

Lent and Easter Readings

Also adaptable to a Maundy Thursday service

Instructions:

- 1. They encompass the six Sundays before Easter and include Easter Sunday and the Sunday following; eight in total.*
- 2. All of the readings have involved candles (hence the occasional references.) We have had six purple candles placed around a white central candle. The six purple candles are lit the first Sunday and each Sunday following, with one additional one being extinguished each Sunday, with Good Friday being "dark". On Easter the Christ candle is lit, and on the Sunday after the six purple candles are re-lit with a taper from the central candle. The extinguishing/lighting takes place without comment immediately after the reading.*
- 3. If your church has long narrow windows you can gradually darken the sanctuary with tar paper up to Good Friday. This has heightened the sense of journeying into the dark, but the candles will convey that symbolism if the other is not possible.*
- 4. On the second and last readings, you can sing a cappella "Guide me O Thou Great Jehovah".*
- 5. On the first Sunday and occasionally in between the reader prefaces the Reading by explaining "what is going to happen." These explanations are not included in the text, but are necessary information for the congregation.*

Lent One

During this time of Lent,
we remember the approaching death of our Lord Jesus.
The remembering will be a journey.
Will you come?

We will come.

Consider, as we begin, Jesus' face.
We are not told what his face was like.
We do not know its shape or coloring,
or the particularities of his features.
The face we picture for him must be imagined.
But, we are told, his face is set to go to Jerusalem.*
There's resolution in it, something determined.
It's as if YES had settled into his eyes.

All the promises of God find their "YES" in him*

He must go up to Jerusalem,
he must be there for the Feast of Passover.

We must be there for the Passover.

Consider, again, his face.
Not long ago it was transfigured before some of his friends.
His face shone like the sun
and his clothes became as white as the light.
From the cloud a voice said,
This is my Son, the Beloved...listen to him.*

God commanded the light to shine out of darkness... and his glory is in the face of Christ.*

Consider his face, set for Jerusalem.
They will spit in his face, and hit him with their fists.
"Play the prophet!" they will cry,
"Who hit you?"*

These are the words of the prophet:
I offered my back to those who struck me.
my cheeks to those who tore at my beard;
I did not cover my face against insult and spittle.

The Lord God will help me; I shall not be confounded, I have set my face like a flint, I shall not be ashamed.

We go with him, watching his face.

Scripture References: Luke 9:51; 2 Corinthians 1:20; Matthew. 17:2; 2 Corinthians 4:6; Matthew 26:67; Isaiah 50:6, 7.

Lent Two

We are on a journey through Lent.
We travel with Jesus to Jerusalem, to his death.
For him, the trip was real and very physical,
by foot, perhaps with a pack donkey, over familiar roads.

He'd gone as a 12-year-old boy, and other times since.

He knew the steep up and down course,
into the hills where the city stood.
He knew the cypress trees, the olive grooves, the arid heat, the night cold,
the villages along the way where one stopped to eat or sleep.

He knew his friends.
No one in Israel would go on a journey by himself,
unless it was very short.
It was too risky.
Pilgrims to Jerusalem traveled in groups.
They formed caravans, they entrusted themselves to a guide.

Hymn: *Guide me, O thou great Jehovah (vv. 1-2)*

We too have our real and physical pilgrimage.
We cook and eat together, buy clothes to keep warm and cool.
We travel along familiar streets to our jobs, the stores, our schools and universities.
Every day we are leaving our homes and returning.
Every day we journey through our lives to our eventual deaths.

Hymn: *Guide me, O thou great Jehovah (v. 3)*

When the pilgrims thronged towards Jerusalem for the great feasts, they sang songs.
Some of their songs are found in the psalms: the songs of ascents.
They sang of their fears and the Lord's protection;
they sang of injustice and God's vindication;
they sang of the glories of the house of Yahweh
and how glad they were that soon they would be there;
they sang of God's blessings on families,
about their enemies, about despair,
about how the ancient king took the ark to its resting place in Zion.
They sang songs for walking and songs for the night.

Jesus sang as He went up to Jerusalem.
We are with Him. Even as it grows darker, we sing.

Scripture References: Songs of Ascents: Psalms 120 to Psalm 134.

Lent Three

So we reach Jerusalem.

The city of our God.

Amazing, isn't it, that the centre of the world,
the place that symbolizes the presence of God, is a city!
A city is people, houses close together and crowded streets,
Thorough-fares and commerce, schools and churches.
Sometimes we think we must leave the city to find Him,
Venture to the isolation of mountains or forests or lakes.

But He is here, in the city.

Forgive us Lord, when we often escape the city,
if not in body then in spirit,
especially its poor and homeless and needy,
to seek our comfort and consolation
far from the brokenness and despair at the heart of cities.

Forgive us Lord that we care so little for our neighbours,
that we so seldom think of those we encounter
in the congestion and busyness of urban life.

**When Yahweh builds Zion anew,
He will be seen in His glory;
He will answer the prayer of the abandoned,
He will not scorn their petitions.**

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil.
"Who is this?" the people asked, and the crowds answered:

This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.

Jesus from Nazareth, who loved Jerusalem.
He was presented there, in the temple, as a baby.
He visited, so eager and wise, at twelve.
The devil took him to Jerusalem to tempt him.
In Jerusalem he had cried out during the Feast of Tabernacles,
"If anyone is thirsty, let them come to me!"

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem," he says now,
"you that kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you!
How often I have longed to gather your children,
as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you refused!"

