



ADULT STUDY

from www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com

LEADER'S GUIDE Session 1

Reflecting on Holy Week: An Adult Lenten Study

A Triumphal Entry?

Goal for the Session

Participants will experience Jesus' entry into the city and the surprises it brings and ponder how to discern when their faith is calling them to wait and when they should act.

Preparing for the Session

- Read through the entire six-session study to get a sense of its scope. Pray for the participants and yourself.
- Adapt this session, and the other sessions in this study, for the needs of your group. There are often more activities suggested than you may have time to do.
- In each session, there is a resource sheet with an expanded spiritual practice that arises from the Scripture passage. Decide if you will use this practice instead of the Scripture experience or the reflecting activity in the session. If you don't use it during the session, consider giving it to participants to use for their own devotional time during the week.
- If possible prior to the study, contact participants and ask them to bring a journal—either a paper version or an electronic tablet—to class. Plan to provide paper and pens for those who do not bring a journal. Distribute session 1 to

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Review Holy Week
- Extinguish one candle
- Pray

EXPLORING

- Experience Scripture
- Explore the staged parade
- Examine surprises

RESPONDING

- Confront unexpected waiting

CLOSING

- Choose a symbol
- Sing a hymn
- Close with prayer

the group before the meeting if possible and have them read it prior to coming to the session.

- At the top of newsprint or on a board, print “Palm Sunday.” At the bottom, print “Easter.”
- Gather six white candles and matches or a lighter. Alternatively, plan to use electronic candles. Just prior to the session, light all six candles.
- The activity of experiencing Scripture calls for words and phrases to be recorded on a newsprint sheet. If you are using a board to record responses, be sure to jot down participants’ responses in a notebook or journal and save them so they can be used in session 6.
- If your group is uncomfortable singing, read the hymns in unison.
- For the closing, obtain copies of the hymn “Ride On! Ride On in Majesty!” and arrange for accompaniment.

Materials Needed

- Newsprint or board and markers
- Copies of session 1 Participant Handout
- Six white candles and matches or lighter, or electronic candles
- Bibles
- Paper and pens or pencils
- Copies of the hymn “Ride On! Ride On in Majesty!”
- Copies of the session 2 Participant Handout

Begin Teaching Tip

For participants with a limited understanding of the season of Lent, consider using a two-minute introductory video (found at <http://bustedhalo.com/video/ash-wednesday-in-two-minutes>).

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Review Holy Week

As participants arrive, welcome them. If participants are not familiar with one another, invite them to introduce themselves. Call attention to the sheet or board on which you printed “Palm Sunday” and “Easter.” Ask: What events in the Bible happened during Holy Week?

Between the two major events already listed, jot down each event participant’s name. Don’t worry about getting the order correct. Ask participants to review the introductory material in the Participant Handout or to read it quickly if they have not already done so.

Explain that often congregations are not able to do an in-depth exploration of the events of the week leading up to Jesus’ crucifixion and death. In this study, they will have the opportunity to slow down and journey with Jesus as he encountered and experienced the events of what we call Holy Week. Participants will experience those happenings through the account of the Gospel of Mark.

2. Extinguish One Candle

Remind the group that we use the Advent wreath as a reminder of the coming of Jesus into the world at Christmas. Each week we light one more candle until four candles cast a bright light, signifying the coming of Jesus Christ, the light of the world. Explain that during Lent you will begin with six candles. Gradually over the six weeks of the study, the candles will be extinguished, until in the last session all candles will be extinguished. Invite participants to sit in silence for a few moments. Then extinguish the first candle.

3. Pray

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

Holy God, as Lent begins, we seek to journey with Jesus. Some of us come with the mark of Ash Wednesday still fresh on our foreheads, acknowledging our own mortality. Many of us are seeking a deeper understanding of the life and death of Jesus Christ. In the midst of busy lives, we all yearn for a closer walk with Jesus. By your Spirit, guide our steps and illuminate the path ahead. Amen.

Exploring (15 minutes)

4. Experience Scripture

Ask four volunteers to read aloud the following: Mark 8:27–33; 9:30–32; 10:32–34; 10:46–52. Ask:

- What do you notice about the three times when Jesus foretold his death and resurrection to his disciples? How did the disciples respond to his pronouncements?
- What was different about the way Bartimaeus responded to Jesus?

