

Entering Holy Week
Palm SundayB, Passion Gospel
Grace Church Newton
March 24, 2024

THIS IS A DRAFT TEXT OF THE SERMON. IT MAY VARY FROM THE PRESENTED VERSION. PLEASE EXCUSE TYPOS AND GRAMMATICAL ERRORS, AND DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION.

[When they] saw all that was taking place, they were filled with awe. Amen.

Today is a complicated day. Given the difficult history of Jewish-Christian relations and the contemporary rise in anti-Semitism – even right here in Newton – the ways in which Jews are portrayed in the Holy Week liturgy is an important issue.¹ These texts – this time – through history they have given rise to anti-Jewish language and violence, marking Holy Week and Good Friday as a historically dangerous time for Jewish communities living in Christian contexts. So this, today, is complicated.

Thanks be to God, many, many years ago, Grace parishioner John Townsend, priest, New Testament scholar, and leader in ecumenical efforts, began to work alongside Jewish and Christian scholars to examine the harm done by some Christian practices in this season and to offer alternatives. Today's passion gospel was the result of his work. John Townsend was ahead of his time.

And yet, more work remains to be done. This year John Heywood and I – thank you John – made additional modest edits to the text, hoping to further shift its impact. And yet...it's still uncomfortable. Were you uncomfortable?

A history of violence against Jews, justified by invoking Christian scripture – this is a legacy to which we are accountable. And yet, within the text, behind the text, in

¹This sentence is adapted from the “Proposed Trial Use Liturgy for Good Friday,” Diocese of Massachusetts. The full text may be found [HERE](#).

between the lines of the text...this is where that we also find the life-giving figure of Jesus. Intertwined. It's complicated...

As we move into this week, this holiest of weeks in the Christian tradition, we slow down. We take this time to remember the last days of Jesus' life on earth. This year, together with St. John's Church in Newtonville and Trinity Parish in Newton Centre, we will – through worship and imagination – follow alongside Jesus through these days, almost as if in real time.

- On Thursday here at Grace, we will remember how Jesus showed us to serve others, taking a towel and washing the feet of his disciples. We will remember their last supper together. And we will recall his betrayal and arrest, as we strip our altar of any remnants of Jesus' presence, just as the disciples who were there with him that night fled to avoid his same fate.
- On Friday with reflective music, singing, and prayer, we will remember his death, and we will focus our gaze on the cross on which he died.
- And on Saturday, at Trinity in Newton Centre, we will kindle the new flame, from which we light the paschal candle. Under its glow we'll recount the saving history of God through the Jewish people, and then through Christ, as we proclaim the Easter feast.

This, my friends, is the nature of Christian life. Indeed, the nature of being human. Complications and complexity. Reckoning with the harm, and the violence, and the unintended consequences of our tradition...alongside the mystery, and the joy, and the celebration of life and new creation that is always and forever available through God.

I invite you into this Holy Week. I invite you to hold this complexity. I invite you to walk alongside Jesus as together we move through this deepest mystery of our faith. May you be filled with awe.

Amen.