

Lesson Plans that Work
Year C – Palm Sunday
Gospel Lesson for Adults

Scripture: Luke 23:1-49

The Lord is full of compassion and mercy: Come, let us adore him. (Antiphon for Lent, Book of Common Prayer, page 81.) And what if, during this season of Lent, we sought a deeper understanding of this amazing gospel of grace? Will that image of grace energize us to do the spiritual housekeeping we need to be ready for the "new thing" God is doing in Easter?

A notation for this week's Gospel

Gathered in our comfortable churches, we struggle to let the difficult words of the Crucifixion land anywhere in our psyches. Would any of us have been there, or would we have waited for the news to reach us? Had we shown up, would we have demanded that Barabbas be released instead of Jesus? Would we have stood with the few at the foot of the cross? What time will we scrounge in the week ahead to pause and squint at the grace of this awesome love?

Theme: What love is this?

Before Class: Come to class equipped with a listing of the services that will be offered in your church this coming week, and to the extent possible, other services in other churches during the day in your community (if you are in a large enough city that people would not be able to get to your church on their lunch hour for noon-day services or even for Good Friday services.) You will need copies of the Bible or copies of the scripture for today, paper, and pencils.

Beginning: Especially if you are meeting directly after the worship service, invite the group to be silent for a moment or two to collect themselves; honor the fact that we have before us a painfully difficult passage AND, unlike those who walked through it originally, we know the next chapter in the story.

Opening Prayer: Lord, be with us as we meditate on your word and help us to remember the words of Psalm 31, "But as for me, I have trusted in you, O Lord, I have said, 'You are my God.'" Amen. (Psalm 31:14)

The Scripture: Suggest the group take this passage in three groupings, stopping after each to unpack what we find. Be sure each person has access to a Bible or a copy of the scripture for today, a piece of paper, and a pencil. Suggest that if a question or a response comes to them as they are hearing the reading, jot a note to themselves: the verse, for example, or a word that came to them.

Luke 23: 1-17. Ask one person to read this passage, the rest following along and taking notes. Invite them to especially make note of words or phrases that stick out for them.

After a moment or two of silence, ask if anyone has a response or a question from this portion. (A few items that may come up: the charges against Jesus clearly have no basis; they were looking for things that would catch the attention of the Roman authorities. Notice how neither Pilate, the Roman Governor, nor Herod, the Judean puppet ruler, wants to handle the case.)

Luke 23: 18 - 25. Invite a different person to read this passage, the rest following along and taking notes.

Again, after a moment or two of silence, invite responses or questions. (Note that it was the custom to release a prisoner at Passover as a token to the Hebrew people under occupation by Rome. How did Pilate think this would solve his problem? How did the crowd foil him? (Verse 18b)

Luke 23: 26 - 31. Invite another person to read this passage, the rest following along and taking notes, and especially making notes of words or phrases that stick out for them.

A moment or two of silence may help people form a response. (Most of us have seen artists' renderings of Simon of Cyrene carrying the massive cross. Notice that a "great number of people" followed. Executions always usually draw a crowd to this day. Jesus' response to the crowd appears only in Luke.)

Luke 23: 32 - 43. Invite a different person to read this passage while the rest follow along, taking notes, and especially making notes of words or phrases that stick out for them.

Take a moment or two of silence. Notice these elements: Two thieves are crucified along with Jesus and Jesus' poignant, yet crystal clear response (verse 34); Lots cast to divide Jesus' clothing, fulfilling the psalm (22:17); The contrast between the two thieves, the one projecting his bitterness, the other owning his crime. Jesus, pastor to the end (Verse 43)

Luke 23: 44 - 49. Invite one more person to read, the rest following along and taking notes, and especially making notes of words or phrases that stick out for them.

Again take a moment or two of silence. Some elements to notice: The darkness at noon and the curtain in the temple torn in two: the distance between God and us now obliterated. Jesus last words (Verse 46), the revelation of the Centurian, the crowd still animated, the few friends who had stayed, watching from a distance.

Getting Closure: Invite the participants to look back over their notes and the words or phrases that stuck out for them as they read today's Gospel passage. Have them write those words on a separate piece of paper and invite them to carry the sheet with them as they journey through Holy Week as a way to call them back to the scripture that defines this week.

Closing Prayer: God of All, for unimaginable love, thank you; for our potential to love, thank you. Be with us this week as we journey through Holy Week toward Easter. Amen.

Luke 23:1-49

23 Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate.² They began to accuse him, saying, 'We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.'³ Then Pilate asked him, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' He answered, 'You say so.'⁴ Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, 'I find no basis for an accusation against this man.'⁵ But they were insistent and said, 'He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.'

6 When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean.⁷ And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time.⁸ When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign.⁹ He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer.¹⁰ The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him.¹¹ Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate.¹² That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.

13 Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people,¹⁴ and said to them, 'You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him.¹⁵ Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death.¹⁶ I will therefore have him flogged and release him.'

18 Then they all shouted out together, 'Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!'¹⁹ (This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.)²⁰ Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again;²¹ but they kept shouting, 'Crucify, crucify him!' ²²A third time he said to them, 'Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him.'²³ But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed.²⁴ So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted.²⁵ He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.

26 As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus.²⁷ A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him.²⁸ But Jesus turned to them and said, ‘Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.’²⁹ For the days are surely coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.’³⁰ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us’; and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’³¹ For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?’

32 Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.³³ When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.³⁴ Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’ And they cast lots to divide his clothing.³⁵ And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!’³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine,³⁷ and saying, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’³⁸ There was also an inscription over him, ‘This is the King of the Jews.’

39 One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?’⁴¹ And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.’⁴² Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’⁴³ He replied, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’

44 It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon,⁴⁵ while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two.⁴⁶ Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.’ Having said this, he breathed his last.⁴⁷ When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, ‘Certainly this man was innocent.’⁴⁸ And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts.⁴⁹ But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

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