Begin in prayer
Spend a few moments in prayer before reading the Scripture. Ask the Lord to let his Word speak to your heart.

Morning after morning, Lord,
open my ears that I may hear the promptings of your Spirit.
May I know how to speak to the weary
a Word that will rouse them.
Be with me now, Holy Spirit,
as I prepare my homily for next weekend.
Guide my words and my life to reflect the joy you bring. Amen.

Liturgical Context
† Today is Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord, the beginning of the holiest week in our church calendar. Today we tell the story of the Lord’s Passion and death from the evangelist Mark’s perspective.
† Today we commemorate the Lord’s triumphant entry into Jerusalem as well as his passion and death. We celebrate the Lord’s entry by processing with palm branches.
† The Biblical Tradition has given us four portraits of Christ’s passion and death. The true picture emerges when considering the four narratives and the way in which they differ. Each story was told from the perspective of a human community’s needs, issues, and worldview.
  o Each year we hear two versions of the Passion narrative—one from either Mathew, Mark (we are presently in cycle B and Mark is the evangelist) or Luke; and every Good Friday we also hear John’s version of the event.
  o The wisdom in hearing this story from different perspectives is such that the power of the text reaches out to people with varying spiritual needs and desires.
  o The abandoned and broken Christ of Mark stands in stark contrast to the
Divine Christ of John who is victorious and in control over the situation at hand.

- The human face of Jesus serves as consolation to those of us who are experiencing life in travail and our broken humanity. The divine face of Christ is for those of us who need a self—assured Christ who stands victorious in the face of evil and defeat and shows us the power of redemptive suffering.

† Palms were added to the solemn liturgy in the eighth century. Pagan belief suggested that palm branches contained special magical powers. Christianity appropriated the pagan use of palms by having them blessed and using them in devotional practices intended to ask for protection from storms and from evil.

† There are three forms for the procession with palms.

- The first form hearkens back to the earliest fourth century ritual. The liturgy begins in another place, palms are blessed, the gospel is proclaimed, and all solemnly process with branches into the church.
- The second, less solemn, form begins in the church, outside the sanctuary. The gospel is proclaimed and the presider and others process with palm branches into the sanctuary.
- The third and least solemn, the simple entrance, begins with the presider processing into the church.

† The procession with palms is not to overshadow the proclamation of the passion.

Approach the Text
Read the Scripture for this Sunday several times. Let its words and phrases truly affect you. Use the Lectio Divina method (available from PastoralPlanning.com as part of this homily kit) to allow the Word to fill your heart and excite you about the homily you are preparing. Begin by reading through all the readings for this weekend.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 50:4-7
My face I did not shield from buffets and spitting.

- Second Isaiah was an eloquent poet and reflective theologian. The Servant Songs reveal his deepest insights.
- Isaiah introduces us to a special Servant of the Lord who not only listens to the experience of pain by enduring it himself but, gleaning wisdom from that experience, is able to offer comfort, healing and encouragement to those whose faith grows feeble and weary as a result of trials, tribulations and endless suffering.
- The Suffering Servant places his hope, his faith, and his love in God and abandons his life to God’s providential, salvific care.
- Isaiah introduces us to this Suffering Servant who neither resists nor flees in the face of suffering; he willingly embraces it and takes it upon himself. He trusts God completely.
- Isaiah is not giving us a self-portrait, but unknowingly giving the world the first glimpse of the ONE who has yet to come, Jesus Christ, Savior of the World.
The Servant in Isaiah’s reading will not be deterred in his mission to proclaim God’s word.

The people were tired of his futile optimism in the face of their suffering in exile. Something had to reach their hearts. God gave him the words to speak to the people.

The Christian community believed that the Suffering Servant of Isaiah was Jesus.

Jesus, like the servant, would not be deterred from his appointed mission—to love God’s people, to teach them, to save them and to free them by his sacrificial death on the cross.

Jesus could be no less than completely faithful to the mission God gave him; his faithfulness resulted in his death (the fate of all prophets).

The situation at the time of this writing was bleak. Judah was teetering on the edge. All was lost. People were losing their faith in God’s providence, and even their faith in God altogether.

The exiles had settled in the land of their exile; they had no desire to return to their roots.

The prophet had his work cut out for him; it was his responsibility to reignite the faith of the people. His task was formidable.

He reached out to them in the only way he could: he touched their lived experience; he spoke to their trials, tribulation and sufferings. He helped them glean meaning from their suffering, to give their suffering meaning and purpose.

The people pleaded their frustrations: “What did their suffering mean? Did God give up on them? Was God not as all powerful as they thought he was?

The prophet gave them another reality to consider. Contained deep within the mystery of their suffering was the redemptive value it offered. Suffering when joined to the suffering of God and others who suffer offers redemption for everyone.

Since there is no evidence of the servant associated with an actual personage, it is possible that Isaiah created the Servant of God image to embody his message to them.

