



SEVEN DAYS THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

An In-Depth Look
at the Last Week
of Jesus' Earthly Life

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Rev. Craig M. Sturm
Trinity Lutheran Church
Sherman, Texas

PALM SUNDAY – A DAY OF CELEBRATION

In this series, “Seven Days That Changed Everything,” we will be taking an in-depth look at the events that transpired during Jesus’ last week here on earth. Jews call the week “Passover.” Christians refer to it as “Holy Week.” As we will see, it’s truly seven days that changed everything. My hope is that as we take a closer look at each specific day of Holy Week, both our understanding of and faith in Jesus Christ will increase.

The most important week of the entire church calendar starts on Palm Sunday. I bet most of us know what happens on Palm Sunday because we relive that day each year. We gather outside with raised palm branches in remembrance of how the people lined the streets, cheering and raising their palm branches in celebration as Jesus made his way into Jerusalem.

A young girl came home from worship one Palm Sunday and her father asked her what she had learned about Jesus that day. She told him how everyone was waving palm branches at Jesus and they were singing him a song. The father was pleased that his daughter had recalled so much. “And what song were they singing to Jesus?” the father asked. The little girl paused then said, “I think it was *O Susanna!*”

It wasn’t “*O Susanna*” that the people shouted on Palm Sunday, but rather “*Hosanna!*” which means, “Lord, save us!” To fully understand those words, we have to remember that the world in which believers lived was very oppressive. For generations, Jewish believers were treated harshly and unfairly by the Romans. The fact that the Jews claimed that God Almighty was the only true ruler (and not Caesar) caused lots of animosity between the Jews and the Romans.

The Jews longed for God to send the promised Messiah to overthrow the oppressive Roman government. And now, after years of waiting, this man named Jesus had come and was standing up to the Romans and questioning their authority. The people saw in this man, Jesus, one who was willing and able to liberate them from the oppressive Roman occupation. Jesus was surely the one sent by God to set them free.

And so people grabbed anything they could get their hands on. They tore palm branches from roadside trees. They removed their outer clothes. They threw them in his path to create a red-carpet fit for a king. Something incredible was happening and everyone wanted to be a part of it. The mighty Son of God was about to overthrow the evil Romans.

But something didn’t seem quite right. You would think that the One who had been sent by God to overthrow the Romans would come with shield and sword, riding on a white warrior horse as is portrayed in the book of Revelation. But Jesus didn’t have shield or sword, just a gentle smile and eyes full of love. And he wasn’t riding on a warrior horse, but rather on a young donkey – an animal known for humility and peace. When you think about it, it must have been a funny sight. Jesus – a grown man – riding on a colt of a donkey, his long legs dangling almost to the ground. It would have been an unforgettable sight, and an unforgettable message. Jesus wasn’t riding off to war. He came bringing peace. Jesus came bringing the message that love always triumphs over hate. It would not be the sword that would save us, but rather the mercy and love of God.

The love of God often times does not show up in ways that we expect or envision. And yet God’s love always arrives, in God’s good time, and in God’s good ways. The people wanted Jesus to take his crown so that he could by-pass the cross. Jesus would have to disappoint them. For Jesus knew full well that the only way for him and us to receive the crown of glory was through his sacrificial death on the cross. Jesus chose his Father’s will over all others.

There’s a challenge for us, I believe, hidden within this Palm Sunday story. Before Jesus parades into Jerusalem, he instructs his disciples to find him a young colt to ride. “If anyone asks, ‘Why do

you need a colt?' just say, 'The Lord needs it.'" That is to say, if the Lord needs it, then that is reason enough for someone to willingly offer it.

How many times has someone asked us, "Would you be willing to offer your talent, or your expertise, or your resources, or your time?" How do we respond? "Let someone else do it!" "I've served my time!" "I'm not the right person!" Perhaps we wondered why they asked us in the first place. Jesus responds to us the same way he did to his first disciples: "The Lord needs you, and that should be reason enough."

As we continue on in our Lenten journey, and ultimately see how Christ is willing to give us his very life upon the cross, it will become increasingly difficult to say "No" to God. When we ask, "Why do you want me?" Jesus responds, "God needs you." And that should be reason and justification enough for us to offer our whole lives in faithful service.

