

## **The Traditions of The Lenten Season and Holy Week**

Many Christians like to express their faith by observing some of the original traditions of Holy Week or, (as some have called it), Passion Week. Many others often just wonder what it all means. So, lets see...

To a seeking believer, there is no arguing that this time of year is very important to the origins of our faith, as well as our continued faith in God. I personally believe it is even more significant to us than Christmas, and it is certainly our cornerstone message when proclaiming the Gospel of Christ as the truth to a better way to live and to love in this world - and the world to come. To be sure, every Christian should know that the events that took place in the life of Jesus surrounding His final week laid the foundation by which the world and all that are in it have been given hope. I would like to share some of these traditions with our community for the purpose of not only enhancing our journey, but also to provide some meaning and understanding of the historical and biblical importance of the celebration and observance of the Resurrection season.

First we begin by acknowledging our role and responsibility in regards to what happened Christ on the cross, and then our response to what transpired with Him three days later in His resurrection. Secondly, we need to seek an understanding of how and why these events impact our past, present and future. Although one was death and the other life, what happened in those seventy-two hours between the two events should be seen as one mission, serving one purpose. Finally, to really understand

what Jesus did for us, we should not distance or separate ourselves from what happened. The truth is, at times, it is very important that we do just the opposite - we move in as close as we possibly can. Holy Week is one of those times. The following are some questions and responses to help you and I make that move.

## **Lenten Season**

Lent is a season of self-examination, reflection, and preparation for the celebration of Jesus' resurrection on Easter. Though it is an ancient tradition, it powerfully speaks to our modern condition because it calls us not to observe a ritual, but to engage in renewal. As theologian Robert Webber puts it, "We too easily forget our Maker and Redeemer, replacing God with things and ambition. Lent is the season that...calls us back to God, back to basics, back to the spiritual realities of life. It calls us to put to death the sin and the indifference we have in our hearts toward God and our fellow persons. And it beckons us to enter once again into the joy of the Lord—the joy of a new life born out of a death to the old life."

## **Ash Wednesday**

Ash Wednesday is a Christian holiday (holy day). Ash Wednesday is not a biblical mandate (just as Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and Easter are not biblical commands). Nevertheless, Ash Wednesday observances have been honored by Christians for well over ten centuries. The date falls always at the beginning of Lent, a six-week season of preparation for Easter, or as we call it, "Resurrection Sunday". In the earliest centuries,

Christians who had been stuck in persistent sin had ashes sprinkled on their bodies as a sign of repentance, even as Job repented “in dust and ashes” (Job 42:6). Around the ninth and tenth centuries, all believers began to signify their need for a calendarized day or season of repentance by having ashes placed on their foreheads in the shape of a cross. Interesting to note that even in this symbol of sinfulness (ashes), there is the hint of the Good News yet to come through the shape of the sign (the cross).

Again, there is no biblical commandment that requires us to observe Ash Wednesday. You have heard me say often that I believe this is one of those practices that Christians are free to observe or not to observe. The core ideas of Ash Wednesday are, however, shaped by a biblical theology of creation, sin, mortality, death, grace, and salvation. It also engages the biblical instructions of Romans chapter twelve to the community to sincerely “weep with those who weep” and as James chapter five instructs, to prayerfully and carefully “confess your sins to one another.”

What I value most about an Ash Wednesday worship gathering is the chance for us all to openly acknowledge the frailty and sinfulness of our humanity. In a world that often expects us to be perfect, Ash Wednesday gives us an opportunity to freely acknowledge our imperfections. We can let down our pretenses and be truly honest with God, ourselves, and others about who we are. From birth, we all bear the mark of sin - we are flawed human beings. We all must come at one time or another to stand in our shame and guilt before a merciful, forgiving, righteous and Holy God.

We all are mortal and will someday experience bodily death. The truth is we all need a Savior.

Ash Wednesday is a day to stare death in the face, to acknowledge our mortality. All of us will die. Most Christians who observe this holiday get ashes “imposed” on their foreheads, while a minister or elder says, “You have come from dust, and to dust you will return.” In other words, “You and I are going to die. And here are some ashes to remind you, just in case you’ve forgotten the mere breath of human life.”