Ask participants to read silently the first paragraph of the Participant Handout and then to find a comfort-

able position for sitting where they can close their eyes and breathe in and out deeply. Encourage them to try to imagine themselves as part of the crowd. Then read Mark 11:1–11 aloud. Following the reading, ask participants to respond, popcorn style, to the following as you jot down their responses:

- What detail or word did you notice that you have not noticed before in reading or hearing this passage?
- What surprised you about the parade itself? Was there something about the parade that did not turn out quite as you expected? What was it?
- What word did you hear that God is speaking to you?

Save participants' responses for use in session 6.

5. Explore the Staged Parade

The Participant Handout tells us that Mark's description of the event we have traditionally called the triumphal procession comes across as staged rather than as a spontaneous demonstration. Invite participants to quickly review the material in the Participant Handout under the heading "A Staged Parade." Discuss:

- What about the arrangements for Jesus' arrival in the city makes it seem more like a page from an espionage novel?
- With respect to the palm branches, how does Mark's account differ from Matthew's?
- What echoes are there in this account to the Old Testament, and what is the significance of those echoes?

Ask participants to describe what they remember about Palm Sunday services of worship in your church. Ask: How, if at all, would a Palm Sunday service be different if based on Mark's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem?

6. Examine Surprises

Form groups of three. Note that the Participant Handout identifies three surprises that arise from the text. Assign one surprise to one person in each group. Ask participants to quickly review and then discuss the surprises in their small group.

In the total group, revisit the sheet on which you jotted down what persons found surprising about the parade when they heard the Scripture read, and read over those observations to see where they are in synch with what is noted in the Participant Handout. Discuss:

- Why do you think we found these factors surprising? Does it have to do with the fact that Mark's account is not part of the normal lectionary cycle and therefore we don't normally hear it read? Or does it have to do with how we portray the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday in our services of worship? Or is there another reason?
- Given that the author tells us that throughout Mark's Gospel Jesus repeatedly silenced any attempts to reveal his true identity, how consistent is this account with that recurring theme?
- How, then, can you explain the staged nature of the procession, with its nods to Old Testament passages about kings and rulers?

Responding (10 minutes)

7. Confront Unexpected Waiting

Revisit with the group what happened after Jesus entered Jerusalem by having a volunteer read aloud Mark 11:11. Ask: What do you make of what Jesus did—and didn't do—after the procession into Jerusalem?

Invite the group to review the information about Martin Luther King Jr.'s decision not to cross the bridge on the march following Bloody Sunday. Then discuss some of the following:

- What do you think prompted King's decision to turn back on that second march (if participants' knowledge of those events is limited, ask them to do an internet search for "Bloody Sunday Alabama")?
- If you had been one of Jesus' disciples, what do you think you would have expected him to do? How do you think you would have felt about simply turning around and going back to Bethany?

Invite the group to reflect on the following questions posed by the author:

- What do we do when life does not go the way we think it is supposed to go?
- What happens when we shout, "Hosanna!" which literally means, "Save us now!" and the response we hear is "not yet, not now, wait a little longer"?

Ask the group to consider the context in which we are presently living, when once again there are challenges—albeit more sophisticated and subversive—to the rights of persons of color to vote and to access basic

rights, as well as a resurgence of the acceptance of the systemic racism that has been present since our nation's founding. Invite them to respond in writing to one of the following in their journals:

- I believe that my faith is telling me “not yet, not now, wait a little longer” because _____.
- I believe that my faith is calling me to step out and respond to the current context because _____.

Encourage them to continue to reflect on whether this is a time for waiting or a time for action. In either case, ask that they commit to regular prayer for discernment as to when action may be called for, and what that action might be.

Closing (10 minutes)

8. Choose a Symbol

Call the group's attention to the five lit candles and to the one whose flame you extinguished. Ask: In the light of what we have experienced in this session, with what word, phrase, or symbol would you choose to identify Jesus' procession into Jerusalem?

Jot down suggestions on newsprint or a board. Then ask participants to indicate their preference with a show of hands. Plan to make a table tent with the symbol for this session prior to the next, or ask a participant to make it.

9. Sing a Hymn

Tell the group that the final stanza of the hymn “Ride On! Ride On in Majesty!” captures the somber tone of the procession. Sing or read the hymn together.

Distribute copies of the Participant Handout for session 2, or arrange to send it by e-mail to participants.

Encourage participants to read the Scriptures for the next session as a part of their devotions, reflecting on the questions posed in the first paragraph of the Participant Handout. Also, suggest that they make use of the spiritual practice outlined on the Resource sheet.

10. Close with Prayer

Pray the following prayer, with which the Participant Handout ends:

Eternal God, grant us the patience and the faith to walk, to wait, to turn over this season of Lent to you, the one who knows the way from Bethany to Golgotha, from a Garden Tomb to Galilee, and from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. We are certain that somewhere along that way, at your appointed time, our Lord will come to visit. Amen.

