worship space and light the candle.

Pray a prayer of your own or invite participants to spend a few moments in silence looking at the light of the candle.

Sing or listen to, if possible, the song “As We Go Now” (pp. 6–7 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 6; #28 on the *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 6).

Send participants out with the following blessing: “As you go, remember that God is always with you, during both the good times and the times that are hard.”

Distribute copies of the resource sheet “[Holy Week Stations](#)” and encourage participants to read these stories at home with their families during the coming week.

Reflect

In what ways was each age group able to connect with the stories of Holy Week? If the activity “Holy Week reflection” was not chosen as a Respond activity, consider sending copies of the resource sheet “[From Palms to Passion](#)” home with older members of the group, to be used as a way of reflecting on the readings during the coming week.



Holy Week Stations

Station 1: A last supper (*a loaf of bread and cup of juice*) Later that day, after sunset, Jesus and his friends gathered around a table to eat the Passover meal. Jesus looked at his friends and told them that the meal they were going to share was special. It was probably the last meal they would have together. Then Jesus took a loaf of bread and blessed it. He broke the bread into pieces and shared it with his friends saying, "Every time you eat some bread, remember me." Then Jesus took a cup of wine and gave thanks to God. Jesus said, "Take this wine and share it together." (based on **Matthew 26:26–29**)

Station 2: A place to pray (*several large boxes covered with grey or brown fabric; some potted plants*) After the meal was finished, Jesus and his friends went to a quiet place called Gethsemane. Jesus said to his friends, "Sit here while I go over there to pray." Jesus then took his closest friends, Peter, James and John, and asked them to stay awake and wait with him. Jesus started praying, telling God about his feelings. Jesus asked God to help him get through the hard times that were going to happen soon. Then Jesus was quiet for a while, listening to God. Jesus prayed such a long time that the disciples kept falling asleep, too tired to stay awake as they waited. (based on **Matthew 26:36–46**)

Station 3: An arrest (*toy swords and clubs*) Suddenly Jesus and his friends were surrounded by people carrying swords and clubs. Judas, one of the people who used to be Jesus' friends, was there too. He helped the officers of the temple police to arrest Jesus. One of Jesus' friends saw what was happening, grabbed his own sword, and cut the ear of a slave of the high priest. "Put your sword away!" said Jesus. And Jesus touched the man's ear and healed it. Jesus was taken to the house of the high priest. Because Jesus' teaching was different from their teaching, some of the religious leaders were angry and tried to trick Jesus by asking difficult questions. Most of Jesus' friends were so scared they ran away, but Peter followed him. (based on **Matthew 26:47–64**)

Station 4: A betrayal (*fire pit: sticks and red tissue paper*) Some people had gathered around a fire in the courtyard of the high priest's house. Peter sat with them. A servant girl recognized Peter and said, "You were with Jesus." Peter said, "I don't know him!" A little later someone else said, "I'm sure you're one of Jesus' followers." But Peter said, "No I'm not!" Then another person said, "You must be – you sound just like them." Peter shouted, "I don't know the man!" As soon as he said this a rooster crowed and Peter remembered what Jesus had said: "Before the rooster crows today you will pretend three times that you don't know me." Peter went out and cried bitterly. (based on **Matthew 26:69–75**)

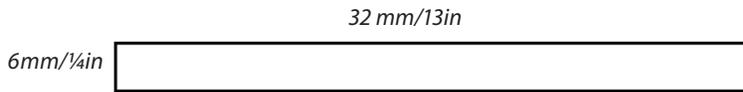
Station 5: A trial (*throne: chair covered with red or purple fabric*) The rest of that night and the next day was a scary and sad time for Jesus and his friends. The men who had arrested Jesus beat him and insulted him. Then they took Jesus to Pilate, the Roman governor of the country. Pilate asked Jesus some questions but he didn't think Jesus had done anything wrong. But the religious leaders wouldn't give up. They made sure that the crowd shouted, "Crucify him! Kill him!" They kept shouting until Pilate finally gave in and sentenced Jesus to death. The soldiers made fun of Jesus, putting a crown of thorns on his head and saying, "Hail, the king of the Jews!" (based on **Matthew 27:11–26**)

Station 6: A death (*cross*) As the soldiers led Jesus away to be crucified, they grabbed a man named Simon and made him carry Jesus' cross. Jesus felt very lonely and afraid. The soldiers put him on a cross between two thieves. When Jesus died the sky became dark, even though it was only three o'clock in the afternoon. The ground shook, and the holy curtain in the temple was ripped in half. A soldier, who was standing nearby, said, "I think this man really was special to God!" (based on **Matthew 27:32–54**)

Station 7: A burial (*length of white fabric*) Jesus' followers were sad and scared. Some brave women stayed beside the cross. That evening Joseph of Arimathea, a respected Jewish council member, asked Pilate for permission to bury Jesus' body. Joseph wrapped Jesus' body in a linen cloth and laid it in a small cave. Then he rolled a great stone in front of the entrance to the cave and went home. The women finally went home, desperately sad. (based on **Matthew 27:55–61**)

