

Scripture

Matthew 27:32-33,
35-56; 28:1-7

God on the Cross



We walk with Jesus through his passion and resurrection.

- ◆ Jesus enters Jerusalem accompanied by the cheers and blessings of the people. He suffers death on a cross only to rise to new and unending life.
- ◆ Older children need to hear the story of Jesus' resurrection whenever we tell the story of Jesus' death—just as the early Church insisted on telling the story.
- ◆ Today's session invites group members to enact and walk through the stories of Jesus' passion and resurrection.

Core Session

- ◆ Getting Started
- ◆ Today's Gospel
- ◆ Scripture Headlines (*optional: modeling clay*)
- ◆ Gospel Walk
- ◆ Praying Together

Enrichment

- ◆ Explore the Good News
- ◆ Holy Week Calendars (*Holy Week Cards, hole punch, ribbon*)
- ◆ Info: Clay Tableaux
- ◆ Praying with Music: Allegri's *Miserere mei, Deus*
- ◆ Lenten Challenges
- ◆ Info: Where You'll Find Everything Else

Helps for Leaders

- ◆ More about Today's Scriptures
- ◆ Reflection
- ◆ Liturgy Link: The Great Vigil of Easter

✓ Getting Started (5-15 minutes)

Activity Soundtrack: Play Allegri's *Miserere mei, Deus*. (Open your Spring-A Seasonal Resources folder, then click on *Companion Music* for options on obtaining this music.)

Participants discuss the events and meaning of Holy Week. Adapt this discussion to fit the actual liturgical practices of your congregation.

Discuss Holy Week with participants:

- ◆ What does the name *Holy Week* mean? (*The week we remember the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus.*)
- ◆ What special liturgies or services do we have in Holy Week? What do we do at each service? (*Typical services include a procession with palms and a reading of the passion on Passion Sunday; washing of the feet and a memorial of the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday; veneration of the Holy Cross and another reading of the passion on Good Friday.*)
- ◆ How do these services help us get ready for Easter?

✓ Today's Gospel (10-15 minutes)

Participants write headlines for scripture passages from **Matthew 27:32-33, 35-56; 28:1-7**. Adapt this activity to fit the size of the group. With eight or fewer participants, you could assign two or more passages to each group.

Divide participants into six groups. Assign each group one of these passages from Matthew:

- ◆ Matthew 27:32-33
- ◆ Matthew 27:35-38
- ◆ Matthew 27:39-44
- ◆ Matthew 27:45-50
- ◆ Matthew 27:51-56
- ◆ Matthew 28:1-7

Directions to the groups:

- ◆ Read your passage.
- ◆ Pretend that you work for a newspaper. You are about to publish the story you just read, but you need a headline.
- ◆ Write your headline on a sheet of newsprint and tape it to a wall.

✓ Scripture Headlines (10-40 minutes)

Participants illustrate the headlines written in the activity above.

For the simplest and quickest activity, ask participants to illustrate their headlines by drawing "front-page photographs" of the events described. Group members can add written comments to the pages, too.

You may prefer participants to model their scenes from clay instead of illustrating them with a mock newspaper photograph. See Info on page 3.

✓ Gospel Walk

Participants tell the story of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection.

With participants, walk from poster to poster. At each poster, ask participants in that group to:

- ◆ read the headline
- ◆ explain the picture
- ◆ briefly tell the story of what happened

If group members have made clay sculptures, walk from sculpture to sculpture instead. At each poster or sculpture discuss:

- ◆ What do you feel about what is happening to Jesus right now? Why?
- ◆ If you could say something to Jesus right now, what would it be?

✓ Praying Together (5 minutes)

Help participants memorize these words from **Matthew 28:7**: *He has been raised from death.*

Memorize the verse together by saying it together slowly and rhythmically several times. Then pause and say:

- ◆ Think about Jesus raised from death, never to die again.
- ◆ Use your own words to speak to Jesus.

Pause, then slowly repeat once more the scripture verse above. Close by praying:

- ◆ Lord Jesus, be with us this week as we think about your death and new life. Be with us all the days of our lives. *Amen.*

Note: Distribute this week's *At Home with the Good News* to group members (or e-mail it to families).

