

THE BRIDEGROOM SERVICES

Magazine pages 4–5, 7–8

Christian faith means preparing ourselves to meet Christ. We meet Christ in the way we live our lives. In the Bridegroom services, we hear examples of people who both meet Christ and fail to meet Him.

MATERIALS

- *Journey through Holy Week* zine for each student
- Bible for each student or pair of students
- Questions from Step 5 for distribution to small groups
- Chart paper and markers, or chalkboard and chalk

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- **Interpret** the meaning of the actions of characters and stories from Scripture, as symbolic of living a life in preparation for encountering Christ.
- **Connect** forgiveness, mercy, and love for others to love for Christ.
- **Decide** on specific ways to live in a preparation for Christ, based on the examples from Scripture.

INTRODUCTION

To be faithful Christians, we prepare ourselves to meet Christ Jesus. This has to do with the way we live our lives. The people in the Bible stories we read on these days are lessons about how each of us can live the kind of life that will prepare us to encounter Him.

Note: The Bridegroom services are the Orthros services of Holy Monday, Holy Tuesday, and Holy Wednesday, and they are celebrated on the evenings of Palm Sunday, Holy Monday, and Holy Tuesday. In some parishes the Orthros for Holy Thursday is chanted on Holy Wednesday evening.

Opening Prayer

Lord our God, the source of all wisdom and truth, send down upon us the Spirit of truth, the Spirit of wisdom, the Spirit of discernment. Enlighten the eyes of our souls with the light of Your knowledge, that we may learn from Your wisdom and grow in virtue, to the glory of Your name. Amen.

PROCEDURES

1. Focusing activity

Ask students to name one thing they like doing more than anything else:

- Is there one thing in your life that you could wake up early in the morning to do, even if you're not a morning person, and spend all your time doing, from the moment you wake up, all day long, every day?
- Is there one thing that really grabs and holds your attention, no matter what is going on?
- Think about why this particular activity holds your attention so well, and why you can spend so much time with it. Why do they enjoy that activity so much?

Guide the conversation, helping them to express that they derive joy from certain activities that they can spend hours doing.

2. Name their present praxis

Ask the students:

- How is this kind of excitement and energy for faith in Christ possible for people? Is it possible for you?

- Remember that Christians are called to be faithful and dedicated to Christ and their faith at all times, even while they are doing other things and not just when they are at church.
- Our dedication comes in many different forms—how we treat others, how we spend our time, how disciplined we are at using our talents, etc.
- This “work” we do to bring us closer to Christ prepares us for Christ.

3. Reflect on present praxis

Have students think about this challenge:

- How do you feel about the idea that the harder we work, the greater the benefits will be?
- Think about physical training, such as in an athletic competition. Athletes train for competition; musicians practice before a performance; and students study for tests.

4. Access the Christian story and vision

Give students time to read pages 4–5 and 7–8.

What are the Bridegroom Services?

WATCH. GET READY. BE READY.

Christ the Bridegroom

• Read Isaiah 53:3–6. How does this passage describe what you see in the icon?

• Some Bridegroom icons have the words “Behold the man” next to Joseph. Read John 10:1–5 to find out why.

It should sound to you like something big, something important, is happening, and we had better not miss it. Getting ready for the coming of Jesus Christ is what we should be doing our whole lives. On the first three evenings of Holy Week, we get ready for Christ, who is our Bridegroom. We are reminded of our responsibility to keep our eyes open and on Christ.

When we hear the word “bride,” we imagine a pretty, smiling woman in white. But “bride” has a greater meaning in the Church. We don’t come to the Church to be individual brides. In the Church, no person is alone; each of us is an important part of the whole body. When we come together like this, this body is the “bride of Christ.” The Church, the bride, is preparing for the wedding feast that unites her to Christ and makes her complete. So, uniting to Christ makes all of us complete.

But why do we call Jesus a bridegroom? The answer is simple: Jesus, like a bridegroom in a wedding, is willing to give everything for His bride, the people of God, the Church. By the end of Holy Week, we will see that Jesus gives up His life for His followers.

