Saturday of Lazarus and Palm Sunday

God can surprise us and fulfill our hopes.

OBJECTIVES

Students will:
• Identify the joy that Jesus brought people when He answered their greatest hopes.
• Connect with this joy and bring it into their present life.

MATERIALS

• Journey through Holy Week zine for each student
• Questions from Step 4 for distribution to small groups
• Bible for each student or small group

INTRODUCTION

On each of these days, Jesus does something that surprises the people around Him. On Saturday, He restores the people’s faith and hope by raising Lazarus from the dead, teaching that all people can hope in their own resurrection from the dead. On Palm Sunday, the surprise is simple (and it foreshadows the greater surprise that is to come): when Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem riding on a humble donkey. This delights them, because it fulfills the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9: that the “king would come humble and mounted on . . . the foal of a donkey.”

The people excitedly welcomed Jesus as a king, but would their excitement fade or give way to anger or betrayal? Over the course of Holy Week, when Jesus fulfilled God’s will and not the people’s will, they became angry with Him.

The first lesson teaches that when we are surprised and excited about a blessing from God, this is only the beginning of faith. Christian faith requires that we strive to remain faithful to God no matter what happens.

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
To get the students thinking about the element of surprise, ask the following questions:

- Can you name something that you wished for really hard, something really wanted, that came true?
- What happened after that?
- If you were excited about it, how long did that excitement last?
- Did things get boring? Did you ever start to complain about it?
- Was there ever anything that didn’t turn out how you wanted it to, even though you were really excited at first?
- Ask the students to give examples and explain their reasoning.

Alternative: Use the “Hopes Up!” activity (found at the end of this guide). You will need to redirect the questions below to focus on hope instead of surprise.

2. Name present praxis
Ask students:

- Has there been a time in your life when God surprised you with a joyous blessing?

This may be difficult for students, so you may need to guide this process to make it easier. You might share a personal example, tell about recent news item, or offer categories such as: at school, with family, with friends. An especially appropriate example could be it involved a time of sadness that ended with a joyous surprise.

Allow students to share examples and discuss.

3. Reflect on present praxis
Ask students:

- What do these kinds of surprises do for our faith?
- How do they help us?
- How do we feel when God blesses us with a joyful surprise?

You may want to record students’ responses on a board or chart paper. Responses may include: faith becomes stronger; know that God cares for us; feel certain and secure in God; feel able to trust and rely on God.

4. Access the Christian story and vision
Be sure that the students have read pages 2–3. Tell students:

Lazarus’s family and friends felt extreme joy, and their most desperate hopes were fulfilled when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. This was a shock that they never could have expected. They were still celebrating in this joy, and as the news of the miracle spread,
people in Jerusalem welcomed Him by laying down palm branches as a carpet when Jesus entered Jerusalem.

On Palm Sunday, Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey for two reasons: He was showing humility, but also He was fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9. The Jewish people, who knew the Scriptures and were looking forward to the one who would fulfill the prophecies and their hopes, were even more excited to see the prophecy being fulfilled in this way, which added to their joy.

Turn students’ attention to the icons and hymns on the sides of pages 2 and 3.

Depending on the size of your class, divide the class into groups of 2 or 3. Have each group or pair respond to one of the following prompts. Let students know that they will share when they are done:

A. The shortest verse in the Bible is John 11:35, “Jesus wept.” What is important about this verse in the story about Lazarus? What does this tell us about Jesus? What is He crying about? Why is this passage important for our faith as Christians?

B. In the icon on page 2, one person holds a cloth over his nose and mouth to protect himself from foul smells coming from Lazarus’s tomb. Read John 11:39, which mentions this. Why do you think St. John included this when he wrote about Lazarus’s death and being raised?

C. On page 3, in the icon of Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem, what are the children doing? How might children who witnessed Jesus’ entry describe this if they are telling their friends about it the next day? Contrast the children with the adults in the icon.

5. Appropriate the story and vision

Have each group or pair share their responses with the whole group. Look for answers such as:

A. To say that “Jesus wept” shows that Jesus, God himself, in His son, was grieving for His dead friend. For our Christian faith, this emphasizes His humanity. It also shows that His love for us is real and genuine, and He really and genuinely wants us to live forever. Another point is that this sadness from God himself makes the raising of Lazarus that
much more joyful. Because Jesus was truly sad about Lazarus’s death, then He was genuinely overjoyed to bring Lazarus back to life. (You may need to remind the students that Lazarus would eventually face his own death again, many years later. The Church believes that Lazarus was a bishop in the early days of Christianity.)

B. St. John included the detail about a smell coming from Lazarus’s tomb, to emphasize that Lazarus had really died, and that it was truly a tremendous miracle that Jesus brought him back to life. In Hebrew thought, the spirit was believed to leave a deceased body after three days; because Lazarus had been dead for four days, this showed that he really was dead.

C. The children are laying down their shirts and jackets to add to the “carpet” of palm branches for Jesus to walk on. They might describe the excitement that the whole city felt when they saw Jesus coming in on a donkey. The adults are doing very little. It is the children who recognize the importance of Jesus.

6. Decision for lived response

The most important message and part of these two days is expressed in the hymn on the bottom of page 3, that Jesus “confirmed the general resurrection” when He raised Lazarus from the dead.

Review and emphasize the message for students:

- Jesus showed the world that all people will rise from the dead in Christ.
- This means that people do not need to be afraid of death.
- Death is not the end, and there is hope for something beyond this life.

Students must make a decision about how this knowledge will change them and change their lives. Ask students these simple questions:

- What should your life be like if you have faith, hope, and joy that God will raise you from the dead to live eternally?
- What do we do with this great faith, hope, and joy?
- How can we better deal with the unexpected tragedies, challenges, and sadness in our lives? We have to keep our eyes on Christ and His plans for us.

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.