The Suffering Servant speaks in the first person allowing the listener deep into his heart and soul. He is the Teacher who gives meaning to their life’s situation. He is the Consoler who sustains them in the midst of their own brokenness. He is the Icon who walks in their footsteps and truly knows their struggles and their burdens.

The people are broken to the core; they have worked for little and toiled for naught. They have known subjugation and abuse from their captors. They were grief-stricken and weary unto death.

The Servant is their hope, their Icon who points them to a new reality and a brighter hope-filled future.

The Servant listens to the people’s heartaches and sorrows; the Servant listens and, through contemplative intimacy with his Father, comes to understand how God is acting in the people’s lives. He thus communicates God’s loving, compassionate and merciful love for them. The Servant is incarnational, real and committed to comforting human need.

The Servant does not deny suffering; he forges right through it; to forge is
to endure. The Servant shows us how to endure. He is God’s ultimate, faithful, and obedient Servant who is willing to die in service of that faithfulness.

► Little did the prophet know that he was giving the world the first preview of what was to come: the advent of the future Jesus Christ, Savior of the World.

► We are all called to become the Servant’s servants and follow his every word.

For your reflection:
► In what way does the Servant speak to your life experience?
► What spoke to you the most about the character and identity of this Servant?

SECOND READING: Philippians 2:6-11
Christ humbled himself, becoming obedient even to death on the cross.
► Many scholars believe that this is a hymn that was used in very ancient liturgies.
► Jesus humiliated himself, took the form of a slave, and thus saved the world. He entered the human condition: he learned firsthand what it meant to be rejected, betrayed, misunderstood, maligned, gossiped about, and hated. He was treated as a criminal.
► Jesus’ perfect kenosis (outpouring of himself in total abandonment and humiliation) resulted in the Resurrection and by extension the salvation of the human race.
► Paul was asking his factious community to accept the posture of Jesus. Jesus could have claimed special rights of nobility. He chose instead to come as one among the poor, to come as a slave. Paul reminds his divided community that if they would only assume Jesus’ posture of self-abandonment, there would be no need for divisions in the community.
► Jesus “became sin.” He entered the human condition; he became one with us. He was like us in all things except sin.

For your reflection:
► In what way does this reading speak to us of God’s love for us?
► Imagine how easily we get caught up in petty animosities, jealousies, and hatreds, not just of our own making but the making of others as well. The dark side of the human spirit is sorely tempted to enter the fray—to condemn others. Imagine how difficult it was for Jesus to keep his head above the fray. People get angry when others refuse to get caught up in sinful patterns with them. What does this reading teach us about Jesus?
► How can you bring such human situations and conditions into your homily, calling your people to learn the art of self-giving love?
**GOSPEL:** Mark 14:1–15:47

“Take it; this is my body.”

► As you read this text put yourself in the place of the characters.
► When have you acted like the disciples who walked with Jesus and constantly misunderstood what was taking place right under their noses?
► When have you acted like the self-righteous religious leaders concerned more for their own personal gain and self-aggrandizement rather than for the needs of those to whom they ministered?
► When have you acted like the legalistic, God-loving religious leaders who simply were doing what they thought was the right thing because it was the legal thing: simply because it was the Law?
► Have you ever acted like Judas who saw the ship going down and chose to save himself by selling his soul for thirty pieces of silver?
► When have you ever acted like Peter who proclaimed Jesus the Christ; then later denied him?
► Was there ever a time you acted like the political Pilates of this world who refuse to face down evil, thus maintaining the status quo, intended to keep lowly people lower and wealthy people higher?
► Is it at all possible you might have been among the religious people who condemned Jesus on that fateful day?
► Or is it possible that you would have stood at Mary’s side and wept with her?
► Put yourself in any of those scenarios as you read this Passion of our Lord according to St. Mark.

**For your reflection:**

► Put yourself in Jesus’ place. We can easily say that Jesus’ divine nature “knew the rest of the story” and thus helped him through the ordeal. Theologians agree that if that were the case then the cross means nothing. Jesus had to suffer as any human would suffer through a similar ordeal, trusting God, hoping but not knowing for sure the outcome, feeling completely and totally abandoned. Have you ever felt abandoned by loved ones, by God or by life itself? What does Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross have to teach you about that experience?
► What does this Passion narrative teach you about the nature of love and have you ever experienced love to such depths? Have you ever loved another unto death and yet experienced rejection and abandonment? What does this event have to teach you about such love?
► What does this story teach you about the suffering in your own life?
► Jesus makes it possible for us to stop the selfish tendency we all have to focus our attention on anything and everything except our relationship with God. In Christ, we can stop the free-fall trajectory toward self-glorification, putting ourselves on the throne of glory rather than God who belongs there. In what way, if any, have you recently ignored your relationship with God? What does this Passion narrative teach you about God’s relationship with us?
Take an inward glance

Think about how the call to holiness is embedded in this week’s liturgy:

† • [Isaiah] “I have not rebelled.” Have you ever rebelled against authority, even slightly? In which situations have you rebelled inwardly even though you obeyed outwardly? When do you find yourself most rebellious? Can you name a time when rebellion was justified? When did you rebel unjustifiably?

