Suggestions for Lent Midweek, 2021

LCMS Worship offers the following suggestions for midweek services preaching through the Passion History in five parts. A Passion History is a conflation and harmonization of the four Gospel accounts into a single narrative. Johannes Bugenhagen (1485–1558), reformer with and pastor to Luther, compiled a Passion History that enjoyed frequent use throughout the German-speaking Lutheran church. The Lutheran Service Book: Altar Book provides a Passion History in the spirit of Bugenhagen’s. Thanks be to our Lord, who has redeemed us by His Passion from damnation!

The Passion History can be found in LSB Altar Book, p. 487–500. It is also available in the Lutheran Service Builder (app.lutheranservicebuilder.com).

Services:
The following Propers have been selected for use with Vespers. If Evening Prayer is used, an opening hymn is best omitted. If the Service of Prayer and Preaching is used, we suggest portions from the Christian Questions and the Second Article of the Creed. Collects may be taken from the previous Sunday. If St. Matthias (Feb. 24) is observed, the first portion of the Passion History will not be heard.

February 24
Opening: 634 The Death of Jesus Christ, Our Lord
Psalm 91
Office: 440 Jesus, I Will Ponder Now
Reading: I. The Lord’s Supper
The Litany: p. 288 (in place of the Kyrie & Prayers)
Closing: 639 Wide Open Stand the Gates

March 3
Opening: 436 Go to Dark Gethsemane
Psalm 75 (Not in LSB Pew Edition)
Office: 544 O Love, How Deep
Reading: II. Gethsemane
The Litany: p. 288 (in place of the Kyrie & Prayers)
Closing: 438 A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth

March 10
Opening: 451 Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted
Psalm 4
Office: 609 Jesus Sinners Doth Receive
Reading: III. The Palace of the High Priest
The Litany: p. 288 (in place of the Kyrie & Prayers)
Closing: 610 Lord Jesus, Think on Me

March 17
Opening: 420 Christ, the Life of All the Living
Psalm 56
Office: 439 O Dearest Jesus (stanzas 1–7)
Reading: IV. The Praetorium
The Litany: p. 288 (in place of the Kyrie & Prayers)
Closing: 439 O Dearest Jesus (stanzas 8–15)
March 24
Opening: 427 In the Cross of Christ I Glory
Psalm 43
Office: 453 Upon the Cross Extended
Reading: V. Calvary
The Litany: p. 288 (in place of the Kyrie & Prayers)
Closing: 548 Thanks to Thee, O Christ, Victorious

Suggestions for Preaching
February 24: The Lord’s Supper
- Note: Consider what topics may be preached on Holy Thursday so that any duplications may be intentional, or so that different content may receive focus. The Gospel for Holy Thursday focuses on the New Commandment and Christ’s washing of the disciples’ feet, while its Epistle is St. Paul on the Institution of the Lord’s Supper.
- The context of the Passover suggests haste, but Christ is in earnest to take time with His disciples and to institute something new: His Testament. A sermon on the Lord’s Supper as Christ’s final testament before His death might consider Hebrews 9 and Galatians 3. See also Luther in “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” AE 36:37–40.
- The Words of Institution are themselves a proclamation of the Gospel in very succinct form, recounting the purpose of Christ’s death as well as delivering its benefits. “The Son of Man is glorified” in His death for us. Hymn 634 is not only an explication of the Supper, but draws the connection between Christ’s death and its delivery to us. Its opening line deserves our attention: “We celebrate” what seems strange and ugly. Our God’s death is the world’s highest good.
- There is room to preach also the imitation of Christ in love and sacrificial service to the neighbor. What is primary is that Christ goes to the cross for us as an atoning sacrifice. “Where I am going, you cannot follow.” Yet, “afterwards you will follow me.” The Lord’s death must not be reduced to an object lesson; nevertheless, we learn in Him how to love our neighbor, which we also learn by eating and drinking the Sacrament (Christian Question 18).

March 3: Gethsemane
- There are many examples to be imitated in Christ, as in 1 Peter 2:21:
  - Christ’s constancy and content in prayer, both His directness with the Father and His exhibition of the Third Petition.
  - Keeping watch, especially as we await the Lord’s return.
  - Letting vengeance belong to God; not taking up the sword unlawfully, etc.
- Again, however, what Christ does in the garden is primarily for our salvation:
  - The intra-Trinitarian dialogue between Father and Son, where Christ willingly obeys and consents to His Father’s plan and purpose (see LSB 438).
  - Christ’s flesh is not weak like ours, thus He is able to be our Savior and unable to fall into temptation and sin.
  - Christ in His state of humiliation (as a man) does not make use of His divine powers and rights, but humbles Himself to fulfill the Scriptures and be taken. “No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.”
- The exchange from John’s Gospel gives a glimpse that Jesus is the “I AM,” God in the flesh. It is shown here at the beginning of the Passion to highlight that He, not His captors, is truly the Master of the coming events (see Bach’s “St. John Passion”).
- Psalm 44 could also be referenced regarding Christ’s betrayal.
- Caiaphas’ statement is the Holy Spirit’s irony, that he speaks according to his office as high priest concerning the sacrifice of Christ, though he believes it only in a political sense.