□ Explore the Good News

(5-15 minutes)

Use the visual discussion starter on page 1 of today's *Explore the Good News* to help group members further explore the events of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday.

On page 2 group members will find the scripture skills activity Explore God's Word. Encourage group members to complete this activity in twos or threes.

□ Holy Week Calendars

Participants make calendars to use during Holy Week.

Before the session print a set of *Holy Week Cards*, attached to this document.

In the session, review the Getting Started discussion about Holy Week with the participants:

- ◆ In Holy Week, we remember the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus.
- ◆ Typical services include a procession with palms and a reading of the passion on Passion Sunday; washing of the feet and a memorial of the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday; veneration of the Holy Cross and another reading of the passion on Good Friday.
- ◆ How do these services help us get ready for Easter?
- ◆ How do our families get ready for Easter?
- ◆ What could we do at home this week to remember Holy Week and get ready for Easter?

Help participants think of activities appropriate for each day this week; for example:

- ◆ Participants could bake bread on Maundy Thursday.
- ◆ Participants could write a poem in the shape of a cross on Good Friday.

List all ideas on the board or newsprint. Encourage participants to add unused ideas from the Lenten Challenges poster made in the 1st Sunday in Lent, too.

Distribute the *Holy Week Cards*, scissors and felt pens or colored pencils. *Directions to the participants:*

- ◆ Cut out your seven cards. Punch a hole where indicated in the corner of each card.
- ◆ Use ribbon to bind the cards together, in order, starting with today, Palm Sunday.
- ◆ On each card, write or draw an activity to do on that day. (example: *Maundy Thursday. Bake bread.*)

- ◆ You can add decorations or borders to each card, if you want.
- ◆ Take your calendar home to use with your family this week.

Encourage participants to work together, sharing plans and ideas. Some participants may want to plan activities to do together this week.

INFO Clay Tableaux

At the conclusion of today's Scripture Headlines activity on page 2, it was suggested that you may prefer participants to model their scenes from cornstarch clay instead of illustrating them with a mock newspaper photograph.

You can use any popular modeling material for this activity, from commercial products, such as Model Magic® or Sculpey®, to homemade cornstarch clay. To make cornstarch clay mix 1 cup corn starch, 2 cups baking soda and 1½ cups water in a saucepan. Cook and stir over medium heat until it resembles mashed potatoes. Cool and knead. Store in plastic containers. This clay can be air-dried to harden.

Distribute the modeling material and ask group members to volunteer to sculpt symbols or sculptures for each story. For example, a group member could form an empty tomb to illustrate Jesus' resurrection or make a sculpture showing the resurrection scene with people gathered around.

□ Praying with Music (15-20 minutes)

Allegri's Miserere mei, Deus

Listen together to Gregorio Allegri's *Miserere mei, Deus*. (Open your Spring-A *Seasonal Resources* folder, then click on *Companion Music* for options on obtaining this music.) As the music plays, Share with group members the following information about the piece and its composer. Pause after every paragraph to listen to the music for 30-60 seconds:

- ◆ We're listening to a musical work written in the 1630s by an Italian named Gregorio Allegri. For lyrics, Allegri used the Latin words of Psalm 51, which start: "Be merciful to me, O God, because of your constant love." (*Pause.*)

- ◆ We're actually hearing two small choirs, one singing a simple version of an ancient chant based on Psalm 51; the other singing more intricate responses. Can you distinguish between the two choirs? *(Pause.)*
- ◆ Allegri composed his version of *Miserere mei, Deus* to be sung in the Sistine Chapel during Holy Week. It soon became forbidden to perform it anywhere else, which added to its air of mystery and awe. Anyone caught writing it down or performing it could be excommunicated from the church. *(Pause.)*
- ◆ It's said that Mozart, at age 14, heard the *Miserere mei, Deus* and—being the musical whiz he was—wrote it out from memory after the service. It was soon published in London (in 1771), and the ban against singing it outside the Vatican was lifted. Instead of excommunicating Mozart, the Pope praised his genius. *(Pause.)*
- ◆ The *Miserere mei, Deus* is an appropriate text for Lent and Holy Week. In it we admit our sinfulness and our need for God's forgiveness. We ask God to make us sincere, truthful, pure and humble. *(Pause.)*

As the music continues to play, ask group members to close their eyes and to listen as you read aloud, slowly and meditatively, Psalm 51. If the music concludes while you're reading, start it again. If it continues after you've finished reading, let group members sit with their eyes closed until the music concludes.

