

## **PALM SUNDAY 2020**

**Rebecca:** For Jesus, this week marks the beginning of the end. He knows what is coming. The prophet Isaiah predicted it: “He was despised and rejected. He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his wounds we are healed.” Jesus would be crucified. But we know that in reality, it was not the Roman soldiers who put Jesus on the cross. It was not the Jewish religious leaders who put Jesus on the cross. It was sin that put Jesus on the cross. The sins of yours and mine.

**Amy:** Holy Week begins with what we now call Palm Sunday. At that time, however, it was Passover, one of the largest Jewish festivals of the year, and thousands of Jews from all over the country came to celebrate, including Jesus and his disciples. Passover was a time of joy – retelling the story of how God brought the Israelites out of slavery, and anticipating the time when God would send the promised Messiah to save them. Many in Jerusalem believed that Jesus was that Messiah. But they were expecting him to save them, not from their sins, but from the oppression of the Roman government. And so there is excitement in the air as people anticipate Jesus’ arrival.

**Rebecca:** As Jesus came to the towns of Bethphage and Bethany on the Mount of Olives, he sent two disciples ahead. “Go into that village over there,” he told them. “As you enter it, you will see a young donkey tied there that no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. So they went and found the colt, just as Jesus had said. They brought the colt to Jesus and threw their garments over it for him to sit on. As he rode along, the crowds spread out their cloaks on the road ahead of him, and began waving palm branches – a sign of victory. It appeared as though Jesus was indeed the long awaited Messiah – the king who would deliver them! People began to shout and sing as they walked along, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

**Amy:** The thrill of Jesus’ triumphal entrance didn’t last long. Over the next few days, tensions began to build, as Jesus challenged the Jewish authorities. He overturned the tables of the unscrupulous merchants selling inside the temple. He exposed the hypocrisy of the religious leaders, condemning their practices, thus threatening their authority. So the chief priests met at the residence of Caiaphas, the high priest, plotting how to put Jesus to death. They would send their temple guards to capture and arrest Jesus, but they needed someone to help them in this plot. The Bible tells us Satan entered into Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve disciples, and he went to the leading priests to discuss the best way to betray Jesus to them. They were delighted, and they promised to give him thirty pieces of silver.

**Rebecca:** That Thursday, Jesus planned to share the Passover meal with his disciples. This is an annual ritual celebrated by Jews everywhere in which they tell the story of their freedom from slavery in Egypt. In the Old Testament Book of Exodus we read that God finally had enough of trying to convince Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. And God's final ultimatum was that the firstborn of all the households in Egypt would die. However, there was a way that the Israelites could be saved – by sacrificing a lamb and smearing its blood on the doorposts outside their home. Then, as the Spirit of God swept through Egypt, when he saw the blood on the doorpost, he would “pass over” that place, thus sparing the household of death. God had made a covenant with his people that they would be saved by the blood of the lamb.

**Amy:** With the institution of the Last Supper, Jesus now becomes the sacrificial lamb, whose blood saves us...from sin and death. This would be the new covenant for all of humanity. As they shared their meal, Jesus took bread, broke it and said, “Take, eat, this is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” He then took the cup, gave thanks to God, gave it to his disciples and said, “This is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of your sins. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of what I have done.”

**Rebecca:** After the meal, around 11:00 pm, Jesus led his disciples up to the Mount of Olives, where he often went to pray. On the way, Jesus warned his disciples that later that night something would happen and they would all desert him. Peter, convinced of his own allegiance and faith, reprimands Jesus, “Even if everyone else deserts you, I never will!” Jesus however, insists: “Before the cock crows twice, you will deny three times that you even know me.” But Peter was insistent, “No, I will never desert you.” They went to a grove of olive trees, called the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus took his three closest friends, Peter, James and John and told them he was deeply troubled and grieved, and could they just stay awake and pray for him. Tragically, they could not. They fell asleep not just once, not twice, but three times. So Jesus was left alone in his anguish. He prayed to God that he might be let go of the awful burden about to be placed upon him – paying the penalty for the sins of humankind, and the pain and suffering of the cross facing him. Luke tells us he was in such agony of spirit that his sweat became like drops of blood falling on the ground. Yet through it all, Jesus surrendered to God. “Not my will, but yours, be done.”

**Amy:** Suddenly a large crowd of temple guards, yielding clubs and swords came to arrest Jesus. Just as it had been planned, Judas went over to Jesus saying, “Rabbi!” and kissed him. Immediately the soldiers grabbed Jesus and dragged him to the home of the high priest, Caiaphas, where the religious leaders had gathered secretly to determine Jesus' fate. As he was bound and led away, all his disciples...his closest friends, deserted him and fled.

**Rebecca:** They arrived at Caiaphas' home, where the members of the Jewish Council waited. Standing before the religious authorities, Jesus listened as many people gave false testimony against him. Because all the witnesses couldn't agree, Caiaphas asked him directly, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of God?" Jesus said, "I am," which is the same name God used for himself when Moses asked God his name thousands of years earlier – "I AM". They needed to hear no more. Jesus had just claimed himself to be both the Messiah and God. They began to spit on him and beat him. They convicted him of blasphemy, and decided they would take him to Pilate, the Roman governor, condemning him on the grounds of treason – calling himself a messiah – a "king of the Jews." This, they knew, would result in Jesus' death.

