

Sermon by Rev. Susan Scott
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
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Grace to you and peace from God our creator, our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ and the Holy Spirit.

So here we are: We've come to the climax of the story. We're entering into the week Christians call Holy Week.

For those of you who gave up something for Lent, you have seven days to go.

When I was in my second year at seminary, I lived in the dormitory. One of the women in the dorm that year gave up chocolate for Lent and during the 40 plus days of Lent (remember the Sundays don't count), I never heard someone speak so much about chocolate. It seemed like every time I saw her, I heard some variation of: "I can't eat any chocolate. I gave it up for Lent." Finally Easter arrived and Easter evening, when I returned to school, she was there and she said, "OOH, I feel sick. I ate too much chocolate today."

I wanted to ask her, but I was too timid "then what was the point of giving it up for Lent if it only meant you were going to overindulge and make yourself ill on Easter Sunday."

I know people who give up different things for Lent and that's fine, but I've tended to believe it might be a little more important to take something up instead of giving something up: to take up more prayer, to take on more worship, to be more reflective, to be more charitable. I believe the season of Lent should be a self-reflective time, a time to grow in our faith and to grow as a person.

Today we enter into Holy Week, the last week of Lent. And as we enter into this week, we also enter into the story of the Passion of Jesus. As we are gathered here this morning, we come from different traditions and we have different beliefs about Jesus, but I want to ask you to pay attention to the person of Jesus during his last week.

My preaching is always affected by my reading and my experiences. This past week there are two pieces that I read that led me to think more about my life and also about Jesus' life.

The first is from the book, *What it is like to go to War* by Karl Marlantes. He writes: "...there are two broad categories of initiation experiences. The first kind prepares the individual to fulfill an adult role in his or her society. Traditionally it was where the boys learned to accept the danger and responsibility involved in hunting and the girls learned to accept the danger and responsibility involved in childbirth. The second kind of initiation goes beyond societal roles and is of a spiritual nature. It is about accepting one's mortality. It is about facing death. To fully mature as individuals we need to undergo both kinds of

initiation. In our culture individuals now must do initiatory rites on their own. Some do and some don't. A lot of people in our culture simply never grow up."

As I ponder Jesus' life and particularly the events we remember during holy week, I believe Jesus was fully mature and understood danger and responsibility and his own mortality.

The other thing I've been reading about is self-compassion which means treating yourself with kindness, caring, nurturance, and concern, rather than being harshly judgmental, indifferent to your suffering, or self-indulgent. What distinguishes self-compassion from self-love or self-acceptance is that you frame your failures, your inadequacies, or the suffering in your life that's not your fault in light of common humanity. Instead of feeling *Oh, poor me*, which is like self-pity, we understand that the human condition is tough. Humans aren't perfect, and things go wrong. That's the way it is for all of us.

There are three aspects to self-compassion:

The first is self-kindness which entails being warm and understanding toward ourselves when we suffer, fail, or feel inadequate, rather than ignoring our pain or flagellating ourselves with self-criticism. Self-compassionate people recognize that being imperfect, failing, and experiencing life difficulties is inevitable.

The second aspect of self-compassion is a connection with common humanity. Frustration at not having things exactly as we want them to be is often accompanied by an irrational but pervasive sense of isolation – as if I'm the only person suffering or making mistakes. The very definition of being "human" means that one is mortal, vulnerable, and contrary to some people's belief: imperfect.

The third aspect of self-compassion is mindfulness, a balanced approach to our negative emotions so that feelings are neither suppressed nor exaggerated. This stance stems from the process of relating personal experiences to those of others who are also suffering and putting our experiences in a larger perspective. ⁱ

So with this in mind maturity and self-compassion, consider Jesus' actions during this last week of his earthly life.

Traditionally the week begins with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Mark is that Gospel that is the briefest. He moves the story along at a quick pace. So as you heard when I read, Jesus comes riding into Jerusalem on a donkey and the crowds are cheering. It's a parade. People are shouting Hosanna!. It seems like Jesus has finally won everyone over. They are ready to make him a king.

Someone else might have nursed this adoration. Look at how wonderful I am. They love me. Not Jesus. Mark tells us that Jesus entered Jerusalem "went into the temple and looked around at everything" and then with his disciples went to the nearby town of Bethany.

Mark describes Jesus as coming to and going from the temple in Jerusalem during these days. He continues to teach. He continues to speak.