So as we begin this Holy Week journey, let us remember that Jesus has come to die. The triumphal entry on Palm Sunday occurs in the shadow of the cross. Jesus knew full well that no matter how many palm branches the people threw at his feet on Palm Sunday, the crowd would soon turn against him. The cross was his fate. It was his calling from God. "I need you," God told Jesus. And that was reason enough.

Out of love, God's Son, the perfect Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, will shoulder the sin of the whole world upon the cross.

At the memorial service for Hubert Humphrey, former Vice President of the United States, hundreds of people came from all over the world to say good-bye. One person who came to the service was shunned and ignored by virtually everyone there. Nobody would look at him, much less speak to him. That person was former President Richard Nixon. The shame of Watergate was still on everyone's mind. President Nixon was back in Washington for the first time since his resignation.

Then a very special thing happened. President Jimmy Carter, who was in the White House at that time, came into the room. Before he was seated, he saw Nixon standing over against the wall all by himself. President Carter went over and greeted Nixon as though he was a member of his very own family. To the surprise of everyone, the two of them embraced each other, and Carter said, "Welcome home, Mr. President! Welcome home!"

The next day, a newspaper columnist wrote, "If there was a turning point in Nixon's long ordeal in the wilderness, it was that moment and that gesture of love and compassion."

Palm Sunday is that same kind of turning point for Christians. It is that moment when God decides to look past all of our scandalous mistakes and cover-ups and extends his divine hand of mercy and grace. In the person of Jesus Christ, God chooses to ride through life with us to remind us of the gifts of forgiveness and life eternal that are available to all those who believe in the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

"Hosanna! Lord, save us!"

MONDAY – A DAY OF JUDGMENT AND ANGER

In this Lenten series we are reliving the last week that Jesus was here on earth, the week we refer to as “Holy Week.” In the last chapter, we talked about Palm Sunday, that day of celebration when Jesus paraded into Jerusalem. Now let us turn our attention to Monday.

Jesus woke up early Monday morning. He had spent the night in Bethany, five miles from Jerusalem, in the home of his dear friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. We can’t help but wonder what thoughts were running through Jesus’ mind. Surely Jesus was still caught up in all the excitement of the previous day when he had triumphantly entered the city with people shouting, “Hosanna! Lord, save us!” But there must have also been somber and reflective moments as well as Jesus mentally prepared himself for what was to come.

At daybreak, Jesus said goodbye to his good friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, and started down the road to Jerusalem with his disciples. As Jesus descended into the city from the Mount of Olives, he began to weep. Jesus mourned the fact that the people would not recognize or accept him as the Savior of the world. Their (and our) rebellion would have consequences. Jesus would have to bear the intense weight of the sinful world upon the cross. It would be unbearable but necessary for humanity’s relationship with God to be made right once and for all.

All of those thoughts of rebellion, lack of faith, and the impending crucifixion caused Jesus to weep. And when Jesus thought about the incredible, unconditional love that God, his Father, had for all of his children, it also caused Jesus to tear up. Grace is an emotional thing. It’s heart-wrenching when you realize how far God was willing to go to save us.

When Jesus arrived in the city of Jerusalem, things quickly turned ugly. As was his custom, Jesus headed towards the Temple, the holiest place in the entire city. But what Jesus found at the Temple caused righteous anger to well up inside of him. God’s House, a place meant for worship and prayer, had been turned into a shopping mall.

During Passover – that great festival when Jews celebrate their deliverance from Egyptian slavery – it’s estimated that the population of Jerusalem would swell from 50,000 to 180,000. Entire families would come from all over the world to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem. For comparison, think about College Station on the Saturday afternoon of an A&M football game, then double that number and hold on to the crowd for a week instead of a day. We’re talking lots of people.

Believers would desire to sacrifice an animal while at the Temple (after all, it’s biblically mandated) and they would need to pay their Temple tax. So lots of vendors had set up shop (with inflated prices, of course) to offer the necessary services to the massive crowds. The holiness of Passover had been replaced by its endless commercial possibilities. Lots of money was exchanging hands. It is very comparable to how commercialized the Christmas season has become here in the United States. All of the selling and buying is a blatant violation of the First Commandment, of pushing God aside in order to please our own wants and desires.

