

Wilderness

THE WILDERNESS JOURNEY FROM PALMS TO PASSION

WELCOME & LENTEN CANDLE MEDITATION

Welcome to worship as a dispersed people of St Andrews Uniting Church Glenbrook, and welcome to our friends and family who are tuning in online from across Australia and beyond.

Much of our liturgy today comes from the good people at Sanctified Art, who have given us the wilderness poetry that we have enjoyed so much during Lent.

As we begin our wilderness journey from Palms to Passion, I am aware that in reality this wilderness journey is far from over. This year we must journey further than anyone of us imagined - beyond the familiar expectations and hope of Easter, into a deeper wilderness - that place where we encounter the deep mystery of God in the wilderness of our world at this time.

So I invite you now to close your eyes and let go of the things that distract and concern you. And Listen!

The time is drawing near. Jesus is preparing to enter Jerusalem.

How will we greet him? Will we follow him all the way to the Cross?

Are we open to experience the mystery that the light came into the world, became flesh, and dwelt among us?

The light of the world is going out.

What will we learn this year in the dark night of our soul?

(Silent time.)

As we extinguish this light, we acknowledge the darkness and pain of illness and disease in the world, in body and in mind.

(A candle is extinguished.)

Let us pray.

Loving God, there are so many choices before us every day.

Choices offered by our friends, our families, our culture, our own past.

Some of them encourage the well-being of the earth, ourselves and our neighbours; others are destructive. Help us to distinguish between them.

May we learn from the choices of Jesus and embody compassion, justice, and inclusion in all we say and do. Amen.

SONG: O TENDER GOD

Today is a special service because this week is unlike any other week in the Christian calendar. Today we celebrate Palm Sunday, Jesus' joyous entry into Jerusalem. But we will also turn to the events that followed, walking through the moments that led up to Jesus' arrest. We'll do this as if journeying day by day, because just like our lives, holy week happened day by day.

In our service, we will incorporate the tradition of midrash. Midrash is an ancient Jewish tradition that weaves together the art of storytelling and the truth of scripture, inviting us to imagine and wonder about the details that exist between the lines.

Today you will hear from five voices: a woman who witnessed Jesus flip the tables in the temple, a Pharisee, the woman with the alabaster jar who anointed Jesus' feet in Bethany, Judas, and one of Jesus' disciples in the garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus was arrested. As you hear these stories, we invite you to lean in. Imagine yourself there. Feel the truth of this narrative—for it was a holy week, and it was a hard week. Let us begin.

CALL TO WORSHIP

ONE: On Palm Sunday so many years ago, the people saw Jesus and asked,

ALL: **Who is this?**

ONE: In worship, we respond. In worship, we declare:

ALL: **Jesus is a miracle worker and healer.**

ONE: Jesus is a teacher and preacher.

ALL: **Jesus is our light in the darkness.**

ONE: Jesus is our source of love.

ALL: **Jesus is our path in the wilderness.**

ONE: So may we lay down our hearts like they laid down their coats.

ALL: **Let us worship Holy God.**

SONG: IN MY HEART IS A ROAD

PROCLAIMING THE WORD TOGETHER

SUNDAY | Matthew 21:1-11

It was Sunday morning.

"When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

"Tell the daughter of Zion,

Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!
 Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
 Hosanna in the highest heaven!"
 When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking,

"Who is this?" The crowds were saying,
 "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

And this is where the story begins.

OPENING LITANY | "Who is this?"

Who is this?

1: I heard he was a carpenter's son.

2: I heard he was from Nazareth.

3: Can anything good come from Nazareth?

ALL: **Who is this?**

1: I heard he knew John the Baptist.

2: I heard he was related to John the Baptist.

3: I heard he can heal people.

1: Do you think he can heal me?

2: Who is he?

3: I heard he talks to gentiles.

1: I heard he talks to children!

2: And women!

3: And tax collectors!

1: Seriously, who is this?

2: I heard he's the Son of David.

3: I heard he's the Son of Man.

1: I heard he's the one we've been waiting for.

2: I heard he was born of a Virgin.

3: I heard he was born in a stable.

ALL: **Who is this?**

1: Why is he riding a donkey?

2: How does he have so many followers?

3: Do you think Caesar knows that a man from Nazareth has been welcomed with such a large parade?

ALL: **Who is this?**

1: I don't know who he is, but I've heard he's gracious and kind.

2: I heard he fed five thousand.

3: I heard he survived the wilderness.

1: I heard he helped the blind man see.

2: Do you think he sees me?