What gives us such freedom to think or talk about death? Are we Christians morose? Do we have some peculiar obsession with dying? I don’t think so. Rather, what allows us to stare death in the face is the assurance of life, real life, and of course eternal life. When we know our lives are kept safe in the hands of God, and that this physical life is just the beginning of eternity - then you and I are free to be honest about what lies ahead for us. We can face mortality without fear or pretending, because we know intimately the One who defeated death. Jesus said to his close friend Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die” (John 11:25-26).

The emotional response of Ash Wednesday observance should never be depression or gloom, but gratitude and new energy for living our life with renewed meaning and purpose. When we realize how desperately we need God, and how God is faithful far beyond our desperation, we can’t help but offer our lives to him in fresh gratitude. And when we recognize that life

doesn't go on forever, we find new passion to delight in the gifts of God each day – and to maximize the possibilities of each day He gives us, not taking one of them for granted.

Maybe one of the greatest benefits of Ash Wednesday is that it begins the season of Lent, leading us to Holy Week and ultimately to another Resurrection Sunday. For me that means I have one more chance at completely surrendering my mind, heart, and soul to my beloved Jesus and living my life more fully in Him!

Joel 1 and 2

*Turn to me now, while there is time. Give me your hearts. Come with fasting, weeping, and mourning. Don't tear your clothing in your grief, but tear your hearts instead. Return to the Lord your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. He is eager to relent and not punish. Gather all the people - the elders, the children, and even the babies. Call the bridegroom from his quarters and the bride from her private room. Let the priests, who minister in the Lord's presence, stand and weep between the entry room to the Temple and the altar. Let them pray, Spare your people, Lord!*

## **Holy Week**

**What is it about Holy Week that affirms in us what we have believed and have been told about the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus?**

From the divine events resulting in the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus, we Christians have complete access to God, and a unique claim to the gift of grace we call salvation or eternal life. Without the suffering and death of Christ on the cross and the power and hope of His resurrection, the Christian message of salvation or eternal life is merely just flapping in the wind. Without that kind of life and love, what we believe is irrelevant. Historically based traditional Christian worship during Holy Week and Resurrection Sunday has helped Christians for centuries continue to affirm this claim of life and hope, and to experience the resurrection in expressive and consequential ways. This is particularly true when those traditions are alive with truth, and participants are opened to its full procession and genuine love of Jesus. Holy Week is a perfect opportunity to walk along with Jesus and His disciples by bringing events of the Passover Week to life through worship gatherings specific to the times, places of the week. If we will open and humble our hearts and surrender our pride, we can preserve within us the unity and fullness of the work of Jesus Christ (as others before us) in a dramatic and powerful way.

**Since these traditions are so old – why hasn't Holy Week become just another outdated religious ritual?**

The bigger question is, why would we let it become an outdated religious ritual? As a community, Christians should actually approach this week as an annual spiritual pilgrimage. Holy Week is a pilgrimage made together with Christ and His people – this makes the week alive, significant and relevant. It is also a wonderful time to strengthen our faith, while coming to moments of clarity and understanding of the heart of God, the mission of Jesus, and the difficult path of suffering and shame that He took during

that historical week. Because of that, it is important to keep the traditions and journey of Holy Week a spiritual priority.

### **What should these events in the life and death of Jesus mean to me personally?**

During the week of worship activities and gatherings Christians have the unique opportunity to experience the Holy Spirit at work within us - leading us away from self into an even deeper and more intimate understanding of what Christ did for us. It means that we can begin again; in complete sincerity, simply asking God to help us in our struggle against everything that is dark, evil, and sinful in our lives. We have often been told, "Jesus died for you." That is true, He did. But, He did not just die for us. He died, and then came back to life - for us. There are literally hundreds of thousands of good men and women, who have died bravely for good causes, with good intentions. However, none could legitimately make claim to be God; and none ever (verifiably) came back to life from the dead. Christ's dying means little to us without His resurrection, but it means everything with it. Finally, if celebrated openly and intently, Holy Week for Christians everywhere should actually help our faith to make sense... it fills in the blanks and connects the dots. And more importantly it helps us lose the doubt that casts its long shadow over our many attempts to grow great faith in God, and faithfully walk with Jesus.

### **Palm Sunday**

Palm Sunday is the worship gathering that introduces the Christian experience of remembering the death and celebrating the resurrection of Jesus. Most Palm Sunday gatherings begin with interpretive recollections

or re-enactments of Jesus' triumphant but short-lived final entrance into the city of Jerusalem. Some churches have even had their congregation gather in a place other than their home church building to help them understand that in many ways they are like the onlooking crowd that once met Jesus outside the city. Actual palm leaves are often distributed and a Scripture portion of Jesus' procession into the city is read. The worship then turns to thanksgiving and the singing of hymns of praise. The sermon (homily) or communion liturgy emphasizes the passion (the pending suffering of Christ). Most Christian historians refer to this Sunday as the "Sunday of Passion."