The Temple, a place meant to draw people’s hearts to God, had become a place for personal gain. The lure of wealth and success had trumped the people’s devotion to God. Instead of trusting God to provide for their every need, they decided to set up their own fundraising stand to ensure that they would have enough. Instead of giving their tithes to God out of gratitude for all God had given to them, they made themselves believe that having a little extra money in their pocket (even at the expense of others) was a wise investment.

If we are honest with ourselves, we are guilty of the same kinds of things – a lack of trust and not putting God first in our lives. And our rebellion and lack of devotion to God simply does Jesus in. The Scriptures say that Jesus ruthlessly begins to overturn the tables of the merchants and drives out

the animals in the stalls saying, "My Temple will be called a house of prayer, but you have turned it into a den of thieves!"

I imagine that when Jesus takes a close look at our lives, he perhaps has the same desire – to overturn our lives in order to get our attention. It's a wake-up call for us. Jesus forcefully convicts us of our sins in order that we might have a change of heart, and a change of priorities – a total surrender of our lives to the will and purposes of Almighty God.

As odd as it sounds, the anger and judgment of Monday in Holy Week reveals the mercy and grace of God. God simply cannot remain silent and uninvolved when it comes to our sin and rebellion. God, out of his love for us, gets angry at our rebellion, overturns our lives, and guides us back onto the path that leads to true life and peace.

By being painfully honest with us, Jesus gets us back on track. There's too much at stake to just leave us wandering aimless in our own dead-end journeys. Jesus comes and shakes things up a bit in order to reclaim our hearts and minds. Too much is at stake. It's a matter of life and death, literally.

True, God's anger and judgment are real. But so are God's mercy and love. That is the message of Monday in Holy Week. God always desires peace, but if we are unwilling to face reality and turn from our sinful ways, God's response will be strong and direct – in our face, you might say. But when we humbly repent and seek forgiveness from God, God's response of reconciliation will be just as strong and direct.

God, through the prophet Jeremiah, declares this: *"O my people, come home to me again, for I am merciful. I will not be angry with you forever. Acknowledge your guilt. Admit that you have rebelled against the Lord your God. Confess that you refused to listen to my voice. Come back to me, and I will heal your wayward hearts. Only in me will you find salvation and peace"* (Jeremiah 3).

True, God's anger and judgment are real. But God's mercy and love are just as real. This truth will be made clear upon the Cross of Calvary. Through the death of Jesus – the sinless Lamb of God – God will forgive our wickedness and will remember our sin no more.

"O my people, come home to me again, for I am merciful. Come stand at the foot of the cross and experience my forgiveness and love. For I am slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."

TUESDAY – A DAY OF TEACHING

WEDNESDAY – A DAY OF SOLITUDE

Let us continue on in our journey of reliving the last week that Jesus was here on earth. We've already remembered Palm Sunday, that day of celebration when Jesus paraded into Jerusalem; and Monday, the day that Jesus overturns the tables of the merchants at the Temple. Now let us consider the next two days, Tuesday and Wednesday in Holy Week.

Biblical scholars much smarter than I have figured out that if you put all of the writings of the four Gospel writers together, it equals about 80 pages. And yet, there is a lot of duplication within the different gospel accounts. If you eliminate all of the duplication, you would have only about 20 pages that tell us of Jesus' life and teachings. Of those 20 pages, 13 of them deal specifically with the last week of Jesus' life – what we call "Holy Week." And if you separate it still further, you would discover that a third of those 13 pages took place on Tuesday of Holy Week.

The Bible says that Jesus spent Sunday and Monday evenings in Bethany at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. He woke up on Tuesday morning and with his disciples returned to Jerusalem just like they had done the previous two days. It was Passover time. Many thousands of pilgrims had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish holiday.

Jesus used Tuesday in Holy Week as a day of teaching. It was a day where Jesus answered questions from the religious leaders. The Scriptures inform us that the questions asked of Jesus were intended as traps. They tried to get Jesus to say something publically that could be used against him so that the Roman officials would have reason to arrest him. Three unlikely groups conspired together the week of Holy Week: the Herodians, the Sadducees, and the Pharisees. Their common goal was to get Jesus arrested and to discredit his teachings so that they wouldn't have to deal with him any longer. Jesus was a menace to both the political and religious authorities, boldly proclaiming that God Almighty (and not Caesar) was ultimately in control, and filling people's heads with the idea that God was merciful and loving rather than the Judge and Punisher of the unfaithful.