March 10: The Palace of the High Priest
- Three scenes are shown, the first two happening simultaneously:
  - Christ’s kangaroo-court trial
  - Peter’s test and denial of Christ
  - Judas’ repentance and hanging
- It may be worth teaching what the accusations against Jesus mean, namely, that He claimed to be God, was understood by
His accusers to be claiming to be God, and thus was charged with “blasphemy,” that is, lying about God, since any man who claims to be God would be lying. (Christ, of course, was speaking the truth by such a claim.)

- Contrast can be seen between Christ, who makes the good confession both in silence and when He speaks, and Peter, who fails in silence and in speaking.

- Contrast can be seen also between Peter’s repentance and Judas’, as the Lutheran Confessions explain. See Apology XIIA (V) 8–38.

- The hymns are chosen to highlight this second contrast, which shows us the pernicious assault sin and temptation make on our faith (Peter), but also that we are not to despair in our sins (Judas), but rather to turn in faith toward Christ who forgives.

- The account of Judas is a deeply troubling but instructive account of the depths of the conscience without Christ. It may be unwise to dwell on the subject of suicide and more profitable to draw attention to despair (literally, losing hope). The priests and elders did not serve Judas according to the sacrifices at all, but rather gave him the worst possible advice: “See to it yourself.” No creature can make satisfaction for sin. Only Christ, true God and man, can do that (Christian Question 16).

- It may be helpful to “look ahead” to Christ’s Word, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” So also, Paul’s trustworthy saying, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15).

- We have every reason to despair of ourselves; never despair of Christ and His mercy!

March 17: The Praetorium

- For chronological difficulties between the Synoptics and John, see Steinmann, From Abraham to Paul: A Biblical Chronology (St. Louis: CPH, 2011), p.271ff.

- The wicked determination of the Jewish leaders leads them to try to dispatch Jesus before eating their own Passover. It does not happen according to their timeline, leading them to become breakers of the Passover requirements also.

- Some biographical details about Pilate and the politics of Judea may be helpful. His inclusion in the Scriptures and the Creed places these events in the realm of history, not mythology. In this scene also, however, Christ is truly the Master of events, submitting to the authority of others as the Father intends and working even this evil miscarriage of justice for our good.

- Christ’s few words to Pilate are some of the most significant definitions of His ministry: He testifies to the truth (Himself); His words, not His miracles or some violent call to action, are His most significant deeds until now; His kingdom is not of this world.

- Pilate’s skeptical and disinterested “what is truth?” has many connections to prevailing attitudes in our day.

- In the Holy Spirit’s irony, the skeptic Pilate truthfully declares Jesus innocent multiple times, yet permits him to be beaten and further to be crucified, punishments that ought to have been alternatives and which are not to be executed on the innocent.

- Psalm 2 could be referenced with respect to Herod and Pilate’s friendship forged as they capitulate to the crowds against Christ.

- The exchange of Barabbas for Christ has often been treated in an allegorical way to depict the blessed exchange: Christ is gladly bound to set us, the guilty sinners, free. The hymns chosen for today highlight the many stark contrasts and opposites that characterize the Lord’s Passion. The preacher may draw attention to the underlying truth that this is God’s will and no accident. Even Pilate “has no power unless it be given from above.” “Christ suffers for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18).

- Note: The recognition of allegory here should not and need not conflict with historical objectivity. As has been said, God orchestrates and narrates these events according to His purposes. He has made the Passion of Christ rich in rhetorical truth, of which the preacher should take full advantage. The musical and artistic treasures of the church will be helpful in sermon preparation.
Any number of word studies might be suitable for this text. There is room for rhetorical and theological musing on the statements of the crowds, many of which they mean for evil but may be understood for our good when applied to Christ’s atonement, such as “His blood be on us and on our children” (i.e., not in the sense of a curse of blood guiltiness as the crowds intend, but as the covering and atoning blood of the covenant as Christ and His Father intend).

**March 24: Calvary**

- Note: Something of the death of Christ ought to be reserved for the sermon on Good Friday. The preacher will benefit from planning ahead. Fortunately, the Scriptures are exceedingly rich.
- Christ’s words to the women distinguish our “pondering” of the Passion from others. Our focus is not the gore, the pain or even the suffering per se. Our concern is the purpose of this death. We may weep for ourselves, for our sins deserve such a death; Christ goes to the scaffold as our substitute and Savior.
- The advantage of a harmonization is that all of the Gospel writers’ unique elements can be included at once. This suggests a sermon that brings the full scene into view. It also suggests that a sermon on “the seven words of Christ” may be especially appropriate.
- Pilate is made an unwitting “author of Scripture” by refusing to change the epigraph above Christ. (Note: An explanation of “INRI” may be helpful for newer generations of Christians.)
- Psalm 22 parallels and foretells so much of the death of Christ. It is appointed for singing during the stripping of the Altar on Holy Thursday (see *LSB Altar Book*, p. 510). A study of Psalm 22 may yield fruit for a sermon on the words of Christ’s revilers in contrast with His faithful trust in the Father and willingness to die for us.
- The burial of Jesus is rarely treated with any detail. This may be an opportunity to consider the Gospel evidence together for its apologetic value, so long as the proclamation of the significance of Christ’s atoning death is not obscured.