For centuries, the Gospel for this gathering has typically been from Matthew chapters twenty-six and twenty-seven. The idea is to provide a strong reminder and interactive theme of Christ's last week from "supper to death to resurrection." In the first four or five centuries after the resurrection of Christ, Christians wanted expressive ways to remember what Christ had done and why He did it. In worship they would read the most accurate accounts from the "Gospels" or from the Didache (the writings of the apostles). They would sing hymns and psalms, and prepare dramatic re-enactments of the Gospel account of Christ's final days and hours. They felt it important that they were not simply remembering Jesus' triumphant entrance into Jerusalem as a religious ritual, so they would gather together each day for the entire week starting on Palm Sunday for meditations, prayer, devotions, communion, liturgy, and artistic vignettes reflecting upon the whole event. "The Passion" gospel narrative would be read on that beginning Sunday (palm or passion) and again on Friday (crucifixion and death). The premise was to vividly remember what Christ



had done in His suffering and sacrifice. This was a sincere attempt to attempt to participate together with Him in ways that are meaningful (not meaningless) enough to put us in a position to experience a genuine revelation of the Holy Spirit and not just a “good vibration or excitation.”

Of course there are obstacles aimed at keeping us from making this kind of journey. The biggest obstacle is our human tendency towards creating a meaningless ritual with only a partial understanding and less than intentional participation. Committing to a journey with Christ using a daily devotional, meditations, and reading the specific recollections of the Gospels will help eliminate that tendency and provide new meaning and revelation of the love of Jesus and the hope He gives us for each day. We can (like any day of course) use each day of this week to listen for the voice of Christ deep inside of us.

If we look at what history tells us of His walk that last week, we can in a spiritual, intellectual, and emotional sense, walk with Him. We need to have some time in our daily routine during Holy Week for worship and meditation. The Holy Spirit often gives us the opportunity to connect with the Gospels, and as we worship and meditate, we can begin to walk more closely with Jesus.

### **Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday**

Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday of Holy Week are traditionally called the “ordinary days” of the week, or often called Passion-tide (the complete journey and experience of the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ). Some Christian traditions have included a communion service each day at

noon or in the early evening of the ordinary days to help believers maintain a spiritual focus and mindset towards the week's journey with Christ. The Gospels give similar accounts of Jesus' time during these three days. It is helpful to have a connection with what went on during this time - that is the only way one can share the journey. On Thursday, of that final week things obviously began to dramatically and aggressively shift against Jesus. The historical worship of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Resurrection Sunday were meant to accurately reflect the intensity, despair, and sorrow and great joy of what happened to Jesus during that time. Any worship gathering of Christians during those times should be passionate reflecting the significance of our new life covenant with Jesus and His actions on our behalf. If we do this correctly, the (year-round) expectations Christ has for us can become more obvious and clear during this time. As a follower of Jesus our lives should always be filled with purpose and have some sense of anticipation and spiritual desire for seeking to know what we do not know. But for one week, once a year, these three days remind us (even more brightly) of the events and circumstances leading up to the final hours of Jesus, that brought to us a new and eternal life. They also express in very real and understandable language what it cost God to love us, and to give His life to mankind.

### **Maundy Thursday**

The word Maundy is of Latin origin and means "command". This is in reference to the command of Jesus in Mark's gospel on that Thursday evening for His disciples to remember and repeat the observance of the Last Supper He shared with them. The traditional Maundy Thursday service has been described as a tenebrae (shadowed) gathering - inviting

participants to understanding a more realistic and despondent side (the human struggle) of Christ's passion. The solemn gathering often includes re-enactments of the "last supper", the "garden prayer", and the "betrayal and arrest." Most historical Maundy Thursday gatherings for believers were of silent and shadowy spiritual preparation - preparation for the boldest and brightest expression of love the world has ever known. If any hymns were sung, they were always sober, subdued and resolved. The Gospel portion shared was usually from John chapters fifteen and sixteen - the commandment of Christ for His disciples to love one another. The re-enactments often included the opportunity for washing of one another's feet. The altar was stripped of ornaments and linen while the participants sang portions of Psalm twenty-two. The services usually concluded powerfully and dramatically with all participants leaving in silence and darkness. Even in the silence, the unmistakable theme of love was and is felt in the darkness and the shadows of the night.