Teaching Alternative

Lectio Divina: Spiritual Reading of Scripture

Using the resource sheet, invite the group to engage in *lectio divina*, or a spiritual reading of Scripture, either in place of the experiencing Scripture activity or as part of reflecting. Encourage participants to continue to practice spiritual reading in the coming week as part of their devotional time.

Key Scriptures

Mark 8:27–33; 9:30–32; 10:32–34; 10:46–52; 11:1–11

Martha Bettis Gee, a writer, editor, and educational consultant, is retired from the Presbyterian Mission Agency, where she was Associate for Child Advocacy and Networking.

Spiritual Reading of Scripture

The practice of *lectio divina*, or spiritual reading of Scripture, is a fourfold rhythm of listening and then allowing ourselves to respond to God's word to us personally.

Reading

Read a passage of Scripture slowly. Read it a second time, letting your awareness rest in turn on each word. Be alert to any word or phrase that draws your attention in a special way or seems to jump out to you. Repeat that word or phrase to yourself. (If engaging in this practice in a group, allow some space for persons to name this word or phrase aloud.)

Reflecting

As you read the passage a third time, allow it to evoke some kind of response or answering word—it may be an emotion, an image, a memory, or something else. (In a group, again invite persons to name this answering response aloud.)

Praying

Read the passage again. Holding the word that draws your attention and the answering response together, reflect on the connection they may have to your life. What might God be saying to you? Respond, if you like, in writing.

Contemplating

Move naturally into a wordless silence, resting in God's presence. You may conclude with a simple prayer.



ADULT STUDY

from www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com

PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 1

Reflecting on Holy Week: An Adult Lenten Study

A Triumphal Entry?

Mark 11:1–11

Beginning with Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem, this session invites the reader to begin a careful study of the Holy Week texts in the Gospel of Mark to better prepare for the joy of Easter.

In preparation for this session, read Mark 11:1–11. Read slowly and seek a detail or a word you have not noticed before. Imagine joining the crowd as it descends with Jesus from the Mount of Olives. Seek to be surprised both by the parade itself and by what happens when things do not turn out quite as you expect. Hear the word that God is speaking to you.

Introduction to This Lenten Study

Holy Week: Palm Sunday to Easter, the final week of Jesus' earthly life. These days provide the foundation of the Christian faith. However, even the most faithful Christians rarely spend every day of Holy Week contemplating Jesus' last days. Participating in a joyous procession of palms on one Sunday and the acclamations of Alleluia beside an empty tomb the next is the best many can do. Even when additional worship services are offered for Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, or Easter Vigil, life gets in the way. Walking with Jesus in Jerusalem during the final week of his earthly life, amid the ever-present cares and concerns of our

earthly life, can be quite challenging. So, both individually and collectively as the church, we skip so much of Holy Week.

This six-week study invites you to slow down and dive deeply into the Gospel of Mark's account of Holy Week. A full one-third of Mark's Gospel is devoted to the final week of Jesus' earthly life. However, the Gospel of Mark's account of Holy Week does not appear in any of the three-year lectionary cycles (apart from the rarely used alternate "Liturgy of the Passion" on the Sixth Sunday of Lent in Year B). Hearing God's Word to us in these texts holds the potential to enrich our Alleluias when we finally reach Easter morning.

In these six sessions, I invite you to stop and listen to words you rarely hear. This series will allow you to spend the entire season of Lent walking with Jesus in Jerusalem. The first session begins with Jesus' entry to the city and the surprises it brings. In the sessions that follow, we will witness Jesus' disruption of and teaching in the temple; join him at table with his disciples in Bethany and later for a Passover meal; experience his prayer, arrest, and abandonment in Gethsemane; see him convicted in a sham of a trial; and finally witness him crucified and buried. As a full account of resurrection morning is beyond the scope of this series, we will

conclude with a holy waiting, knowing that Sunday is coming.

As you slow down, extend Holy Week over the entire season of Lent, and walk with Jesus in Jerusalem and pray that God will prepare you well to truly hear the good news of Easter.

A Staged Parade

Our journey with Jesus begins in Mark 11 just outside the city of Jerusalem. Jesus has been making his way toward the holy city since chapter 10. Along the way he teaches the crowds, he predicts his death three different times, and most recently in Jericho he heals Bartimaeus, a blind man who was forced to beg for a living. Bartimaeus identifies Jesus as “Son of David,” a royal title that Jesus does not deny. With this acclamation ringing in his ears, he begins to climb the hills toward Jerusalem.