Notes:

- ◆ As an alternative to this activity, play for group members the PowerPoint meditation "Miserere: A Lenten Meditation" found in the *Seasonal Resources* folder. This 10-minute meditation combines photographic images with Allegri's music to provide a contemplative Lenten experience.
- ◆ Watch the King's College Choir of Cambridge sing a shortened version of *Miserere* on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4lC7V8hG198>.
- ◆ Learn more about this magnificent piece at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miserere_%28Allegri%29.

□ Lenten Challenges (10-20 minutes)

Participants review for the last time the Lenten challenges from a poster made in the session for the 1st Sunday in Lent.

As necessary, review with group members that we are now in the last days of the season of Lent. Lent, which lasts 40 days, prepares us for the feast of Easter. The Church asks us to pick one or more ways to change our lives so that we become more like Jesus. Some ways that people use are prayer, doing without food or something else we're used to, giving money to the poor, reading the Bible, changing a habit or making peace.

Gather group members around the poster. Discuss:

- ◆ What ideas did we try this week? *(Accept that participants may not have tried any.)* What difference *did* our ideas make? What difference *could* our ideas make?
- ◆ What could you do for just one day to make a difference in your own life?
- ◆ What could you do for just one day to make a difference in the way you spend time getting closer to God?

INFO Where You'll Find Everything Else

- ◆ Attached to this Session Plan you will find:
 - Backgrounds and reflections for today's readings, titled *More about Today's Scriptures*.
 - Printable *Holy Week Cards* for use in the optional Holy Week Calendars activity.
 - An optional *Faith Skills* activity, which continues our exploration of the Church.
 - A helpful article looking at *Older Children and the Gospel*.
 - A family paper, *At Home with the Good News*, to print and distribute *or* to e-mail to families for use at home.
- ◆ Open your Spring-A *Seasonal Resources* folder, then click on *Seasonal Articles* to find:
 - Information on Spring-A's *Models of the Faith*.
 - A helpful *Holy Week Overview*.
 - The *Introduction for Intermediate* for **Living the Good News**.

More about Today's Scriptures

Today's readings explore the depth of Jesus' suffering. Isaiah pictures God's servant enduring rejection so that he might speak God's word. Paul describes Christ's spirit of humility to the Philippians. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus suffers as God's faithful Son in order to inaugurate God's plan for a new world.

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Today's passage is the third of the four servant songs found in Isaiah (see also 42:1-4, 49:1-6 and 52:13-53:12). The servant probably represents Israel in its ideal form, which some thought would be fulfilled only in the unique person of the Messiah.

The servant was considered a corporate personality, a single individual who would represent and incorporate in himself all the features of Israel's election and mission. The servant songs first provided a way for Israel to understand the significance of the suffering and humiliation of the exile and later helped the Church understand and proclaim the meaning of Jesus' suffering and resurrection.

Philippians 2:5-11

Verses 6-11 are generally considered a pre-Pauline hymn to Christ that Paul here adopts to make his own point. The hymn, poetic in rhythm and structure, contains a summary of the Christian proclamation that includes divine preexistence (v. 6), incarnation (v. 7), death (v. 8), celestial exaltation (v. 9), heavenly adoration (v. 10) and Jesus' new title (v. 11).

The first stanza (vv. 6-8) recounts Jesus' own action. His equality with God is not a prize to be exploited for his own advantage. The second stanza (vv. 9-11) stresses the response by God to bestow on Jesus the name *Lord* (Greek, *kyrios*; Hebrew, *adonai*) and our response to honor him as God is honored.

Matthew 26:14-27:66

The power of the gospel accounts of Jesus' suffering lies not in an appeal to emotion but the stark witness to the presence of God and to the working out of God's purpose. The hearer is called not to pity, sorrow or even penitence, but to faith.