Jesus was challenging all of their customs and practices and it was causing the people to become rebellious against the traditions of the land. Jesus was more interested in the relationship people had with God Almighty than with any tradition. Jesus was bold in declaring that the Romans had no authority except the authority given to them by God Almighty. Jesus had to be dealt with. Otherwise, things were going to get more out of hand than they were already.

When the Herodians, the Sadducees, and the Pharisees asked Jesus a question, it wasn't so that they could learn from him. They were trying to trick Jesus, to make him look like a fool so that those who were following him would lose all faith in their new leader.

The Herodians ask Jesus a question about paying taxes to Caesar. That's not surprising. The Herodians were a political group who opposed the Roman leadership of Pontius Pilate. They wanted King Herod's power to be restored through one of Herod's sons. They despised contributing to Caesar's power and authority through the tax. So they tried every trick they could think of to question Caesar's authority.

The Herodians' question was clearly intended as a trick. If Jesus had said, "No, you don't need to pay taxes," then the Romans could arrest him on the spot on grounds of treason. If Jesus had said, "Yes, you need to pay taxes," then he would have alienated himself from his own people who despised the unfair tax rate that the Romans forced upon them with few benefits.

Jesus asked for a Roman coin and then asked whose picture was stamped upon the coin. It was Caesar's image, of course. So Jesus responded, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's (*namely the tax*), but give to God the things that are God's (*which is nothing less than all that we have and all that we are*)." A powerful teaching and statement, indeed!

The next group to step forward were the Sadducees. They did not believe in the resurrection so their question dealt with the afterlife. Their goal was to make Jesus look ignorant in matters of the world to come to discredit his many statements about heaven and the afterlife. They ask Jesus a hypothetical question about a woman who had been widowed seven times. "In heaven," they ask, "whose husband will she be?" To the Sadducees, it was an argument for the total absurdity of an afterlife. Once again, Jesus brilliantly comes up with a faithful answer. "In heaven," Jesus says in so many words, "we will all be children of God, all related and united with Christ. The whole church will be the bride; Christ the bridegroom." The Sadducees were amazed at Jesus' wisdom and they walked away defeated.

The last question came from the Pharisees. The Pharisees were highly educated in the Word of God and believed that it was their duty and calling to point out when other people were not living according to the teachings of the Bible. Think of them as the self-righteous Bible police. So naturally their question dealt with the Law of God and our relationship to God's law. Their question was straightforward: "Which commandment is the greatest?" This open-ended question left lots of room to criticize Jesus no matter what his answer. To pick just one command from the 635 laws of the Old Testament was to imply that the rest of the commands were not as important.

But Jesus doesn't hesitate at all in his answer. After all, he knows for certain the greatest commandment because he lives it out each and every moment of his life. Jesus says, "Love the Lord your God with all of your heart and soul and mind and strength. And the second is just as important: Love your neighbor as yourself." Love God. Love others. Jesus says that if you live by those two simple commands, then you could literally forget all of the other laws. For if you are truly loving God and loving others in all that you say and do, you wouldn't ever be tempted nor have the desire to ever break *any* of God's commands. Ironically, to live by just two simple commands would force the Pharisees, the Bible police, out of a job.

With all three groups, Jesus saw through all of their tricky questions and proved that they, not Jesus, were the fools!

I wonder if in our faith journey we ask God the wrong kinds of questions. As we journey through life, we gather up our own personal questions that we want God to answer for us. Why do you allow so much evil and suffering in the world? Why haven't you helped us find a cure for cancer? Why did my spouse or parent or child have to die so young? Those are all serious, heart-felt questions. But I wonder if they are the kind of questions we should be asking Jesus.

Take note of the kinds of questions Jesus asks us: "Who do you say that I am?" That's a question about relationship. "How much trust and faith do you have in me? Are you willing to surrender your whole life to me so that I can be your Lord and Savior? When I died upon the cross, do you believe that I died for you, for your forgiveness and salvation? Who do you say that I am?"

