



## Sunday of the Passion

An option for worship on Palm Sunday, used by some churches even before the new hymnal, is to read the passion history. Here's what some brother pastors say about this custom.

**Jonathan E. Schroeder (Sharpsburg, GA):** We do an opening procession of palms. Then the entire service is dedicated to the responsive passion reading broken up by hymns. We have done this for five years. The benefits are: 1) more congregants hear the passion history, which is not appointed for Sundays in the lectionary, and 2) one less sermon during Holy Week. I was convinced that having a larger percentage of our congregation hear the passion history was important. For many of our members who didn't attend midweek services, their Sunday worship path took them from waving palm branches to shouting, "Christ is risen!" without seeing the cross in between. Passion Sunday was a completely positive experience. I had worried that the members who attended every midweek service would find such a practice repetitive. I shouldn't have worried. Those were the folks who commented most often and most positively. *I love to tell the story for those who know it best seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest.* (CW 746)

**Earle Treptow (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary):** We used this option for my last Palm Sunday in Denver. We began with a procession of palms, followed by a shorter sermon on a Palm Sunday text. Then the passion history. I expected that it would be appreciated by those who did not attend the midweek Lenten services. I heard positive feedback from them. They liked the different feel to the service and appreciated how it set the stage for Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter.

What I didn't expect was the very positive feedback from those who had attended all the midweek services. They thought it was helpful to hear the passion history

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in one service instead of piecemeal over several weeks. They also felt it tied the entrance into Jerusalem a little more tightly to why Jesus entered Jerusalem. While I can't imagine preaching a Palm Sunday sermon without speaking of that, the service made the connection for them powerfully.

The forthcoming *Christian Worship: Foundations*<sup>1</sup> offers the following.

As God's people arrive at the Sixth Sunday in Lent, their attention is drawn to two sets of related yet contrasting events. The first events are those that took place on the Sunday before Jesus died. On that day, Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem on a donkey as the crowds covered the road with palm branches and shouted "Hosanna!" Our congregations have long commemorated these joyous events in their celebration of Palm Sunday. Many congregations have incorporated into their Palm Sunday services a re-creation of sorts of that first Palm Sunday procession. Just as the crowds surrounding Jesus on that first Palm Sunday processed into Jerusalem waving palms and singing Jesus's praises, so God's people today process into the church sanctuary waving palms and singing Jesus's praises. Such a procession is a meaningful commemoration and celebration of our Savior's triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

But the events of that first Palm Sunday are not the only events that grab the worshiper's attention on this day. Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem had a purpose far beyond receiving the praise of those who accompanied him. As we sing in one of

our Palm Sunday hymns, "Ride on, ride on in majesty! In lowly pomp ride on *to die*" (CW 411). On the day on which the people of Israel selected their lambs for the upcoming Passover, Jesus entered Jerusalem as God's chosen Passover Lamb. In a matter of days, he would pour out his blood to rescue the world from its slavery to sin. Our Lord's upcoming passion also demands our attention on this day, for it was to suffer and die that he rode into Jerusalem on that donkey.

Since Pope Paul VI's revision of the Roman calendar in 1969, many Christian churches have combined these two emphases into their worship on the Sixth Sunday in Lent, which also is known as Passion Sunday. Two Gospel readings are in effect appointed for this day. The first is the account of Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which is read in connection with the procession at the beginning of the service. The second is the entire passion history as recorded in one of the synoptic Gospels. (John's history of Jesus' passion is reserved for Good Friday.) This Gospel is read during the Service of the Word. The juxtaposition of these two readings emphasizes for the worshiper that Palm Sunday led directly to Good Friday. Both days were part of our Savior's saving work. While their tone could not have been more different, their purpose was the same: the salvation of all people.

The calendar and lectionary included in this hymnal provide options for congregations to observe the Sixth Sunday in Lent as either Palm Sunday or Passion Sunday. Full propers for both Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday are provided. Congregations are encouraged, however, to incorporate elements of both Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday into their worship on the Sixth Sunday in Lent. In many of our congregations, it has been customary to read the history of our Lord's passion during the midweek Lenten services. Attendance at those services has unfortunately waned over the years. As a result, it has become common for many of our people to proceed through an entire Lenten season without hearing the history of Jesus's passion in its entirety. Including the reading of the passion history on the Sixth Sunday in Lent helps address that concern.