Each of the gospels presents a distinctive focus on Jesus in his suffering. Matthew adds more explicit references to Old Testament material, thereby enhancing his theme of Jesus' goal to carry out God's plan for salvation. Matthew also stressed that Jesus was the royal Messiah who was completely willing to suffer in order to inaugurate God's plan for a new world. He highlighted Jesus' faithful obedience as God's son because his community (c. 85 CE) needed to persevere in their faithfulness when they were rejected by their former Jewish colleagues.

Though Matthew based his account closely on Mark, he tightened up the narrative and introduced new material about the betrayal and suicide of Judas, the dream of Pilate's wife, Pilate washing his hands, the crowd's responsibility for Jesus' death, the cosmic events when Jesus dies, and the guards at the tomb.

Reflection

We live in an age of constant communications, in a steady "soup" of words. We may not recognize how pervasive words are until we enter the silent space of a retreat house or forest. We make commitments in words through vows or contracts and work hard on "communication skills."

Yet the central symbol of today's readings speaks profoundly without words, through the symbol of the cross. As Elizabeth Boyle writes in *Preaching the Poetry of the Gospels*, "The crucifixion itself is the Incarnate Word's supreme poem comprehended without explication in every language by thousands who understand no other theology... If no other evidence of his existence survived, history would accord Jesus Christ the title 'poet' on the basis of the passion narratives alone" (p. 122).

When the cross hangs in our churches, meeting rooms or homes, we can compare what we are doing there with its silent witness. Are we attempting to love so much, so unguardedly, so unselfishly? When people reverence the cross during the Good Friday liturgy, they reveal a glimpse of how their own suffering connects with Jesus'. With him, they too turn a symbol of torture into one of saving life.

Liturgy Link

The Great Vigil of Easter

The Easter Vigil service is one of the oldest liturgical celebrations of the Church, only the weekly Eucharist being older. Our modern ritual imitates the way the night-long Vigil was celebrated in the fourth century, when the Church was no longer an illegal association and could openly express its worship and mission. The Vigil consists of four parts: 1) The Service of Light; 2) Liturgy of the Word; 3) Liturgy of Baptism; 4) Liturgy of the Eucharist.

Part 1: The Service of Light

Christians adopted from Judaism the custom of blessing a special light on the eve of great feasts. The paschal candle gathers together the themes of light—the light first created in the beginning, the pillar of cloud and fire that led the Israelites at the Exodus, the presence of the risen Christ, and the fire of the Holy Spirit.

The candle is lit from a newly kindled flame and decorated with symbols of Christ. It is carried at the front of the procession into the darkened church, as “The Light of Christ” is proclaimed three times. The ancient chant, the *Exsultet*, is a song of rejoicing at the present reality of God’s deliverance and the blessings of salvation through Christ’s Passover.

With the kindling of the light and the proclamation of the *Exsultet*, the words of 1 Peter 2:9-10 take on added meaning (many scholars think that this letter is based on a baptismal homily): “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

Part 2: The Liturgy of the Word

The sequence of Old Testament readings and psalms recalls the formation of the people of the old covenant from the creation to the promise of the final gathering of God’s people, interpreted through the central event of the exodus. In the early Church, these Old Testament texts were the final teachings for those about to be baptized. The Jewish heritage of Christians leads us toward participation in the new covenant. Prayer, silent and spoken, collects our recognition of the reality and intent of God’s mighty acts in an atmosphere of expectant waiting.

Part 3: The Liturgy of Baptism

In the early Church, the Easter Vigil was the time for baptisms. Those who had received instruction (over a period of up to three years) and had prepared by fasting and prayer were presented for initiation into the new covenant.

Clad in white, they renounced the world, the flesh and the devil and accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. They affirmed the baptismal creed and were baptized.

Then the bishop laid hands on them and they were sealed with *chrism* (consecrated oil) and received holy communion. In some places, the newly-baptized, the “neophytes”, were also given a chalice of milk and honey to show that they had entered the promised land. Today, if there are no baptisms, the members of the congregation may reaffirm their baptismal vows using the form provided.

Part 4: The Liturgy of the Eucharist

Now in bread and wine, Jesus comes among us in the Eucharist. He comes into the darkness of our lives with his risen life. The time of waiting is completed, yet we also look ahead to the final fulfillment of the paschal banquet when we shall see him face to face.