**Amy:** In the meantime, a crowd had begun to gather in the courtyard outside by a fire, and Peter was waiting there. One servant girl said to him, "Weren't you with Jesus, the Galilean?" "I don't know what you're talking about," said Peter. Soon another girl saw him and said, "This man was with Jesus." But again, Peter said, "I do not know the man." Later, a third time, one of the bystanders pointed to Peter saying, "This man is a Galilean, he must know him." Then Peter began to curse. He exclaimed, "I do not know him!" Immediately, the crow of a rooster sounded through the courtyard. Peter remembered Jesus' words, and he broke down and cried bitterly.

**Rebecca:** When Judas heard what happened to Jesus, he regretted what he had done and wanted to return the money. But Caiaphas wouldn't take it back – it was now blood money. Judas was filled with such grief and remorse at his betrayal, he went out and hanged himself.

**Amy:** The Jewish Council wanted Jesus dead, but only the Roman government had the power to execute someone. They knew that blasphemy would not mean anything to a Roman official, but if Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, a king, it could be construed that Jesus wanted to start an insurrection. And that was punishable by crucifixion. So at 7:00 on Friday morning, Jesus was hauled off to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. After questioning Jesus, Pilate turned to the leading priests and to the crowd and said, "I find nothing wrong with this man!" Pilate wanted to let Jesus go, but the crowd was insistent that Jesus be crucified. So to satisfy their lust for blood, Pilate offered them a choice between Jesus and a notorious murderer, Barabbas. Certain that the crowd would release Jesus, Pilate asked, "Who shall I release for you?" "Barabbas!" shouted the crowd. "What shall I do with Jesus?" They said, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

**Rebecca:** The crowd that celebrated him on Sunday now condemned him on Friday. For his message was not “let’s rise up and fight the Romans and end this oppression.” His message was “love your neighbor, pray for your enemies, go the extra mile.’ But no one wanted to hear this. So when the two men stood before the crowd – they chose the one symbolizing evil, power, hate, and sin, over the one symbolizing love, peace, and goodness.

**Amy:** It was the Roman custom to flog someone prior to crucifixion, to inflict as much pain as possible, while still keeping them alive. Jesus was taken, stripped of his clothes and bound to a post. Whips laced with hooks, glass, and metal tore into and ripped his skin and tissue to the bone. From there he was dragged by the guards into the courtyard of the Governor’s palace, where they jammed a crown of thorns on his head, threw a purple robe on him, spit at him and mocked him.

**Rebecca:** Around 9:00 that morning, they led Jesus about a third of a mile up to the hill where he was to be crucified. We sometimes call it Calvary, from the Latin word, *Calvaria*, meaning “skull,” or Golgotha, the Aramaic equivalent. Jesus was forced to carry the crossbeam of the cross. Having just endured such torture, he began to stumble and struggle as he climbed the hill to his death. A bystander, a foreigner from Africa, Simon, was pressed into service, to carry the cross for Jesus.

**Amy:** Once there, the soldiers hammered Jesus to the cross, with spikes through his hands and feet, and he was lifted up for all to see. The only charge against him, “King of the Jews.” Jesus, who had endured so much pain and humiliation, who had seen the evil of humanity at its worst, looked down from the cross at the soldiers gambling for his clothes, at the priests with their self-satisfied looks, at the crowd shouting out, “If you are the Son of God, save yourself.” And with a love that is beyond our understanding, prays to God, “Father, forgive them. For they do not know what they are doing.” Two criminals who had also been charged were crucified at the same time. One mocked him along with the crowd, but the other, in humble repentance said, “We deserve to die, but this man is innocent. Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And Jesus, looking at the man, assured him, “Today, you will be with me in paradise.”

**Rebecca:** One particular person who had to endure the pain of watching all this was Jesus’ mother, Mary. And Jesus, wanting to make sure that his mother would be cared for after his death, said to his disciple, John. “Here is your mother,” and to Mary, “Here is your son.” At noon, the sky suddenly turned dark, and stayed that way until 3:00 that afternoon. Jesus, feeling like we all do when God sometimes seem silent, cried out with a loud voice, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”

A little later, with blood and fluids having drained from his body, he said, “I thirst.” Later, as his breathing became more difficult, and with his life slowly ebbing away, Jesus said, “It is finished.” God’s plan for the salvation of the world was fulfilled. Then, Jesus, with a loud voice called out, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” And he breathed his last.

**Amy:** Suddenly, the earth began to shake, and rocks split, and the curtain in the temple that separated the people from the holy place of God, was ripped in two. This showed that God’s people would be separated from him no longer. A Roman officer and his soldiers were terrified at what was happening, and they said, “Surely this man truly was the Son of God.”

**Rebecca:** After this, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, asked Pilate for Jesus’ body. They took it and wrapped it in linen cloths with spices, as was the burial custom of the Jews. Near the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb where no one had ever been buried. So they laid Jesus there, and rolled a great stone across the entrance and left. Mary Magdalene, and the other Mary and women who had followed him, saw where he was laid. Then, because it was now the Sabbath, they rested as required by the law.