3: I heard he walked on water! Is that even possible?

1: I heard he can save us.

2: I heard he can save all of us.

3: Who is this?

ALL: **Who is this?**

PALMS PROCESSIONAL & TRIUMPHAL ENTRY

HYMN | "All Glory, Laud & Honour"

*All glory, laud, and honour
 to You, Redeemer, King,
 to Whom the lips of children
 made sweet hosannas ring.*

You are the King of Israel
and David's royal son,
Now in the Lord's name coming,
The king and blessed one

All glory, laud, and honour....

The company of angels
is praising you on high;
and we with all creation
in chorus make reply.

All glory, laud, and honour....

The people of the Hebrews
with palms before you went;
our praise and prayer and anthems
before you we present.

All glory, laud, and honour....

To you before your passion
they sang their hymns of praise;
to you, now high exalted,
our melody we raise.

All glory, laud, and honour....

Their praises you accepted;
accept the prayers we bring,
Who in all good take pleasure
our good and gracious king

TABLES TURNED | Matthew 21:12-13

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers."

DRAMATIC READING:

MONDAY | The woman in the temple

I come here every Monday morning.

It has always been like this, at least for as long as I can remember.

My parents talk about a time when this room used to be packed with people here to pray and hear the Torah every week. They talk about those days like they were the glory days—if only we could get back to that.

Now? Now the temple is primarily a marketplace.

I come here every week for the farmer's market—to buy eggs and figs and food for my family. And they have the best bread! I've never felt guilty for that because I pray on my own, and we still celebrate passover; so is it really that big a deal?

I used to think not, but that changed the day Jesus showed up.

I don't know that I will ever forget that day.

I had just bartered with Samuel down the street to get two fresh fish for my kids. That's when I heard the sound. It was so loud—a crash, a splintering. For a brief moment I thought God might be tearing open the walls of the temple and climbing inside. I turned around, hands full of fish, to see the money changers' tables turned over and the doves flapping wildly in their cages. Coins slowly rolled their way across the holiest of holies and everyone froze. I've never heard silence so loud. Jesus paused and looked at the room. Quietly he said, "My house is to be called a house of prayer. *Prayer. For all nations.*"

In the quiet, I felt myself hiding the two fish in my hands behind my back, like Adam and Eve hid behind leaves, wishing the coins in my hands could disappear. And then, as quickly as he arrived, he turned and left.

I can't be sure, but it looked like there might have been a tear running down his cheek, and for just a second, I wondered to myself—maybe, just maybe, that sound really was God tearing open the walls of the temple and climbing inside.

Who is he, you ask?

I'm not sure, but he's not like me.

He's faithful. He's honest. There was nothing hiding behind his back.

Have any of you ever felt that kind of shame?

Have any of you ever wanted to hide something from God?

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Let's confess together

ALL: God—for all the things we try to hide from you, forgive us. Amen.

AUTHORITY QUESTIONED | Matthew 21:23

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

DRAMATIC READING

TUESDAY | A Pharisee

Do you know how many laws are in the Torah? Six hundred and thirteen.

You know how I know that? Because I spent my entire youth memorising them—hours upon hours upon hours of repetition. And after I mastered those, I went on to memorise the entire Torah. That's the first five books of the Bible, by the way.

I spent all those hours sitting at the foot of my teacher so that I could one day teach.

That's what faithfulness, sacrifice, and a life of service looks like—at least that's what I've been taught.

I've talked to every scribe and priest in the land and no one knows who taught this Jesus.

No one raised him to teach. No one knows if he even passed his Torah comprehension exam. Where does he get his authority?

AND WHY ARE PEOPLE LISTENING TO HIM?

That is the thing that blows me away. His teachings are unorthodox. He's healed on the Sabbath. He's talked to Samaritans. He's completely disregarded our societal lines—befriending women and lepers. Does he even know how many rules he's breaking? I just don't understand. This isn't the way it's supposed to be.

I studied for so long, and nothing prepared me for this.

Who is he, you ask?

He's a radical. A heretic. A rebel.

A mystery.

ANOINTED | Matthew 26:6-13

Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table. But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, "Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor." But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

DRAMATIC READING

WEDNESDAY | The woman with the alabaster jar

It was Wednesday.

I heard he was coming to Bethany. People talk about stuff like that.

People also talk when you break open a bottle of perfume to anoint someone in a crowd. I learned that the hard way.

In a few years they may forget my name, but I bet they'll remember what I did. I am the woman who anointed Jesus, and it remains one of the moments in my life that I am most proud of.