Because the Church is the bride, we each play a part in getting ready, if you have ever seen a bride preparing for her wedding day, you may notice that she is very busy. Her upcoming wedding probably seems to be the only thing on her mind. It may seem like the only thing she talks about. Almost everything she does involves her wedding and her groom.

Like the busy bride, we must keep our Bridegroom, Christ, on our minds as much as we can. If we are busy, we must be busy living a life that brings us closer to Him. We show Jesus our love by preparing for Him. The stories we hear in each of the Bridegroom Services remind us of what this preparation means.

We show Jesus our love by preparing for Him

Palm Sunday Evening: The First Bridegroom Service

When we enter the church on the evening of Palm Sunday, we greet the icon of Christ the Bridegroom, which will remain at the front of the church for the three days of Bridegroom Services. It shows us who the Bridegroom is and who we are preparing to meet. How does He look? This is a somber icon, reminding us that we are entering into the harshest days of Jesus Christ’s earthly life. The challenges and betrayals will lead to His arrest, trial, and death on a cross.

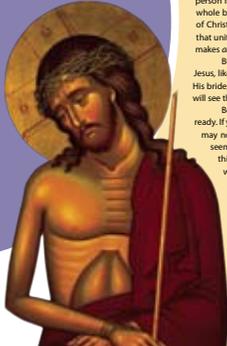
On Sunday evening, we focus on two stories that connect us to the past (the Old Testament) and the future (our own lives). We remember Joseph the Patriarch, whose story is in the Book of Genesis. We see Joseph as a “prototype” of Jesus Christ, showing the same steadfast love that Jesus Christ offers in His last earthly days. Joseph was innocent and righteous, but his brothers betrayed and mistreated him. He had enough faith that God loved him, that he “reassured and comforted” his brothers (Genesis 50:19–21). We all know how difficult it is to reassure and comfort someone who mistreats us. Joseph offers his brothers the same type of forgiving love that Jesus Christ shows when He asks His Father to forgive those who crucify Him. In the end, God rewards Joseph because forgiving love is the Way. Joseph’s story reminds us that our Bridegroom is the one who forgives, loves, and rewards us if we do the same.

During this service, we also hear Christ curse the fig tree. According to the Gospel of Matthew, Christ walked past a fig tree that didn’t have any fruit, and He cursed it to never bear figs again. This story is not just about a tree. When the fig tree stands before Christ and gives Him nothing, it symbolizes any person or group of people who does not receive Christ and His teachings. The tree fails to give fruit. Often we as people fail to “bear fruit”; we don’t live as we should. Each of us needs to care for our soul as if it is a garden, so our faith is *living, breathing, and doing*.

When Christ curses the tree, it withers and dies, showing His divine power over life. Therefore, our Bridegroom is not just a savior, as He may appear in His icon; He is triumphant and powerful, as well as loving and forgiving.

Bridegroom Hymn

Behold the Bridegroom comes in the middle of the night. Blessed is the servant whom he shall find watching. Unworthy is the one whom he shall find heedless. Beware, then, O my soul, not to be borne down with sleep, lest you be given up to death and to shut out from the Kingdom. Wherefore, rouse yourself, crying out: “Holy, holy, holy are you, our God.”



Holy Monday Evening: The Second Bridegroom Service

The service of Monday evening helps us to understand the imagery of the bride and bridegroom. We hear about the ten virgins waiting for the coming of their bridegroom. This warns us to be ready for an important moment, and to have what we need prepared and waiting. Five of the women bring oil to light their lamps, but the other five forget to bring their oil. When the forgetful five leave to go buy more oil, the bridegroom arrives. The forgetful ones miss the wedding feast because "the door was shut" (Matthew 25:10). How many of us have gone somewhere, realized that we have forgotten something important, and been disappointed that we miss out on some fun because of it?

We must remember Jesus Christ every day and keep our "oil" nearby. Our oil is our good works and prayerful attitude. So within us are the miracle and the mystery: as we get ready and show love for others, we actually get closer to the very one we are preparing to meet. If we think of Christ and watch for Him, we will find Him in our lives. Christ tells us that He visits us through other people. "I was hungry and you fed me... Even as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me." This is because every human being is created "in the image and likeness of God." Every time another person crosses our path, we have an opportunity to serve Christ by serving one of His children. We are waiting and watching for Him, but if we really pay attention to Him, we will realize that we are not waiting and watching for something that will happen; it happens all the time, all around us. We can become closer to Christ every day if we look for Him every day.