Mark tells us he had a meal at the house of Simon the Leper and a woman comes in and anoints Jesus' head with oil. Some complain that the oil could have been used for the poor, but Jesus says let her alone. He allows her to anoint him.

Then the plot thickens. Here is where if this was a movie, the music would tell us something bad is going to happen. (dum, duh, dum, dum). Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, makes an agreement with the high priests to betray Jesus.

Jesus continues on his way, Jesus is focused with his intention. He eats the Passover meal with the disciples – the meal that reminds the Jews of their freedom from slavery. There Jesus shares bread and wine and tells them it is his body and his blood and that they are also to do this.

After supper Jesus goes to the garden to pray. He prays that what is to come may not happen: "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible, remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want."

Soon Judas comes with a crowd of people with swords and clubs. Just a few days ago, the crowds were shouting, Hosanna. Now they have turned against him. And even his disciples scatter.

Mark has this interesting little tidbit: "A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked." Some people think that might have been the author. It does tell us people were scared.

They take Jesus to the high priests. Jesus appears calm.

And then Jesus is before Pilate. Pilate offers to release one prisoner the people who had shouted, "Hosanna" now shout to have Jesus crucified. "Crucify him" Pilate asks: "What evil has he done?" But they shout even more: "Crucify him."

And so Jesus' fate is sealed. The soldiers mock him and beat him. Jesus stumbles carrying his cross to the site of the execution and they compel a passerby to help him.

They nail him to the cross and offer him a wine mixed with myrrh and he declines. Most of the people around the cross mock him. Before he dies, Jesus cries out in his suffering, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Then he gave a loud cry and breathed his last.

And Mark tells us there were some women, followers of Jesus, who were at a distance from the cross until the end.

Deserted by his disciples, turned on by the crowds who had just days earlier shouted "Hosanna," Jesus dies on the cross.

Mark tells us there was a centurion there who having watched all these events proclaimed: Truly this man was the son of God.

My friend Ruth is fond of saying, "If I were queen of the world. If I could control everythingand then she proceeds to tell what changes she would want to make.

We imperfect humans have that tendency to want to control. It's in scripture:
--Adam and Eve in the garden

--Story of the Tower of Babel

In each of these stories and with many others people wanted to be like God.

This is perhaps our greatest temptation –to be like God.

We want to control. We don't like the feeling of things being up in the air or unsettled. We don't like uncertainty.

When the people of Israel lived in Egypt they were slaves. They pleaded to God for release from their slavery. In the story of their journey to the promised land, multiple times, they complain. "Why did you bring us to this wilderness? Was it to die? We were better off in Egypt."

There are times when we might feel that way that we are in a wilderness. We don't know what's up ahead. It's scary.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus shows us a better way – a fully human way.

Jesus has been tested, and tried and he proceeds to be who he believes God calls him to be.

Instead of choosing to be like God, Jesus in his life chooses to be fully human. He doesn't take the easy way. He doesn't try to be God. Jesus acts humbly. Jesus shows us how we humans can live. He lived purposefully within the constraints of being human. And it is precisely because he did that, that we have come to know him as the Son of God.

Jesus lived fully who he could be. He didn't try to be God. He lived as a human being. He lived with uncertainty. He lived with difficulty. He was not swayed by people's fickle actions. He knew that his source of strength was God.

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote about it this way: "Both Adam and Jesus were tempted by the chance to play God. Whereas Adam stepped over a line and found humanity a curse, Jesus stayed behind the line and made humanity a blessing. One tried to be God, one was content to be a human being. The irony is that the one who tried to be God did not do too well as a human being, while the one who was content to be human became known as the Son of God." (from *Christian Century*, May-June 1996)

We are not to try to be like God, you could say we are to remember our place – we are human beings loved by God.

Paul in his letter to the Philippians included the words read today. These are not Paul's original words. It is understood that they are a hymn the early church sang.

"who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross."

As we enter this Holy Week, we enter into the passion of Jesus. It's not about chocolate or anything else we might have given up. We will remember the life and actions of Jesus, one who chose to live fully human, one who chose to fully love, even when that meant giving his life.

I believe the lesson for us is that we need to be content to be human beings with all our mistakes, with our suffering and with our imperfections and then we will show we have learned from Jesus, we have learned from our reflection, and we are open to growing in faith and as a human.

God bless each of us during this holiest of weeks.

¹ Kristen Neff, PhD – Spirituality and Health