Approaching the holy city, he first comes to the Mount of Olives, near Bethphage and Bethany. These villages sit about two miles east of Jerusalem and serve as a kind of staging ground for Jesus’ entry to the city. It is no accident that the Gospel of Mark has Jesus arrive on this route, for Zechariah had prophesied that the Messiah would appear on the Mount of Olives (Zech. 14:2–4). As readers of this Gospel, our expectations are high.

The parade of Jesus and the crowd from the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem is, in many ways, remarkably similar to other ancient processions of kings and rulers. It seems to be choreographed down to every detail. Jesus sends two of his disciples into Bethany and tells them to find “a colt tied there that has never been ridden.” Perhaps it had been used only to carry baggage or supplies, but now it would carry a king. This colt had been set apart for a sacred purpose.

The disciples are told what to say to anyone who asks them what they were doing. Here the bystanders ask, “What are you doing untying the colt?” and the disciples respond, “The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.” The bystanders let the disciples take the colt, obviously hearing whatever they needed to hear.

When they bring the colt to Jesus, they place their cloaks on it, and many people begin to spread their

cloaks on the ground. In addition to laying down cloaks, others begin to spread leafy branches “that they had cut in the fields.” As the Gospel of Matthew tells this story, in the heat of the moment people cut branches from the trees beside the road and placed these branches on the ground (Matt. 21:8). However, in Mark’s version the branches have been cut *in the fields* and brought to the road. Someone prearranged for the branches to be cut and stockpiled for this parade.

Then those who followed and those who went ahead began to shout, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” Those verses are from Psalm 118, the final psalm of ascent used by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. The psalm heralds the coming of the king to Jerusalem, calling for the gates to be thrown open and a new day to dawn. The true king of Israel, Jesus of Nazareth, has arrived. All appears to be going according to plan.

The Surprises

If this entry into Jerusalem feels staged and even mundane, what about this text surprises? What seems strange? The first surprise is Jesus’ silence. We would expect that the coronation of a king, a triumphant procession and entry to the holy city, would call for a speech. What is his vision for his coming reign? We get not a word. At least he should thank those who have been with him along the way and have brought him to this day. He should recognize the disciples for getting the colt, all those who cut branches early in the morning to bring to the road, and all those whose cloaks now

The parade of Jesus and the crowd from the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem is, in many ways, remarkably similar to other ancient processions of kings and rulers.

have muddy hoof prints on their backs. But Jesus says nothing. Throughout the Gospel of Mark, Jesus has denied or silenced any attempts to reveal his true iden-

tity. Now the crowds are shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” Still, Jesus sits silent.

The second surprise is the reaction of Jerusalem and its leaders. In the other Gospels, this Palm Sunday procession into the city results in uproar. In Matthew, “the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’” (Matt 21:10). In the Gospel of Luke, after some Pharisees order him to silence the disciples, Jesus responds, “‘I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out’” (Luke 19:39–40). In the Gospel of John, the Pharisees say to one another, “‘You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!’” (John 12:19). However, in Mark it appears as if the procession ends at the gates of Jerusalem. Jesus enters the city alone and is ignored. There is no reaction at all—no Pharisees, no leaders of the temple, no Romans curious about this procession. There is no response at all to Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. Life went on without interruption.

One final surprise follows this uninspiring welcome from the city. When he enters Jerusalem, Jesus does not do anything. In Matthew, Jesus immediately goes to the temple and turns over the tables of the moneychangers (Matt. 21:12–17). In Luke, Jesus first predicts the destruction of the temple and then cleans out the place (Luke 19:41–46). In both Gospels, not only does the procession itself generate controversy in the city, but Jesus also engages in a controversial act. In the Gospel of John, Jesus begins to teach in the temple about his coming death, and there is a dramatic voice from heaven that many mistake for thunder.

Yet in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus goes to the temple, looks around at everything, and then, because it is late, goes out to Bethany with the twelve (Mark 11:11). Remember, this day began in Bethany, the city in which they borrowed the colt. Jesus organizes an event to take him to Jerusalem, but when he gets there he merely looks around and goes back home. What are we to make of this? At first glance it appears that Jesus looked around at everything in the temple like a tourist with a guidebook and then headed back to Bethany

Back to Bethany?

On March 7, 1965, as they attempted to peacefully cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, approximately six hundred African Americans beginning a

march to Montgomery in support of voting rights were brutally attacked and beaten by state troopers and local lawmen. Broadcast live across the nation, “Bloody Sunday” triggered national outrage. Martin Luther King Jr., who had not been present for the Sunday march, issued a call for religious leaders to join in the peaceful, nonviolent march for freedom to be held on Tuesday, March 9. People from across the nation descended on Selma to join him.