† • [Psalm] “Many dogs have surrounded me.” Over the years of your ministry, when have you felt “surrounded”? How do you react when you discover that all “exits” are closed, and that you have nowhere to hide? Where do you go to feel safe? Is it truly safe there, or is your safety an illusion?

† • [Philippians] “In human likeness.” When are you your most human? What situations, what persons, bring out the best in you? Who brings out your worst? What situations should you avoid—because your “humanity” is cheapened, or diminished, or lost? When do you feel the most “human”?

† • “There were some who were indignant.” When have you been most indignant? Over what? What behavior of yours has caused indignation in others? In your opinion, when has the indignation of others ever been warranted?

† • “Troubled and distressed.” When was the last time you felt troubled or distressed? How have such feelings affected you? When in the past has your distress affected your preaching?

† • “He broke down and wept.” Has your sinfulness ever affected you in this way? Do you suppose that your sins will ever bring you to tears? What has ever caused you to break down and weep? Do others know you as someone who is capable of tears?

Take an outward glance

Think about how the call to holiness is embedded in the daily experiences of the people to whom you will be speaking:

† • [Isaiah] “Morning after morning.” In what ways is the daily routine faced by your parishioners much harder than yours, their preacher? What do you suppose the prayer life of most of your brothers and sisters is like? Are the homilies they hear appreciative of their circumstances?

† • [Philippians] “Coming in human likeness.” Do you suppose that Jesus’ divinity overshadows his humanness, in the estimation of your brothers and sisters? Which dimensions of Jesus’ humanity are easiest for your assembly to emulate?

† • “When it was evening.” What trials and suffering do some of your parishioners face when they return home from work? How do your parishioners spend most evenings—how is their experience different from yours? What are the similarities?
**Speaking of Scripture**

**Preparing the 8-minute homily**

† Perhaps this week’s homily preparation has given you cause to consider how you might “rouse” the assembly from their “weariness” -- and how, in doing so, even you might feel stirred in the depths of your heart. Try to preach a homily that gives evidence of your desire to humbly accept the Lord’s cross in your life.

† This is the ideal time to invite your parishioners to learn the art of self-giving love. This love is practiced in their daily lives, not mainly when they’re at the parish campus. The call to love in this way is the same as the universal call to holiness and that call is embedded in the people, events, and situations in which they are you find yourself day in and day out.

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<th>Timing</th>
<th>Homily notes</th>
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<tr>
<td>30 seconds</td>
<td>Greet everyone and say one thing to connect with what is on the mind of the community -- news, weather, sports, parish events, visitors, a special group which is present, or other. Humor is good here. God is sending his love through you to your listeners.</td>
<td>Keep this very short. It takes any group of people a few seconds to get used to the sound of your voice in a room and this is a way to begin that will help your listeners hear you.</td>
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<td>1-2 minutes</td>
<td>Tell a story or provide an image that will fire the imagination of your listeners. Do not launch into a treatment of the readings. This image or story must be one that is easy to understand by everyone, young and old. Avoid using standard jokes here. Instead, as you prepare the homily, what comes to mind as illustrative of the message in the readings?</td>
<td>Again, make sure this stays brief. The point of the homily is not you or your story but the Word of God and this image or story is a way to set the stage for that.</td>
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<td>3-4 minutes</td>
<td>Connect that image now to the message in today’s readings. Again, avoid providing commentary on the readings or exegesis which is disconnected from your image. You want people to remember what you say and take it home. What hope does the message today offer to your listeners?</td>
<td>Make two or three quick points here. Remember that the message must fit into the lives of the people in front of you.</td>
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<td>1-2 minutes</td>
<td>Return to the liturgy. Gesture toward the altar and say, “Let’s come back here now to this liturgy…” You’re setting the stage for what will follow. Make a quick connection</td>
<td>How will celebrating Eucharist and receiving communion change you and your listeners? How</td>
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† “From noon onward.” What is “work” like for most of your parishioners? How do most of your sisters and brothers spend the day? In what ways do their work experiences color their appreciation of the gospel?
between the message today and the Eucharist. will it help them incorporate the message of today’s readings into their daily lives?

30 second Thank your listeners and end on a very positive note. Sit down.

Conclude in prayer
To conclude your preparation, think about the community for whom you’ve just prepared to preach or teach, and spend a few moments in prayer.

Teach me to die to myself, Sweet Jesus, and to follow your footsteps to self-giving love.
May my heart be open to your Spirit and my mind open to your will.
I likewise open myself to the wisdom you alone can give and I offer myself as the earthen vessel which will carry your Word to these people.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.