Jesus was at Simon's house. He often went there when he was in the city, and I knew that. We all knew that, because we could see them packed in there! It's hard to miss twelve people packed into a room. So before the sun fell, I grabbed my jar of perfume—the only item of wealth I own—and walked to Simon's.

I had begged and saved for years to afford that jar of perfume. It was my back-up plan, my safety net when I could no longer work, so I kept it hidden in the cupboard of my house.

The whole way to Simon's house I clutched that jar like a mother holds a baby—terrified that it might slip from my hands too soon, that I might lose the only gift I had to give, accidentally anointing the dirt at my feet instead of the man who had healed so many.

It wasn't until I walked through the door and saw Jesus sitting there that I was able to release my grip on that jar. I had made it. I had my gift, and this was the moment.

The smell was unbelievable—sweet like milk and honey, but even stronger than fresh baked bread. I knew when I cracked that jar open it would be overpowering, it would send people into the street. But I had to do it!

People criticised me for wasting that perfume, but they don't know the whole story. They don't know what it meant to be seen and called by name. Jesus pulled me out of the wilderness of my own isolation. They have no idea the healing that Jesus offered me, and they probably could never understand what I would give

to do it all over again. I mean, how do you put a price tag on life? On a full and abundant life?

I don't need everyone to understand. I just needed him to understand. He gave me the gift of new life, so in return, I gave him the only thing I had.

Who is this man, you ask?

He was grace embodied, and love let loose.

And I'll never be the same.

INVITATION TO THE OFFERING & DEDICATION

What would you give if you could? What treasure is hidden away, what love has been left untapped? In this time when we can't be physically together, let us find new ways to be grace embodied for one another and for our community. How are you giving your gifts and offering to the church at this time?

DOXOLOGY

ALL: Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
Praise God, all creatures here below;
Praise God above, you heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost

PRAYER OF DEDICATION FOR THE OFFERING

Gracious God,
When we hide away our treasure in cupboards for ourselves—forgive us.
Inspire us to be as gracious as the woman with the alabaster jar.
Gratefully we pray,
Amen.

BETRAYAL | Matthew 26:14-16

Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What will you give me if I betray him to you?" They paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

DRAMATIC READING

WEDNESDAY | Judas

Could he have really been the Messiah—the son of God? Could he really be the One that God would send to redeem the world? *Really?!* There were days I was convinced he was. Like the day he fed five thousand people. I still can't figure out how he did it, but I was there and people ate their fill. Or the night he told Peter to walk to him on the water. I could never begin to tell you how that happened, but I was there—it felt real! But, there were other days I wasn't so sure. Like the day he sent us out two by two to heal people—did he really expect us to be able to do what he did? Or the days he rebuked the Pharisees. Could the Son of God really be that hard on people, especially the leaders of the law? I wanted to believe he was the Messiah. I really did. I wanted to give everything I had, but something deep within me wasn't settled. I was beginning to lose sleep over it and the Pharisees began whispering in my ear. What if he wasn't all he said he was? What if everything I saw could be explained? What if I had risked my life, only to find out he was just another great teacher among many? It was that unsettled voice deep within me that told me to do it. That small voice was more powerful than my will, my thoughts, and my faith. It ruled me, and I followed it. Most people said I betrayed him for the money, but that would be too simple. I handed him over because I couldn't know who he was for certain. There is no black and white, no hundred percent proof when it comes to God. Doubt is an untamed wilderness of the mind, and that shade of grey ate at me. Who was that man, you ask? If you would have asked me last week, I would have told you, "I'm not entirely sure." Ask me on Sunday and my answer will have changed.

THURSDAY EVENING | The Last Supper

On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?" He said, "Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, 'The Teacher says, My time is near; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.'" So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover meal.

When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve; and while they were eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, "Surely not I, Lord?" He answered, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born." Judas, who betrayed him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" He replied, "You have said so."

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

Let us say today the Prayer Jesus taught his disciples:

ALL: **Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.**

Normally we would share communion together. Today, let me invite you to hold your empty hands open (like a bowl) as we sing - Into your Hands...

SING: INTO YOUR HANDS (*Sung in three parts*)
Into your hands I place my life.
Oh, loving, faithful God.
Oh, my life is yours.

In our hands and in our hearts, we leave space for resurrection, for new life, for new meaning. We hold the sorrows, prayers and hopes of the world before You, O God. Amen

SING: IN GOD ALONE
In God a-lone is my soul at rest.
Be at rest, my soul.

When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

THE GARDEN | Matthew 26:36-47

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee,

and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Again he went away for the second time and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand."

