

*A Path Forward*

**Text:**

Mark 15: 1-39

**A sermon preached by  
James F. McIntire**

**March 29, 2015**  
Palm/Passion Sunday



**Hope United Methodist Church**

Eagle & Steel Roads, Havertown, PA

Phone: 610-446-3351

Web: [www.HavHopeUMC.org](http://www.HavHopeUMC.org)

Office: [HopeUMCHavertown@verizon.net](mailto:HopeUMCHavertown@verizon.net)

Pastor: [HopeUMCPastor@verizon.net](mailto:HopeUMCPastor@verizon.net)

© Copyright 2015  
James F. McIntire  
All rights reserved.

## Mark 15:1-39

As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. <sup>2</sup>Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” He answered him, “You say so.” <sup>3</sup>Then the chief priests accused him of many things. <sup>4</sup>Pilate asked him again, “Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.” <sup>5</sup>But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

<sup>6</sup>Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. <sup>7</sup>Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. <sup>8</sup>So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. <sup>9</sup>Then he answered them, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?” <sup>10</sup>For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. <sup>11</sup>But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. <sup>12</sup>Pilate spoke to them again, “Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?” <sup>13</sup>They shouted back, “Crucify him!” <sup>14</sup>Pilate asked them, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Crucify him!” <sup>15</sup>So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

<sup>16</sup>Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor’s headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. <sup>17</sup>And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. <sup>18</sup>And they began saluting him, “Hail, King of the Jews!” <sup>19</sup>They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. <sup>20</sup>After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

<sup>21</sup>They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. <sup>22</sup>Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). <sup>23</sup>And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. <sup>24</sup>And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

<sup>25</sup>It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. <sup>26</sup>The inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." <sup>27</sup>And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. <sup>29</sup>Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, <sup>30</sup>save yourself, and come down from the cross!" <sup>31</sup>In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. <sup>32</sup>Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

<sup>33</sup>When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. <sup>34</sup>At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" <sup>35</sup>When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." <sup>36</sup>And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." <sup>37</sup>Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. <sup>38</sup>And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. <sup>39</sup>Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"



Things are not right with the world.



I am really tired of hearing and seeing the news these days. There's the reality of racism that raises its head in fear and condemnation. We see it on our televisions and our computer screens and in our news reports – it leads us to violence in Ferguson, MO, police deaths in New York City, questionable policies in Philadelphia, a fraternity chant at the University of Oklahoma. We see it and hear it and fear it. But we don't seem to want to confront it.



There's the radicalization of religious beliefs around the world. It all leads nowhere else but to degradation and destruction. ISIL carving a path of death through parts of the world. Vicious legislation in some American states which claims discrimination is a religious right. Political hate speech that has no point but to, well, promote hate. We know it's real but we don't know how to deal with it.



Climate change brings snow in the Spring and wildfires in Summer, mudslides in Winter, floods in the Fall. Deserts are more arid, glaciers are melting. Some argue that science is blasphemous, as if we're in the Scopes Trial once again. Others say it's just in God's plan so we can ignore it. We know it's happening but we bury our heads to make it go away.

Things are not right with the world.

It was the same for Jesus in his world. Things were not right.



Rome's oppressive thumb would not let up on Israel. The Judean religious leadership that was collaborating with the Empire was crushing the poor and the struggling. Fundamentalism was pushing aside those who it thought was sinful – those on the margins, the sick, the weak, the forgotten, those who were different than what it thought was God's plan. The Temple was something like a casino slots floor on a Friday night – unbelievably loud and ungodly at best. Ethnic cleansing and racist exclusion was so powerful that Greeks thought they were better than Romans, Romans thought they were better than Jews, Jews thought they were better than Samaritans. And each was willing to kill to prove it.

The difference is ... Jesus ... this not-so-passive peacemaking preacher ... Jesus chose to confront the “not rightness of the

world” directly and he chose to do it right in the center of it all. That’s what this journey into Jerusalem was all about.



Jesus and his group planned this little parade to head into the Holy City from the east on the Sunday morning preceding the Passover festival. On the same day, Pontius Pilate with all of the spectacle of Rome’s oppression would have been parading into the City from the west with an over-the-top display of military power. The Romans reinforced their occupation forces on Jewish high holy days to discourage any attempted insurrection by rebel leaders who made their camps in the Galilee and who might take advantage of the swelling holiday crowd to stir up rebellion. Numerous political resisters had claimed to be Jewish political messiah and they planned their acts of terrorism and disruption when it had a great audience so people would rise up and confront their oppression head-on.



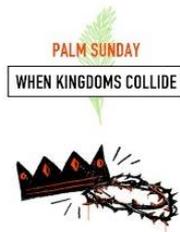
Pilate wanted to be close near the Temple complex showing a display of Roman force that would demonstrate the “Pax Romana” – Rome’s version of peace through force. And Rome had the cross, an intimidating execution device, to enforce Roman authority with any who would question it. Thousands of criminals and perceived enemies of the state were executed along the main

roads at times like this so that all making this pilgrimage could witness the penalty for insurrection.



Pilate rode on a white stallion, wielding the symbol of the eagle and the columns of a Roman legion to show who was in control. Jesus, on the other hand, by way of making a farce of Rome came with no sword, rode on a donkey from the east, and brought with him ordinary working-class folks from the rural areas of Israel.

In addition to Pilate and Jesus and their parades, there was a third force at work in the collaborative religious leadership. The institution was controlled by aristocratic elite who were no longer concerned with caring for the poor and marginalized. This religious ruling class was intent on placating Rome for the purpose of personal gain and institutional security, with no concern for God’s redemptive mission of justice and righteousness in the world.



