

Amuse-Bouche
The Rev. Amy Spagna
March 29, 2026 – Palm Sunday
Matthew 26:14-27:66

Are you worn out from all this already?

So much of what we remember, and re-enact during this most important week is completely overwhelming. Today is just the beginning. The structure of this service forces us to shift quickly from the celebratory singing of *All Glory, Laud, and Honor* and waving our palm branches in the air to celebrate Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem, to receiving the cold bucket of water that is hearing the crowds shouting, "Crucify him!"

It's hard to take in the totality of this part of the story all at once. The Church has recognized that much since the beginning, which is one of the reasons the calendar has always provided a whole week to try to digest this event and make some sort of meaning out of it. Palm Sunday is kind of like the appetizer for the multi-course gourmet meal that is Holy Week. It gives us a taste of what is coming. It also encourages us to stick around for more as we move through the next several days. Just in case you walk away from this service so full that you can't possibly eat another bite of rich Holy Week fare, it shows us what to expect as the next courses are set in front of us. We will start to turn out the lights during Tenebrae on Wednesday. We will hear, and re-enact, Jesus' final commandments to his disciples, before removing all the scraps of decoration which symbolize his presence on Thursday. On Friday, we will get to the meat and potatoes of the story, as we consider how far the powerful will go to silence a rabble rouser from Galilee who had the annoying habit of telling them honestly that they needed to do, and be, better.

Yeah. It's a lot to try to digest all at once. Andrew McGowan, the dean of Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, reminds us that the accounts we will hear of this event are not just a front-page newspaper description of what happened. All four of the gospel writers present us with highly developed accounts, each with its own particular theological spin. There is plenty of common ground among them. None of them particularly cares for the role the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem played in it. To some extent, all of them, including Matthew, double down on the claim that there has to be SOME deeper meaning to what would otherwise have been just another meaningless execution carried out by the Romans: "This is not just a condemned man going to his fate; prophe[c]y is being fulfilled, and God is in charge."¹

God may well be in charge, but we cannot discount the human-ness on full display in this event. Besides the suffering to which Jesus subjects himself, we have to take into account what's going on with the entire cast of characters:

- The mob, which is fickle, hostile, fearful, and very easily manipulated by those in power;
- The Jewish leaders, who are also fearful, hostile to Jesus, and jealous of his success in reaching ordinary people;
- Pilate, the Roman governor who wants nothing to do with any of this, and yet gives in to the demands of the crowds in what John's Gospel clearly paints as an attempt to keep his job;

¹ Andrew McGowan, "The Passions of Our Lord Jesus Christ." <https://abmcg.substack.com/p/the-passions-of-our-lord-jesus-christ> [accessed March 24, 2026].

- The centurion, standing watch next to the cross with his fellow soldiers, who is scared out of his mind when he sees the earthquake, rocks being split, and the saints coming out of their graves;
- Judas and Peter, two of the Twelve, who both play pivotal roles in this drama precisely because they cannot stand the reality of Jesus' suffering which has suddenly hit them in the face. Judas betrays him, Peter denies him, and then neither sticks around long enough afterward to actually see what happens.
- The women, only some of whom are named, who stayed by Jesus' side and saw the whole thing unfold, despite the risk they took in order to do it.

That it is easy to empathize with these characters tells us something about what it is to be human. People haven't fundamentally changed all that much in the two millennia since the events of this week took place. We're still prone to being overcome by fear and petty jealousies; to being manipulated into doing something we know is wrong; and to running away from situations which get to be just too much for us to handle. That is its power: it's not just Jesus' story. It's our story, too. Like Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, who recorded the collective memories of the people who were actually there, we too are left to try to make meaning out of this thing that happened. The centurion's declaration that, "Truly this man was God's Son" (Mt 27:54, NRSV) is Matthew's way of suggesting that there is something more here, beyond just another day when the Romans felt like reminding everyone else they were the bosses. Just as it was for Jesus' first followers, "This event became a point of revelation of God and evil, of love and hate... Some [re-tellings of it] will be helpful, some, unhelpful; some, fitting

the event back into the values of deals and transactions, some, simply allowing the blood to flow and finding it in all violence and sin; some, putting it into competition with others' insights, some, seeing it as a light which seeks its companions universally. We stand under its impact and mystery. Our role is not to explain it down, but to open it up so that people will have an opportunity like generations before them to find in it their own story."²

As Jesus himself did, I invite you: come and see. Come and see what it looks like when the world serves up its absolute worst, and what God does to respond.

² William Loader, "First Thoughts on Year A Gospel Passages from the Lectionary: Passion Sunday." <https://billloader.com/MtPassionSunday.htm> [accessed March 23, 2026].