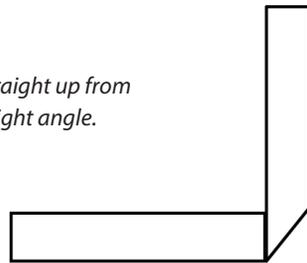


Palm Crosses

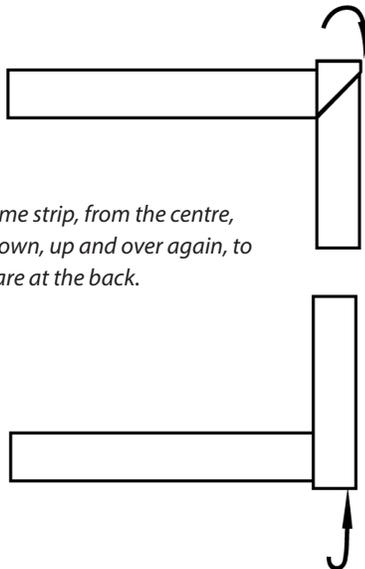


1 Hold the front horizontal.

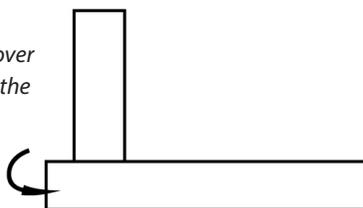
2 Bend the right end straight up from the centre to form a right angle.



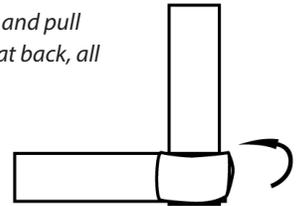
3 Fold this same strip, from the centre, back and down, up and over again, to form a square at the back.



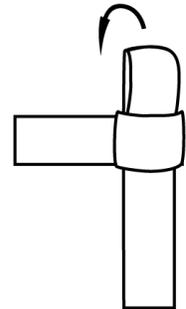
4 Bring the left strip forward and fold over the centre toward the right.



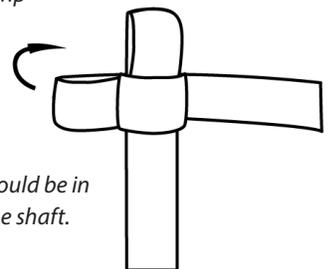
5 Fold away from you and pull through the square at back, all the way.



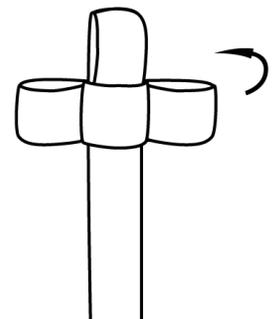
6 Bend the top strip forward and put the end through the centre square to make a shaft of desired length.



7 Fold left hand strip backwards and put through the back square. This makes the left crossbar and should be in proportion to the shaft.



8 Fold the right strip back, put through the back square and fasten.





FROM PALMS TO PASSION

Readings and reflections for Holy Week

Sunday — Questions

Pray — Psalm 118:1–2

Read — Matthew 21:1–1

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" (Matthew 21:10–11)

Reflect — Imagine watching and wondering with the crowds.

- **What questions do you have about Jesus and this last week of his life in Jerusalem?**
- **How would you answer the question about Jesus' identity? Who is Jesus for you today?**

Monday — Being known

Pray — Psalm 139:23–24

Read — Matthew 26:20–30

When it was evening he took his place with the twelve... (Matthew 26:20)

Reflect — Imagine sitting at a table with the One who knows you inside and out.

- **How does it feel to be so well known?**
- **What words might this One say to you today?**

Tuesday — Waiting

Pray — Psalm 42:1–2

Read — Matthew 26:36–56

Remain here and stay awake with me... (Matthew 26:38)

Reflect — Imagine waiting in that dark place with the disciples, tired, uncertain, afraid.

- **What experiences have you had of waiting in uncertain, fearful times?**
- **What keeps you from staying awake and vigilant in your faith?**

Wednesday — Fear

Pray — Psalm 31:14–16

Read — Matthew 26:57–75

Peter was following at a distance... (Matthew 26:58)

Reflect — Imagine standing with Peter, too afraid to stand up for a friend.

- **How do you respond to situations of fear?**
- **Where do you hide when you feel like you've disappointed God and others?**

Thursday — Accusations

Pray — Psalm 25:1–2

Read — Matthew 27:1–31

But he gave them no answer... (Matthew 27:14)

Reflect — Imagine standing with Jesus before his accusers.

- **What do you hear in the spaces of silence?**
- **From where do you draw strength in challenging times?**

Friday — Abandonment

Pray — Psalm 31:9–13

Read — Matthew 27:32–54

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?... (Matthew 27:46)

Reflect — Imagine standing beneath the cross.

- **When have you felt forsaken in your life?**
- **How do you respond to experiences of deep grief and loneliness?**

Saturday — Faithfulness

Pray — Psalm 31:5

Read — Matthew 27:55–66

Many women were also there, looking on from a distance... (Matthew 27:55)

Reflect — Imagine following with the women as the body of Jesus is carried to the tomb.

- **When have you been surprised by another's faithfulness?**
- **What is one thing that you will carry away with you from this year's reflection on the stories of Holy Week?**