While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people.

DRAMATIC READING

THURSDAY NIGHT | A disciple in the garden of Gethsemane

It all happened so fast.

It was late—later than I had realised, and sleep was clinging to me like a fog I couldn't shake. I heard the crowd arrive in my dreams. At first I thought it was a crowd of people wanting Jesus to heal them. I thought selfishly to myself for just a moment, "How in the world did they find us here?!"

That's when I started to wake up.

I realised the crowd didn't sound right—it wasn't people praising Jesus or begging for mercy. It was too quiet, far too quiet for that; and in the quiet I could hear the clink of swords in sheaths.

I frantically pulled myself from sleep, shaking awake my brothers and trying to stand up quickly. I saw Judas at the front of the crowd.

"What is he doing there?" I thought.

"Maybe things will be okay after all," I thought.

But I was wrong.

In a split second my whole world fell apart around me.

I went from knowing my way, knowing my purpose, and knowing my plans, to standing in the wilderness alone. It happened as quickly as a summer thunderstorm and as slowly as the change in seasons.

The crowd with clubs and swords were taking Jesus. They were taking him away, and he was not fighting it.

Maybe if I had stayed awake like he had asked then this wouldn't have happened.

Maybe if we had left Jerusalem and gone back to Bethany, this wouldn't have happened.

What am I supposed to tell my family? The man I have seen heal the sick and walk on water has been arrested, and the angels didn't stop it.

Who is this man, you ask?

He's not a criminal. That's for sure.

It all happened so fast.

RESPONDING TO THE WORD PROCLAIMED

HYMN | TRAVELLING THE ROAD TO FREEDOM

Travelling the road to freedom
 Who wants to travel the road with me
 Feted by noise and branches
 And banners hanging from every tree
 Cheered on by frenzied people
 Puzzled by what they hear and see
 Travelling the road to freedom
 Who wants to travel the road with me

Travelling the road to freedom
 Who wants to travel the road with me
 Partnered by staunch supporters
 Who come the dark will turn and flee
 Nourished by faith and patience
 Neither of which is plain to see
 Travelling the road to freedom
 Who wants to travel the road with me

Travelling the road to freedom
 Who wants to travel the road with me
 Tipping the scales of justice
 Setting both minds and captives free
 Suffering and yet forgiving
 Even when my friends most disagree
 Travelling the road to freedom
 Who wants to travel the road with me

Travelling the road to freedom
 I am the Way I'll take you there
 Choose to come on the journey
 Or choose to criticise and stare
 Earth's mesmerising evil
 Only a traveller can repair
 Travelling the road to freedom
 I am the Way I'll take you there

CLOSING LITANY | "Who is he?"

On Sunday he was everything—the centre of the parade, the centre of our attention. His arrival was holy and unexpected and beautiful.

Who is he?

On Monday he turned the world upside down.
 He flipped the tables while he flipped the script.
 Who is he?

On Tuesday he was a teacher.
 But he wasn't like the other teachers.
 He sat and they sat. He spoke and they listened.

Who is he?

On Wednesday he pulled us from the wilderness.
 He gave us the gift of new life, so we can give him all that we are.

Who is he?

On Wednesday he was nothing more than a man worth thirty pieces of silver.

Who is he?

On Thursday he was the body broken for us, the blood shed for us.

Who is he?

On Thursday he was betrayed. He was arrested. He was treated like a criminal.

On Thursday he was alone, and we were asleep.

Who is he?

It's the question everyone is asking...

Friends, this is the question of holy week,
and it's the question of our entire lives.

In order to answer this question, we have to walk through all of holy week,
through the wilderness of betrayal and death, the wilderness of the tomb and surprise
endings.

As we begin this wilderness journey let me encourage you to take the time to reflect.
This will be a Holy Week like no others... each day, each heartbreak and surprising
moment is precious - a mysterious gift.

On our website you will find an AT HOME LITURGY FOR MAUNDY THURSDAY
written by Sarah Are, which involves baking bread and blessings and being attentive to
the sacredness that is in every meal and all around us.

For those tuning in for Online Worship in Good Friday, we will share in a Stations of the Cross
reflection - a collaboration from various ministers from across our Synod.

And Easter.... Well - we will all have to wait and see...

Friends, let us continue to walk through the wilderness of faith—the good days, the bad
days, the everyday—step by step... together.

BENEDICTION

ALL: Crucified and risen one,
You have chosen us and we have chosen you
May this way of choosing become a way
of knowing, loving and living
that knows no end
Amen.