It's not that Jesus isn't interested in answering all of our faith questions. It's just that he knows that there is something far greater than having all the right answers. The most important thing is to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus desires that our faith be bold enough to answer, "You are someone who walks beside me in the good times and in the bad. You are someone who will never give up on me even when I give up on myself. You are the One who has power and authority over sin and death. You are the only One who knows the way that leads to God and to his eternal kingdom."

If our faith is bold and mature enough to answer Jesus like that, then getting all of our questions answered becomes much less important. More than any answer, we have a promise from Jesus that he will never leave us or abandon us.

Wednesday in Holy Week doesn't take long to discuss, because the Scriptures record no activity of Jesus on that day. The Bible is silent. It jumps straight from Tuesday to Thursday – that day Jesus gathers with his closest friends in an Upper Room and shares the Lord's Supper. From the 22nd chapter of Luke we do learn that Judas Iscariot was meeting with the Temple leaders on Wednesday in order to come up with a plan to have Jesus arrested. But there's no activity from Jesus.

Perhaps the silence of Wednesday clues us in as to what Jesus might have done. Jesus most likely used the day just for himself, as a day of solitude. He needed some time alone with his Father to prepare his heart for what was to come later in the week.

The Bible often speaks of Jesus going off by himself and praying. It serves as a good reminder to us. When we are anticipating difficult times in our lives, our main goal should be to find some alone time with God to prepare our heart for what is to come. Once again, that's language of relationship. More than needing to know what our future will hold, our focus should be on believing and trusting that God alone holds our future. As children of God, our future is indeed in God's hands. Come what may, God has promised that our journey will end victoriously. Even though suffering, hardships and death will be a part of our journey, God assures us that they will not have the last word.

St. Paul writes, "For I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels or demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow – not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love... Indeed, nothing in all of creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (*Romans 8:38ff*).

THURSDAY – A DAY OF FELLOWSHIP

We have been examining in some detail the events that occurred during Jesus' last week here on earth, the week we call "Holy Week." We have looked at Palm Sunday, a day of celebration as Jesus parades into Jerusalem; Monday, a day of anger and judgment as Jesus throws the money changers out of the Temple; Tuesday, a day of questions and teaching; and Wednesday, a day of solitude for Jesus. Let us now turn our attention to Thursday, a day of fellowship.

It was time for the Passover liturgy to be celebrated. Passover was the event where God delivered the Israelites from the oppressive hands of the Egyptians. You know the story: Moses telling Pharaoh to "let my people go"; Pharaoh refuses; God sends 10 plagues upon the Egyptians to let them know he means business. The last plague was the death of all first-born sons. In order to save all of the Israelite first-borns, God instructs the Israelites to sacrifice an unblemished Lamb and to smear the blood on their doorposts. When the Angel of Death came and saw the blood of the lamb, the Spirit would "Passover" those homes, thereby saving the young Israelite boys and the future of God's chosen people.

This event is so central to the Jewish faith and their identity that each year they remember the event through a meal called the Passover Seder. On Thursday of Holy Week, Jesus and his faithful Jewish disciples prepared to celebrate this important meal. It is sometimes referred to as "The Festival of Unleavened Bread" in that only flat bread (bread without yeast) is served to remember how God commanded the Israelites to leave Egypt in a hurry, leaving no time for the bread to rise. God said, "Don't take the time to let your bread rise! Bake it and eat it. We must be off!"

Red wine is also one of the main menu items for the Passover meal, representing (among other things) the blood that was smeared on the doorposts. If this Passover meal with bread and wine sounds very much like Holy Communion to you, it should. For on Thursday of Holy Week, Jesus redefines the Passover Seder meal into a remembrance meal of what would take place the following day, Good Friday.

The Scriptures tell us that Jesus appointed Peter and John to find a room that was large enough for all of the disciples and others to celebrate the Passover Seder together. Jesus told them to look for a man carrying a pitcher of water. The man would stick out because carrying water from the well was a woman's job during biblical times. That man would have a large enough room to accommodate everyone.