Celebrating Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday together can easily be done (without significantly lengthening the service) by following the pattern that is used in many other Christian churches. The service begins with the reading of the Palm Sunday Gospel, which leads into the procession with palms. The Service of the Word then takes place, during which the appointed history of Jesus's passion is read. The reading can be read by multiple readers and can be broken up with interspersed hymn stanzas. The sermon can be shortened to accommodate the longer reading. In this way, God's people have the opportunity not only to celebrate their Savior's triumphal entry into Jerusalem but also to see the purpose for which he rode on in such majesty. In lowly pomp he rode on to die.

To assist with planning Passion Sunday, a *Service Builder* document is available here: [builder.christianworship.com/share/cynJfAb6](http://builder.christianworship.com/share/cynJfAb6).<sup>2</sup> This allows quick customization within the *Service*

**"A Service of the Seven Words from the Cross"** is another *Service Builder* item to note. This is found under Occasional/Seasonal Services. (Unlike the Passion Sunday service, it is available only in Service Builder.) It features the new hymn "The Seven Words" (CW 436) that WELS social media videos are highlighting during Lent. Note that one can access *Service Builder* content on a free trial basis (but without the ability to export content) at [builder.christianworship.com](http://builder.christianworship.com).

*Builder* program. The same document in RTF format is available here [worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/service-folders-palm-sunday/](http://worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/service-folders-palm-sunday/) with two copyrighted hymns omitted. Those with the digital editions of CW93 and CWS can easily insert them. Additional sample Palm/Passion Sunday worship folders plus ideas for using multiple readers for the passion history are available at the second link.

Will your congregation observe Passion Sunday this year? It's usually best to give longer lead time for planning something new than allowed by the timing of this article, especially if discussion with leaders seems best. So, if not this year, then maybe next. Either way, the rest of this article offers comments from those who have been observing Passion Sunday for a number of years. Names are attached to these comments in case anyone wants to seek further guidance.

**Douglas Van Sice (Huntersville, NC):** Many people here are either first-generation Christians or come from a non-liturgical church. So, when we first started doing this, almost none of them had seen anything like it. And now, it is one of the best-loved services we do. People like the Palm Procession (processionals don't happen regularly here due to the odd configuration of our worship space). They like the flow of the service. One person told me last year, "Pastor, I had heard the passion history before. I grew up hearing it at mid-week services. But I had never heard it read all in one sitting like this. Please keep doing this service every year." Another person (a relatively new Christian) said, "I knew Jesus suffered on the cross, but I didn't really know everything that led up to it. Thank you for sharing this service and helping me understand it better."

We do a Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday combination. We begin outside our worship space<sup>3</sup> where everyone is handed a palm and a service folder. The service itself begins with the Procession of Palms (dialogue and the Triumphal Entry according to John's Gospel). After the procession of palms, we move into Passion Sunday. We use the passion history according to the liturgical year we are in. Between each reading, there is a hymn or solo sung.

The benefits are great. Due to limitations put on us by our rental space, we cannot do all five mid-week Lenten services. So, Passion Sunday allows my people to hear the passion history in its entirety. The second benefit is closely related to the first. Palm Sunday is the beginning of Holy Week. Having the entirety of the passion history read on the first day of Holy Week sets the tone for what is coming in the days ahead. While the tone of Passion Sunday retains the celebratory notes of Palm Sunday (“Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” and singing “All Glory, Laud, and Honor”), it also begins to move us into the quiet of the Upper Room on Holy Thursday and the solemnity of Golgotha on Good Friday.

**Steven Lange (Louisville, KY):** We had been observing the Palm Sunday Procession with Palms before we started observing Passion Sunday in 2015, so our congregation already was used to having a different kind of service on Palm Sunday. This made the transition to Passion Sunday rather easy since it wasn’t hard to connect Palm Sunday with a reading of the history of Jesus’ passion. I have received only positive comments about this from my congregation.

The congregation gathers in the fellowship hall and each participant is given a palm frond. We begin the service there with an opening dialog. We read the Palm Sunday Gospel and then process into the sanctuary while singing “All Glory, Laud, and Honor.” After the Prayer of the Day, we read the passion history from the Gospel appointed for that year, broken into sections with hymn stanzas interspersed. Then follows a sermon (shorter than usual). We omit the speaking of the Creed on this day. We conclude the service with the Prayer of the Church and celebration of the Lord’s Supper. We are able to keep the service to a little over an hour in length.