**Awake, awake! To your feet, Jerusalem!
Seek the Lord while He is still to be found,
Call to Him while He is still near.**

Scripture References: Psalm 102:16, 17; Matthew 21:10, 11; Matthew 23:37, 38; Isaiah 51:17; Isaiah 55:6.

Lent Four

At this time of Lent, we continue our journey with Jesus to the cross.
It's a journey of remembrance.
But there are things we would rather forget.
Falling asleep when asked to pray.
Denial, betrayal.
We want to protest, reassure our Lord. Say boldly:
"Though all lose faith, I will never lose faith!"
"Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you."

But we have lost faith, we have disowned you.

"Jesus the Galilean? I don't know who you're talking about...
Jesus the Nazarene? I do not know the man...
My accent, like his? I tell you, I don't know him!"

We cry,

Hosanna in the highest!

And then we betray innocent blood. Three times.
Seventy times seven times.

**He was despised and we took no account of him.
We thought of him as someone punished,
struck by God and brought low.
Yahweh burdened him with the sins of us all.**

As we extinguish the candle today,
we acknowledge with regret and shame
that we have sinned against our Saviour.
We place ourselves before your cross, O Christ,
and ask, in mercy, Lord, remember me.

Scripture References: Matthew 26:34, 35; Matthew 26: 69-74; Isaiah 53:4, 6

Lent Five

There is much to get ready, here in Jerusalem.
The room for the Passover, the bread and wine,
the water and towel, and the lamb for the sacrifice and the supper.
The lamb...

Do we have the lamb?

Remember Isaac and Abraham setting off together, to worship,
carrying the wood and the fire and the knife?
"Father," asked Isaac.
"Yes, my son?"
"But where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

"God himself" came the answer, "will provide the lamb for the offering."

Look, said John when he saw Jesus coming toward him,

There is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.

Well, it's one thing, I imagine, to recall the story of Abraham and Isaac,
or the great story of the Exodus, and to shiver a little at their drama,
to think of the angel of death passing in the night,
looking for blood on lintels and doorposts.

The children must have trembled a little, and laughed in relief,
especially those of them who were firstborn sons,
who would be the ones offered to death unless there was blood over the door.
The door of their freedom from Egypt.

It's another thing altogether, I imagine, to know you're the Lamb.

**Jesus said,
My soul is troubled.
What shall I say;
Father, save me from this hour?
but it was for this very reason that I have come to this hour...**

Scripture References: Genesis 22:7, 8; John 1:29; John 12:27, 32.

Palm Sunday

It grows darker here while we wait for events to unfold as we know they did:
our dearest friend and Lord about to die.

How will he know that we love him?

We could offer praises as the people of Jerusalem did, cheering

**Hosanna to the Son of David,
blessings on him who comes
in the name of the Lord!**

Yes, praises are good,
they are absolutely necessary.
But praises come cheap;
they twist in our mouths and easily turn to "Crucify!"

How will he know that we love Him?

Watch the woman who approaches Jesus while he eats.
She carries a jar of ointment,
the most expensive and esteemed of the ointments: nard.
Probably she purchased this nard to enhance her attractiveness,
to win the attention of others to herself.
Now she pours it over Jesus.
The fragrance fills the room,
though the lovely scent cannot soften the criticism:
why is she wasting something so valuable, on Him?

But Jesus says,

**She has done a beautiful thing to me.
She has done what she could.
She has anointed my body beforehand for burial.**

It grows darker while we wait.
This is not the time for long, fervent words.

This is the time to do a beautiful thing, in remembrance.

Scripture References: Matthew 21:9, Mark 14:6, 8.

Easter One

Light rushes into our world again.
The sun comes forth,
the darkness disappears.

Jesus is risen!

“If you could understand a single grain of wheat,”
Martin Luther said, “you would die of wonder.”
We see the blade of green emerge from the soil and we are filled with awe;
we grasp the overwhelming truth that our Lord is alive and we are unable to speak.
This joy is inexpressible.

(Silence)

“But look: the valleys shine with promises,
and every burning morning is a prophecy of Christ
coming to raise and vindicate even our sorry flesh...”

Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.

He, too, was made glad again!
Jesus endured the cross for the joy that was set before Him.
Obedient through His suffering, completing what He came to do, He reached the morning!
When He had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins,
He sat down at the right hand of God.
Then was fulfilled what was said of the Son,

**God has anointed you
with the oil of joy and gladness above and beyond your companions.**

This is a day of joy.

References: Thomas Merton; John 20:20; Hebrews 12:2; Hebrews 10:12; Hebrews 1:9.

Easter Two

Our pilgrimage continues after Easter, through the days and nights of our lives.
We leave Jerusalem, but we will return again.
Going out, coming in, we are not alone.

Lo, I am with you always, Jesus said, even to the end of the world.

Because of His resurrection, we were not orphaned after His death.
Because of His resurrection, He takes up residence within us.
“I give you my peace,” He says.
“Do not let your hearts be troubled, do not let them be afraid.”

With fresh conviction,
we sing what we sang at the beginning of our journey of remembrance.

Hymn: *Guide me, O thou great Jehovah* (vv. 1-2)

Our hearts are full with all that we have witnessed:
that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,
that He was buried,
that He was raised on the third day.

Today we re-light the candles we extinguished on our way to the cross.
As they flicker into flame from the Christ candle,
we turn with fresh courage to the future.
The risen Christ is present to lead us, always.

Scripture References: Matthew 28:20; John 14:27; 1 Corinthians 15; 3, 4.

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