Tuesday, March 9, arrived, and a crowd of thousands followed Dr. King from downtown Selma to the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Reaching the site of the Sunday attack, Dr. King and the marchers knelt to pray. After several minutes, Dr. King stood and, much to the surprise of those who had gathered, led the marchers back to Selma.

Many civil rights leaders and marchers were critical of Dr. King’s unexpected decision to turn the march around, to not press ahead toward confrontation on the road to Montgomery. They had come to march, not simply to pray and return to Selma. Two weeks would pass before Dr. King finally led the five-day march from Selma to Montgomery, this time with federal protection.

In a similar way, I think most of us have an idea in our minds about what Jesus’ “triumphal entry” is supposed to be. Our churches do as well. It takes great planning to be sure that we have palm branches, and brass, and children’s choirs, and ushers and bulletins outside so we can begin with a grand procession. Palm Sunday is a triumphant day, a day of celebration, a day well planned!

Yet when we read the text from the Gospel of Mark, it seems that all comes to a screeching halt. Jesus enters Jerusalem, the crowd fades, and he goes to the temple, looks around, checks his watch, and goes back to Bethany. Life went on without interruption. Jerusalem barely noticed that Jesus had arrived.

What do we do when life does not go the way we think it is supposed to go? What happens when we shout, “Hosanna!” which literally means, “Save us now!” and the response we hear is “not yet, not now, wait a little longer”? What happens when the parade comes to an unexpected stop?

Sometimes we have to go back to Bethany and return tomorrow. We have to follow Jesus down the unexpected twists and turns of this path of discipleship. I suspect for you, as for me, that the delay, the unexpected

waiting, presents one of the chief challenges to faith. For we live in a world where we want to have it all now, exactly the way we desire. So to hear “not yet, not now, wait a little longer” can be so hard.

Ride on! Ride on!

Jesus enters Jerusalem alone, and he will die alone as his disciples and the crowds abandon him. Jerusalem is not a city of triumph for Jesus but a place of fear, anxiety, hostility, controversy, violence, plots against his life, and death. That is the Jerusalem that awaits Jesus for the final week of his earthly life. And you have embarked on a series of lessons to help you to spend the entire season of Lent in Jerusalem with Jesus.

Surely we could meet him somewhere else. As part of the Palm Sunday parade, we want to take the reins of that donkey and lead Jesus where we need him, where we want him, where we know he is supposed to be. But Jesus brings all that to a halt. As the Gospel of Mark tells the story of Jesus’ entry to Jerusalem, we are reminded that this entry is triumphant only for those who do not know what is to come. Palm Sunday is not a mini-Easter celebration but the first in a series of steps that Jesus takes toward death on the cross. This city that barely noticed his arrival is not a city of triumph for Jesus but the place he will die.

And yet Jesus has a plan. He is in control of the parade and the delay. We want salvation now; we want the celebration to begin today. However, sometimes the colt goes around in circles, and we have to start again tomorrow. There is no doubt that salvation, resurrection, and Easter morning will come. But they come in God’s time, not ours.

The next morning Jesus will return to the city and stir up its inhabitants by turning over the moneychangers’

tables and teaching against the leadership of the temple. Jesus’ looking around the temple today merely sets the stage for the controversies that are to come. He does not approach the temple in anger but carries out another carefully orchestrated plan. As these days unfold, there will be no ignoring this prophet from Galilee. Indeed the disruption will be so great that it will lead to death. The coming of Jesus to Jerusalem means trouble—this will not be a peaceful Passover.

The final stanza of the hymn “Ride On! Ride On in Majesty!” captures the tone of this day for Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. The final stanza reads: “Ride on! ride on in majesty! In lowly pomp ride on to die; bow thy meek head to mortal pain; then take, O God, thy power, and reign.”¹ This well-staged procession is not cause for celebration; celebration is much too premature. There are dark days of trouble ahead—final meals, betrayal, the sting of whips, the pain of thorns, and finally a cross upon which our Savior will die.

Prayer

Eternal God, grant us the patience and the faith to walk, to wait, to turn over this season of Lent to you, the one who knows the way from Bethany to Golgotha, from a garden tomb to Galilee, and from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. We are certain that somewhere along that way, at your appointed time, our Lord will come to visit. Amen.

Note

1. *Glory to God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 198.

Matthew Rich is pastor of Reid Memorial Presbyterian Church in Augusta, Georgia.