

# From the Pulpit

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## *“Sabbath as Suffering”*

*Matthew 21:1-11; Philippians 2:5-11;  
Matthew 26:57- 27:61*

*(Part 7 of 9 in the sermon series  
“Sabbath, the Seventh Day”)*

April 13, 2014

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A meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Palm/Passion Sunday, April 13, 2014, dedicated to Abby and Brian Cave on their fifth anniversary and Emily Elizabeth Cave on her birthday, April 10, 2014 and always to the glory of God!

*“Sabbath as Suffering”*

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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On this day in 30AD two processions entered Jerusalem.

In their book, *The Last Week*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan write of that first Palm Sunday:

*It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year . . . One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession.*

*From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, his followers were from the peasant class. They had journeyed to Jerusalem from Galilee, about 100 miles to the north, a journey that is the central section and the central dynamic of the Gospels. Matthew’s story of Jesus and the Kingdom of God have been aiming for Jerusalem, pointing toward Jerusalem. It has now arrived.*

*On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea and Samaria entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus’ procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate’s proclaimed the power of empire. The two processions (on this day, 1,984 years ago) embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus’ crucifixion.” (The Last Week, John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, Harper and Row, San Francisco, 2006, p. 2).*

As the week we call “Holy” unfolds, we will see that the power of God embodied in Jesus Christ and the power of Rome embodied in the legion under Pilate’s rule will come to confrontational head by week’s end.

Pilate and his troops had come to reinforce the Roman garrison in preparation for Passover. Normally Pilate lived by the sea 60 miles away in Caesarea Maritima. It was more pleasant there and much less hostile than Jerusalem. Pilate came to Fortress Antonia, overlooking the temple and court, to keep an eye on the Jews and to oversee the suppression of all insurrections. Passover is the Jewish celebration of liberation from slavery by Moses from Egypt. Clearly, Pilate had cause to be concerned about insurrections in a week when the liberating hope of Passover was in the hearts and minds of all Jews (ibid, p. 3-4).

The sounds and actions of a liberating force were in the air that day entering from the east. But this force was no less than the power of God to heal, to bring peace, to transform lives through the message brought by the man of Nazareth. As Jesus entered Jerusalem, the people’s cry shook the ramparts on the east gate: ***“Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of our Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”*** People laid their cloaks on the road, they cut branches from the trees and laid on the road as well.

Jesus and his followers knew exactly what they were doing. They were staging a demonstration against the power of the empire. The symbolism of the Hebrew prophet Zechariah was clear: *“A king would come to Jerusalem, humble and riding on a donkey”* (Zechariah 9:9). He would be a king who, in the words of Zechariah *“would cut off the chariot from Ephraim, and the war-horse from Jerusalem. He would cut off the battle bow and command the nations in peace”* (9:10) (ibid).

Jesus’ followers were proclaiming Him as the king of peace who would reign in coming kingdom of God. They believed that military might would yield to the power of God. This peaceful procession from the east was about to confront the power, violence and glory of the empire that ruled the world and had its boot firmly on the neck of the Jews in Jerusalem and Judea. But, as Matthew’s Gospel tells us, *“When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil asking, ‘Who is this?’ The crowds were saying, ‘this is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.’”* Guess what - in the first century Roman Empire, there was only one way to break the back of a revolutionary movement like this. You stopped a prophet like Jesus through public execution on the “lynching tree” of Roman Rule known as “The Cross.”

It was Sunday, but Friday was coming...

The cost of discipleship in the kingdom of God is great. The week unfolding, which we call Holy Week, will show us that the call of discipleship means to lay down your life for others. From palms waving and shouts of "Hosanna," we move to confrontation, to beatings and finally to Jesus' death on a cross. This is a week of prayer, confusion, confrontation, liberation, terror, tumult, breaking bread and breaking bones; pouring wine and draining blood. Ultimately this is a week of death. Even more ultimately, this is week of resurrection from the dead.

I pray that we soak into our souls this Sabbath of Suffering. I pray that we take holy week for "Stop Time." Find Sabbath time this week – to walk the Labyrinth, break bread, drink the cup, pray, and ask ourselves, "Who is Jesus in my life?" "How do I lay down my life for others?" "How do I follow him?" "Who am I and who is he- and who are we together?"

The story of this week has ultimate purpose and the meaning for our lives. For today, we need to answer some questions... Which procession will we join? Which Gate of Jerusalem will we enter - the one from the east gate or the one from the west gate? Which powerful ruler will we follow? Will we give ourselves to God and to one another? Will we lay our lives down for God and one another?

On this Sabbath Day, enter by the east gate. Proceed with him to the cross. If you look up - before the Cross of Jesus you will see the face of God. Watch closely. Be touched deeply. Be liberated completely. Listen carefully. Be his followers. Amen.