On Holy Monday evening, we also hear one of the most powerful stories in the New Testament. Certain Jewish leaders, who were enemies of Jesus, confront Him and try to trap Him with His ideas. But Jesus outsmarts them, skillfully answering their questions and making them look foolish, which only enrages them more. Then Jesus turns the tables on the Jewish leaders, calling them hypocrites because they tell people to observe traditions without following them themselves. These events set the stage for the Jewish leaders' plot to have Jesus arrested for trying to overthrow the Roman rulers in Jerusalem.

Placed at the beginning of Holy Week, this story teaches us two things. First, it teaches us that Jesus had enemies who were willing to have Him falsely accused of crimes, even using His own words against Him. Second, it teaches us that we must be careful about behaving like the enemies of Jesus, saying one thing and doing another.



The door was shut

Turn toward Christ

Holy Tuesday Evening: The Third Bridegroom Service

When we face something bad, we want to turn away from it and turn toward the good. Turning away from harmful activities and thoughts—and then turning toward Jesus Christ—is the focus of Holy Tuesday's Bridegroom Service. This service reminds us that we must make a decision to turn our lives toward Christ and live in His way instead of living sinfully. Many of us probably say, "I'm really not that bad." That's correct. In fact, we are very good, but our lives don't always reflect our true goodness.

None of us is alone in either sinfulness or goodness. On Holy Tuesday, we hear about the sinful woman in the Gospel of Luke, which helps us learn what we must do to choose a life of goodness over one of sin. This woman sits at Jesus's feet, weeps for her sins, and anoints Him with oil. When she needs Jesus, she sees a better way to live, and wants to change. This change is her repentance, and when she turns toward Christ with all her heart, He accepts and forgives her. We don't call this woman "sinful" because she is more sinful than anyone else is. We call her sinful because she realizes and confesses her sins, and then she chooses to turn to Christ. She has the courage to decide that she must change. We should call her the "repentant woman," emphasizing the change that she makes for good. She is meaningful for us not because she sinned, but because she repents for her sins.

Sitting nearby, a Pharisee (a Jewish religious leader) complains that Jesus accepts the woman. When he looks at her, he sees only her sins, instead of seeing a whole person with a desire for good; this is his sin. Do we ever look at others and decide they are not acceptable to God? When we judge someone, we see only his or her unattractive actions, instead of a reflection of God. Often, the sin in our hearts distorts our vision of others.

So when we judge and separate ourselves from others, we separate ourselves from Christ.

Christ forgives the repentant woman because she looks at her sins. The Pharisee is not forgiven because he does not think he needs it; he is too busy judging someone else to see his own sins. When others judge us, it can hurt. But remember the example of the woman: she keeps her focus on Jesus and does not argue with the Pharisee. She ignores his judgment because Christ's presence and forgiveness is more important.

When the Pharisee judges the woman, Jesus silences him and forgives the woman. Jesus's loving forgiveness silences the judgments of others.

So how do we repent? We examine our words and actions, and we ask ourselves how we may be turning away from Christ. Are we trying to live a life like His? He lifts people up and shows them light. We can do this for the people in our lives. But if we push others down or fall into despair ourselves, we bring darkness. And in the dark, we cannot see what is beautiful in ourselves or in other people. Do we gossip or judge? Do we remember Christ daily? Do we treat ourselves with care and respect? Do we notice the needs of others? When we realize that we don't always live like Christ, we know we must turn toward Christ, to repent and change our ways for the better.

When we examine ourselves, we must see that we have the potential to turn to the better way. The repentant woman weeps for her sins when the Source of the better way is sitting in front of her. She knows she can change to a better and fuller life. Holy Tuesday's service should bring us the joy and hope of knowing that we can change our lives to reflect our true goodness.

