*These brief commentaries on services for Holy Week are excerpted from the forthcoming revision to the Presbyterian* Book of Common Worship *(WJKP, 2018).*

**Palm/Passion Sunday**

Palm/Passion Sunday is, by design, a day of drama and paradox, of triumph and tragedy. As the service begins, a crowd gathers, waving branches and shouting “Hosanna” (Hebrew for save us), and wanting to crown Jesus as king. But as the story of Christ’s passion unfolds, the shouts of praise turn into demands for his death. Jesus is handed over to be mocked, tortured, and killed; the crown he receives is one of thorns.

For a number of reasons, it is important to preserve the paradox of Palm/Passion Sunday, celebrating this liturgy in its fullness. First, the service is established on the theological principle that Jesus’ death and resurrection cannot be separated. It insists that we not avoid the cross—God’s way of glory leads through the grave. Indeed, there is a clear path through this service, connecting Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem with his triumphal entry into the new Jerusalem, where the white-robed multitudes will again take up their palms, shouting: “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Rev. 7:9–10). Second, since many people are unable to attend the midweek worship services of Holy Week, the Palm/Passion liturgy ensures that they will hear the whole story of Jesus’ dying and rising—not skipping from “hosanna” to “hallelujah.” Third, this pattern of worship at the beginning of Holy Week has ancient origins, dating to at least the fourth century and reflecting the theological, pastoral, and liturgical wisdom of the early church.

Because this is such a full service, it is appropriate to allow the story of Scripture to speak for itself; a brief sermon, if any, will suffice. The extended reading of the passion narrative is most effectively presented when it is divided among several readers, perhaps representing major characters in the story. The celebration of the Eucharist is an especially significant part of this service, as it follows from the Gospel reading and embraces the complex themes of the liturgy.

color: purple and/or red

**The Three Days**

Maundy Thursday | Good Friday | The Great Vigil of Easter

The liturgy for the Three Days proclaims one dramatic story in three acts. The events of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Great Vigil of Easter are best understood as one service, unfolding over the course of three days. Through this profound and transforming experience at the heart of the Christian year, we are immersed in the holy mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection and the great story of God’s saving love.

Maundy Thursday (from *mandatum*, Latin for “commandment”) proclaims Jesus’ new commandment to love one another as he has loved us. It celebrates Christ’s example of humble service and self-offering, represented by the washing of feet and the sharing of communion. The liturgy begins with an emphasis on confession and forgiveness, concluding the penitential season of Lent. It ends with the stripping of the church in preparation for worship on Good Friday.

Good Friday proclaims the good news of salvation through the paradoxical suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. The center of this liturgy is the reading of the passion narrative from the Gospel of John, in which Christ is lifted up on the cross as a sign of God’s great love for the world. In the Solemn Intercession, we join Jesus’ prayer for the church and world, as he reaches out with compassion from the cross. Through the Solemn Reproaches of the Cross, we hear Christ’s anguished lament: My people, my church, why have youforsaken me?

The Great Vigil of Easter proclaims God’s victory over sin and death through Christ’s resurrection. Traditionally, the Easter Vigil begins at sunset, in keeping with the ancient Jewish/Christian understanding of evening as the start of a new day. The Easter Vigil consists of four movements: *The Service of Light*, rejoicing in the coming of Christ as the light of the world; *The Service of Readings*, remembering the story of God’s mighty acts through history, leading up to Jesus’ resurrection; *The Service of Baptism*, welcoming new members of Christ’s body and reaffirming God’s covenant with us; and *The Service of Eucharist*, giving thanks for new life in Christ and anticipating the joyful feast of the realm of God.

The liturgy for the Three Days encompasses the end of Lent and the beginning of Easter. Like the threshold of a door, it stands between the two seasons—as through the suffering and sorrow of Jesus’ death we enter into God’s promise of abundant and everlasting life. Thus the Great Vigil begins the great fifty days of Easter, the church’s joyful celebration of the new thing God has done, is doing, and will do in Jesus Christ.

color: purple for Maundy Thursday (until the sanctuary is stripped), no color for Good Friday, and white and gold for the Easter Vigil