*“Please keep doing this service every year.”*

This practice gives everyone in our congregation an opportunity to hear the history of Jesus’ passion, regardless of whether they have attended the midweek Lenten services. It seems odd that our people could go through Lent and not hear the history of Jesus’ passion. And for those who did attend the midweek Lenten services and have already heard the passion history, I have heard no complaints from any of them that they did not appreciate hearing it again.

**Johnold Strey (Hubertus, WI):** We used the Passion Sunday concept for the first time in 2019 and then again in 2021, though modified for ongoing Covid concerns. Our choirs hadn’t resumed rehearsing and singing for worship yet. But that modification might give ideas for



churches with fewer musical resources who still want to try the concept.

Our service begins with the Palm Sunday entrance rite. We don’t have people gather outside the nave. Rather, the assembly is seated like usual before the service starts. After the bell peal, I invite the assembly to stand and face the entrance of the nave. We begin with the Palm Sunday rite which includes the reading of the Palm Sunday Gospel. We then process to the hymn “All Glory, Laud, and Honor” with school kids carrying palm branches behind the ministers and making a “lap” around the congregation in some way. After the hymn is the Prayer of the Day and then a Palm Sunday anthem that the school kids sing from the chancel.

We use the Philippians 2 reading. It’s a nice transition from Palm Sunday to Passion Sunday. Then we sing the Palm Sunday Hymn of the Day, “Ride On, Ride On in Majesty.” If it’s a Sunday with the Sacrament, these two items may be omitted for the sake of time.

For the reading of the passion history, we use the appropriate synoptic for the year, broken into about 12 segments. Each segment is followed by a musical response—either 1-2 hymn stanzas by the congregation or a solo or choir anthem. The school kids and adult choir can repeat a Lenten anthem sung earlier in the year, often at midweek Lent services, so they don’t have to learn all new music for this service. For 2021, we relied on soloists. We used several of the old NPH Verse of the Day compositions for Lent as anthems woven into the passion history, along with two unison anthems from the old CPH



*Morning Star* choir books. Most of these solo anthems were Scripture verses. For smaller churches with limited resources, this is a simple and practical approach.

We used four different readers for the passion history, which involves more members in the service.

Presenting the full passion history with anthems and hymns gives it a new dimension—not just listening to the text but pondering it more deeply with contemplative anthems and hymns.

Just as we don't have enough Christmas services to sing all the great Christmas carols, so also even with midweek Lent services we still don't have opportunity for all the great Lenten and Passion hymns. But hymn stanzas woven into the passion history help us to get more of those hymns on the lips of the worshipers.

One caveat: If a church uses the Passion Sunday concept, then they probably shouldn't read the full John 18-19 account on Good Friday. Rather, go with the three appointed readings with the shorter John excerpt for the Gospel. Otherwise, two full Passion readings in the same week might feel redundant.

**John Bortulin (Mukwonago, WI):** We start with Palm Sunday and move to the passion. Without communion we break up the passion with an appropriate Lenten hymn verse between sections. With communion we read it straight through. The day's sermon is just a commentary, 8-10 minutes. It comes right after Palm Sunday and before the reading of the passion.

We make a big deal out of this Sunday. We do palm branches and get as many SS/LES to sing as we can. It's a full, festive church, and it sets the scene for what's coming. Our people enjoy the different flow and the "big picture." After years of doing this, I can't imagine this Sunday differently.

**Jason Hacker (Waukesha, WI):** We've observed Sunday of the Passion for six years. The benefit I have sensed is that since only about half of the weekend worshipers attend midweek services, many miss out on hearing the passion. The pastor and worship planners might feel that by Good Friday the passion "horse" has been beaten to death. But it does not seem to be that way to the worshiper. Passion Sunday sets the stage well for the celebration of Holy Week. We begin with the Introduction to Holy Week, the Palm Sunday Gospel, and procession with palms. The sermon is likely based on a Palm Sunday reading, but shorter, more devotional. We celebrate the Sacrament each week of Lent, so it's always included.

<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing, this pastor's manual from the *Christian Worship* suite is not yet available. Don't confuse it with "The Foundation," the website from Congregational Services that delivers content to amplify worship as the foundation of the week and of the congregation's entire ministry: [welscongregational services.net](http://welscongregationalservices.net).

<sup>2</sup> This file illustrates the potential for sharing worship resources within *Service Builder* but including content from beyond *Service Builder*.

<sup>3</sup> Beginning outside the worship space might be a more viable option in smaller congregations or in warmer climates!