## **Good Friday**

Good Friday (named so in the second century) is another very solemn worship gathering that has always been traditional for Christians everywhere. The worship typically begins with ministers entering in silence and the praying of the collect (prayer) for the day. The Gospel reading has historically been the Passion of John, chapters eighteen and nineteen. The tone is prayerful and meditative with a true sense of reality, filled with shared guilt and remorse. Often a large rough cross is dramatically dragged into the church accompanied by loud cries of sorrow and regret. The idea is to communicate the reproach and condemnation directed at Jesus, and of course for the faithless response to His overwhelming love

and His amazing sacrifice for us. Look what He did - look what we have done - see what has happened. If we listen and pay attention, we are able to see the part we have played (because of our own sin) in this great tragedy. The communion table of the Good Friday gathering looks more to repentance as its theme and focus. The songs and readings reflect this theme as well. A sense of helplessness often sets in, as believers come to the end of their own self - and start to clearly and honestly look upon the suffering Jesus dying on a cross for their sake. It is a good time for sincere hearts to search and see if their faith has been in God or in man. The circumstances of Christ's suffering seem as it did for Jesus followers... overwhelming, too much to handle, and all but hopeless. One should ask, as did His followers... "Jesus crucified...can this be true"? The journey continues - for the true follower of Jesus, this is certainly not over.

### **Saturday Vigil**

Saturday Vigil is called the Great Sabbath, or the supreme day of rest. As God rested on the seventh day from the work of creation, He rests on the seventh day of redemption. But, after the setting of the sun, earlier Christians always gathered to watch and pray. Some know it as the "Great Vigil of Easter" or it is even known as a "Psalter Service." Whatever the name, it has symbolized the culmination of the entire proclamation of the Christian Church. Many of the early Saturday night gatherings were all-night prayer vigils. These long hours were filled with the praying and singing of Psalms as well as prayers of hope and expectation. The tone was that of unwillingness to accept the curse of death, but rather believe in the promise of eternal life through Christ Jesus. The cry is the Christian "credo" - we believe! There is enough hope still to allow for the faithful few

to still believe and to be watchful. The solemn prayerful vigil proceeds until sunrise.

## **Sunday Resurrection**

The journey of the week finally comes to Sunday. Second and third century Christians celebrated the resurrection of Christ under the name Pesach (Hebrew) or Pascha (Greek), both meaning Passover. The name “Easter” (which we choose not feature) was an English term meaning “spring.” Although there are some theories to connect the two, it actually has nothing to do with the spiritual significance of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. It is an example of how man’s religious ideas can end up straying from the truth and intentions of Jesus.

The term “Pascha” has its origins relating to the time of the Passover. Regardless, Sunday the day of hope arrives at dawn with the proclamation of the resurrected Christ. The Resurrection observance is a true gathering of celebration, fulfillment, and hope for believers everywhere. The proclamation - Christ is Risen! And the response from believers everywhere is always – Risen Indeed! The resurrection of Christ moves us from darkness to light, from chaos to order, from captivity to liberty, and from death to life. Many use Genesis 3:14-19, the account of the corruption and curse on all creation as a result of the sin of Adam. The relationship between God and man, once destroyed, is now in Christ forever restored. Singing reflects joy, and the sermon should always proclaim hope and the triumph of new life in Christ and all that is good. Worship should reflect the rejoicing and the celebration God intended for the redeemed Church of Jesus Christ.

The Holy Week traditions and observances of the early Church are certainly not all biblical mandates. They are, however, a way for us to remember the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus (tenets of our Christian faith). It is also a time to be confronted both personally and as a faith community with the historical eternal truths and values that bought and paid for our liberty and life in Christ Jesus. We at Reunion Church may choose to participate in these traditions or we may not. We will, however, certainly recognize and learn the heritage and history of our faith so as the Lord leads us we might have the wisdom to know what He wants from us as we move forward towards Him. We will also acknowledge the Christian procession and spiritual journey that we are all on. We want to travel as did those who have gone before us - in truth, faithfully, courageously, humbly, and always loving those who God sends with us.

If you have further questions please ask myself, or one of our elders for a moment of our time. We are here to serve you.

God's Peace to you always...

Pastor Steve - Reunion Church