Three groups on a collision course – Roman power in the guise of a brutal Pilate, working class oppressed following Jesus, the religious elite determined to protect its power and money. It was a collision course that would change the world.

That's the plan. Not a predestined course of action but a peacemaker and his followers determined to push the limits of their oppression. No matter what the outcome meant. Did Jesus know the cross was in his future when he climbed on that donkey that morning? No. He no doubt knew it was a possibility and if he feared it he could have turned around and headed to the hills. If the small group that was close to him wanted to, they could have stayed home. If the crowds were ready for revolution, they might have grabbed their weapons but they didn't.



The crowds that welcomed Jesus throwing their coats on the ground, ripping palm branches down to make a green carpet, pulled from their scripture the song of Psalm 118 – “*Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!*” By the time of Jesus this Psalm verse was part of everyday greeting and blessing. “Hosanna!” An Aramaic blessing translated into Greek – *soson dei* – means “save us.” It was used, perhaps, as we use something like “I’m blessed” today. When asked, “How are you today?,” how many respond with “I’m blessed”?

“Hosanna,” they shouted. “Save us,” they chanted. With the emphasis being on “us.” Read better – save *me*, but I don’t care about *them*. We say, “I’m blessed” when what we mean is as long as God is taking care of *my* needs, all is well and it really doesn’t cross my mind what it’s like for the others. It’s more like “I’m okay, I’m okay” rather than the 1970s “I’m Okay, You’re Okay” self-help movement.

“Save me, Jesus.” But we know what the rest of the week looks like. When they saw him arrested, they thought he no longer could save them. We, the fickle crowd, turn our backs and shout “He’s no use to me. Get rid of him. We’ll find someone else to save us.”

Self interest prevails in Jerusalem that day. Self interest prevails today. When my prayer is “Save me, God. Bless me, God” I am no different than the crowd and I have no doubt that I would have turned away as well. You?



Yet Jesus still saw a path forward. In John’s Gospel, just before Jesus enters Jerusalem, he refuses to pray this self-centered “hosanna” prayer. “My soul is troubled. And what should I say— “God, save me [sōson] from this hour”? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.” (John 12:27-28) Jesus refused to pray, “God save me.” He cared so much about the others of this world that he put his life on the line here at the gate of the Holy City. This confrontation in Jerusalem could lead to his death, yet he went forward anyway.

The one thing Jesus said he wouldn’t ask of God, “Save me from this hour” is the very thing that the crowd requires of Jesus in their Hosanna – “Save us now!” Can we be so determined about the others of this world that we’ll forgo our own saving prayer for them? We need to find our path forward as well.



On April 4, 1968, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr preached for the last time – his “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” sermon. The next day he would be assassinated – but he didn’t know that. He was in Memphis to focus America’s attention on the poor – specifically in that moment on the plight of sanitation workers. Two men had been sucked into the back of a trash truck and crushed by the compactor – did they have rights too? King called us away from that “save me” mentality that holds us back.

"It's all right to talk about 'long white robes over yonder,' in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here! It's all right to talk about 'streets flowing with milk and honey,' but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and ... children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do."

“This is what we have to do.” No longer can it be “save me.” It must be “save them and I’ll be saved as well.”

The path beyond Dr. King’s mountaintop moment led to his assassination. The path beyond Jesus’ moment of confrontation led to his death. It’s the risk of being true to God’s claim on our life.

One of the personal realizations of this Renewal Leave has been that what often drags me down is the constant focus of many in the church on how can I be saved by God. As if after 2000+ years we still have no clue about what Jesus asks of us. "What do I need to do to inherit eternal life?," a young man asked Jesus. What do *I* do to save *me*? "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." Do something for someone else. He couldn't risk it so he walked away dejected.

Jesus died not just because of the evil machinations of the Roman Empire or the corruption of the Religious Elite. According to Mark, Jesus died also because of the failings of his closest followers. Judas betrayed him (Mark 14:10-11, 18, 43-45). His inner circle of disciples were too weak to keep awake and wait with him (Mark 14:32-42). Peter, despite his promises and protestations, denied him in his moment of trial (Mark 14:66-72). Mark even gives us the vivid image of an unknown young follower fleeing naked into the night from the scene of the arrest – his cowardice exposed for all to see (Mark 14:51-52). Jesus died because his followers betrayed, deserted, and denied him.



A path forward.

Want to save yourself? Then let's work on the doing for others. Let's feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty, let's clothe the naked and visit the prisoner, let's offer ourselves to the world that suffers all around you. Want hosanna in your life? Work for peace, demand justice, welcome the stranger, accept differences

in others. Don't worry so much about yourself, just do for others what you know God wants done.



One of my preaching professors, Tom Long, talks of our response to this Palm Sunday parade from the perspective of the “donkey fetchers” – those that Jesus sent ahead to get the donkey he would ride on. Not much glamour in that job, is there? Not much “save me” Hosanna shouted when you're assigned that task.

It is right at this place, though, that Mark imparts some of his best theological wisdom. He begins his Gospel with the exhilarating trumpet call to "prepare the way of the Lord," but he makes it clear, by his description of the disciples' activity in the rest of his Gospel, that the way to do so is not by becoming a member of the Knights Templar and gallantly defending Christendom, but rather by performing humble and routine tasks. The disciples in Mark get a boat ready for Jesus, find out how much food is on hand for the multitude, secure the room and prepare the table for the Last Supper and, of course, chase down a donkey that the Lord needs to enter Jerusalem. ... In Mark's world, "preparing the way of the Lord" usually looks like standing hip-deep in the mire of some stable trying to corral a donkey for Jesus.

So let's commit ourselves to that task. Don't be so concerned about Hosannas. Instead, let's fetch some donkeys for Jesus.

Amen.