Explain to students:

During the Bridegroom services, we hear stories and examples about faithful preparation, and also examples that show how sometimes people fail to prepare, including Christ's cursing of the fig tree (p. 5), the story of Joseph (p. 5), the Parable of the Ten Virgins (p. 7), and the story of the repentant woman (p. 8).

5. Appropriate the story and vision

The following activity should take about ten minutes.

Let students know that when they are done, the class will regroup to contribute responses to a class chart.

Depending on how many students you have, divide students into pairs or in groups of 3. Assign each group one of the following Scriptural stories heard during the Bridegroom services. Each group should discuss the question that accompanies the reading and be ready to share with the whole class.

Alternative: Have all the students answer every question.

- Genesis 50:15–21—Joseph forgives his brothers. Think of a time when someone hurt you and you had to forgive that person. What was it like to try to find a way to comfort and speak kindly to that person?
- Matthew 21:18–19—Jesus curses the fig tree. Jesus is angry at the fig tree because it doesn't bear fruit. We can be like this sometimes, when we don't "bear fruit" by using our talents more fully or sharing what we have with others. What are some ways that we bear fruit in your life? How can you be more fruitful in your life?
- Matthew 25:1–13—The Parable of the Ten Virgins. Five are prepared with oil for their lamps, and five are not. The bridegroom, or Christ, does not recognize those who are not prepared and does not permit them entry into the wedding feast. We keep "oil" in our lamps by doing works of mercy for others. What have you done in the past week to add "oil" to your lamp?
- Luke 7:36–40; 47–50—The repentant woman anoints Jesus's feet. The Pharisee's sin was that when he looked at the woman,

Example of living a life that prepares to meet Christ	How will I do this?
A. Joseph forgave his brothers instead of being angry and vengeful toward them.	In teaching about forgiveness, it can be more helpful to think and talk about what a Christian does not do if he or she is hurt. Christians do not seek revenge, spread rumors to garner support or gain sympathy, nurture negative feelings, etc. The example of Joseph is acceptance and trust in God, in spite of his brothers' mistreatment. We should emphasize that the main thing about forgiveness is choosing to love God instead of hating or resenting another person, even if that person has hurt us.
B. Jesus curses the fig tree because it does not bear fruit.	Each student should share one specific and unique way that he or she can bear fruit. For example, how is each student talented, and what will he or she do to share that talent?
C. The oil in the lamps of the five prepared virgins symbolizes works of mercy that we are all called to do for others throughout our lives.	Help students to think about people around them who may need "works of mercy" from them. It may be a peer who is lonely, people who don't have a lot of money and who could use donations, etc. Help students to decide specifically how they will do works of mercy for someone specific and real.
D. The repentant woman changed her life and turned toward Christ, even though the Pharisee judged her.	This example can be approached from two angles: 1. Invite students to take the position of the Pharisee—is there someone they know whose life they are tempted to judge? This may include people who are seen as "sinful," but the challenge is to see them as people made in God's image and not to judge them. How can they treat these persons with love instead of judgment? 2. Invite students to relate to the repentant woman. Help them to consider and share things in their lives that they need to change in order to turn toward Christ.)

he only saw her sinfulness. He didn't see her as a full person who was turning toward Christ. Can you think of a time when you made a mistake like this, seeing someone only from the outside and seeing only his or her sinfulness? Can you think of a time when you made a change like the woman did and turned toward Christ?

6. Decision for lived response

On the blackboard, draw a 2-column chart. Fill in the left column as above. Place only the question at the top of the right column, leaving the rest of the column blank. Work through each example and ask the students to complete the right side to answer the question, "How will I do this?"

Help students to generate examples of realistic situations in which they will be challenged to follow the right example. Encourage them to be specific about what they will do in the situations that may arise in their lives.

Closing Prayer

Lenten Prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian

O Lord and Master of my life, deliver me from the spirit of laziness, meddling, vain ambition, and idle talk.

Grant to me, Your servant, the spirit of prudence, humility, patience, and love.

Yes, Lord and King; grant me that I may see my own faults, and to not judge my brothers and sisters, for You are blessed to the ages of ages. Amen.