When all had gathered that evening, Jesus began the ancient liturgy: *Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.* But on Thursday night of Holy Week – the night before Jesus was crucified – Jesus deviated from the words of the ancient liturgy. Jesus saw the Passover meal, complete with bread and wine, in a new way as a symbol of his body and blood that would be broken and shed on the cross.

And so Jesus instituted a new meal, a sacrament that would help his believers remember and celebrate the gifts of forgiveness and salvation that God would offer them through his death. "Take, eat, this is my body, given for you. Take, drink, this is my blood shed for you. Do this in remembrance."

On the Thursday of Holy Week, Jesus made his looming sacrificial death so real you could actually taste it. Through bread and wine, you could actually grab hold of the mystery of the Christian faith – that through Christ's death on the cross – forgiveness and salvation is ours. The words of John 3:16 say it so well: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..." Through the bread and wine of Holy Communion, we experience the truth of those words first hand. "Given for you," Christ says.

In many of my prayers before fellowship meals here at the church I pray something like, "As we share this meal together, may we be brought closer to God and to one another." That is surely the intention of Holy Communion as well: for our hearts and minds to be brought closer to Jesus and to one another.

As we gather together around the Lord's Table and eat from the same bread and drink from the same cup, we can't help but sense that Holy Communion is indeed a family meal. All of God's family is invited to come and dine. And as we share the same bread and cup, it is God's hope that we will be united in mind and spirit, united in a common mission to share with others the love of Christ that we experienced at his Table.

Just as we gather around one Table, so we should leave in one Spirit to love and serve the Lord. From John's Gospel, we learn that on Thursday night of Holy Week Jesus prayed for the unity of the church: "I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one."

On Thursday night, Jesus' destiny with the cross was just hours away. The fulfillment of God's plan of salvation was near. Jesus knew his hour had come, and so after the meal, he went to one of his favorite places for prayer, the Garden of Gethsemane. There, Jesus bared his soul to God: "My Father! Please, if it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet, not my will but your will be done." Soon after, Judas, along with a group of officers, arrived and arrested Jesus.

Amazingly, Jesus did not try to escape; he shows no fear. Jesus knows that everything is happening so that God's plan can be fulfilled. And so Jesus willingly takes the final steps that lead to the cross of Calvary. And as he does, we remember Jesus' words: "My body, my blood, given and shed for you."

May we always treasure those words of grace and forgiveness.

FRIDAY – A DAY OF DEATH

SATURDAY – A DAY OF MOURNING

Now let us consider the last two days of Holy Week, Friday and Saturday.

Friday morning began with much uncertainty. There was definitely tension in the air. Jesus had been arrested the night before for speaking out against the Romans and for the trouble he was causing the Jewish Temple leaders. They were afraid that if Jesus was not dealt with a huge revolt would occur. The fact that it was Passover time with thousands of extra people in the city, made it all the more necessary to stay on top of the situation.

During the great celebration of Passover, there was an old custom for the Roman Governor to release to the Jews a prisoner of their choice. There was an arrested man named Barabbas, a freedom-fighter who had murdered someone to forward the Jewish cause. It's no wonder the Jews wanted Barabbas released instead of Jesus. He was one of the few who was willing to do whatever was necessary to overthrow the oppressive Romans. Pilate would have much preferred to release Jesus who was not so politically dangerous.

The religious leaders stirred up the crowd so that when Pilate asked, "Which one do you want me to release, Barabbas or Jesus called the Christ?" the crowd demanded Barabbas' release and the crucifixion of Jesus. The selfish desires of sinful humanity once again revealed themselves. A murderer is chosen over the Lord of life. The necessity for Jesus to die on the cross for our sins once again becomes evident.

We remember this moment in Jesus' life every time we confess one of the creeds. We say, "For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate..." Yes, this helps us remember that Jesus' trial and crucifixion are historical events; they can be verified. But it also reminds us that Jesus' crucifixion was "for our sake." For God's plan of salvation to be fulfilled, Christ had to die. His sacrificial death "for our sake" was necessary for our relationship with God to, once and for all, be made right. The debt of our sin must be paid.

Even though Pilate seems unfair and cruel, let us remember that he was simply playing his part in God's divine plan of salvation. Even with all of the false accusations, terrible beatings, and ultimate death of Jesus, God was still in control. God was still there, grieving the suffering and death of his only Son.

Here's how it transpired. After Jesus is sentenced to death around 7am, the Roman soldiers flog Jesus, meaning Jesus was whipped with leather straps containing small sharp stones. With each lashing, the skin was torn causing massive blood loss. The point of a flogging was to weaken the resistance of the person and to hasten death. Otherwise, it sometimes took days for one to actually die after being nailed to a cross. As odd as it sounds, flogging was an act of mercy to bring about death in a timely manner.

Around 8am, Jesus is forced to carry the cross beam of his cross to the crucifixion site – a Roman tradition. This was yet another way to weaken and humiliate the victim. Scripture records that Jesus was too weak to make it all the way up the hill so an African man passing by (Simon of Cyrene) was pulled in to carry the beam for Jesus. At 9am, the Bible says, or the third hour, Jesus is nailed to the cross. His guilty verdict was written on a sign and placed above his head: "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."

For the next three hours, as Jesus gasped for each breath, the soldiers gambled for Jesus' clothes, Jesus utters seven statements, and he is insulted and mocked by on-lookers. At the ninth hour, or 3pm, Jesus breathes his final breath and dies. To make sure Jesus is truly dead, one of the soldiers takes his spear and thrusts it into Jesus' side. Water and blood – two symbolic sacramental elements – flow forth from Jesus.

In Roman crucifixions, the bodies of criminals were often left on the crosses to rot – food for vultures. But when Joseph of Arimathea requested Jesus' body from Pilate, he consented – perhaps a sign that Pilate did not truly believe that Jesus was guilty of the charges. Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy man who had his very own family tomb. It was in a beautiful garden area, which is the inspiration for the "Joseph's Garden" we recreate in our sanctuary each Easter.

Joseph lovingly wrapped Jesus' body in linen burial cloths, placed his body in the tomb and then rolled a great stone across the entrance to prevent robberies and to safeguard one from coming into contact with the dead, which would make you ceremonially unclean.

Since the sun was going down and it was the start of the Sabbath (in which any kind of work was prohibited) the anointing of Jesus' body would have to wait. The Scriptures tell us that many women witnessed where Joseph placed Jesus' body so that they could come back after the Sabbath was over and ritually anoint Jesus' body with burial spices – the ancient means of embalming.

Using human wisdom, it was the end of Jesus. All hope was lost. Jesus' plight to bring peace and salvation to God's people had failed. The Romans had won. Can we even begin to imagine the grief and sorrow that Jesus' followers experienced on Friday evening? It probably all felt like a bad dream.

Saturday was indeed a day of mourning. All thoughts were on "what could have been." Surely many questioned where God was in the midst of their suffering and uncertainties. Followers of Jesus echoed the words they heard Jesus speak from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

The Gospel of Matthew tells us that the priests and Pharisees went to go see Pilate on Saturday morning. Here's the conversation: "Sir, we remember what Jesus was telling everyone while he was still alive – that after three days he would rise from the dead. We think it would be a good idea for you to post guards outside Jesus' tomb to prevent his followers from coming and stealing his body and then telling everyone that he has been raised from the dead. For that lie to spread would mean that we would be worse off than before!" Pilate consented and posted guards at Jesus' tomb around the clock. With the dawn of the new day, however, we will learn that God's plan to save all who believe cannot be thwarted, no matter how many Roman guards are on duty. God will have the last word. Good will conquer evil. Life will conquer death.

The seven days of Holy Week; it is indeed a week that changed everything. Because of the redemptive death of Jesus upon the cross, life will never be the same. Come to think of it, neither will death. To fully understand these truths we have to wait until Sunday morning when everything will be seen in a whole new light – the light of resurrection.

But for now we are invited to just kneel at the cross and contemplate the depth of God's mercy and love. God provides exactly what we need – a Savior to redeem us from the consequences of our sin and rebellion; a Savior who shows us the way to the blessed life – both now and in the life to come.

In the words of the hymn: "Upon the cross of Jesus, my eyes at times can see the very dying form on one who suffered there for me. And from my contrite heart, with tears, two wonders I confess: the wonder of his glorious love and my unworthiness."

Thanks be to God!