

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
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April 14, 2019  
*Palm/Passion Sunday*  
Philippians 2:5-11

### Wondrous Love

I don't know how you feel, but I love Palm Sunday. In many ways, it foreshadows the glory of Easter. We sing and acclaim Jesus as Lord. We celebrate, we have parades, we revel in the moment.

Even though we know that the crash is coming. Even though the church calendar these days calls this Palm **and Passion** Sunday. It's like the irony of calling the church's remembrance of Christ's crucifixion "Good" Friday. What this tells me is we have a faith tradition wise enough to embrace paradox, strong enough to contain the complexity of life in our world, deep enough to hold apparent conflict in tension. Palm, a.k.a. Passion, Sunday does this for us. We party in the face of tragedy, trusting God's love to hold us beyond tragedy into eternity.

For nearly 2000 years, people have been trying to articulate the meaning of Jesus Christ, his birth, his ministry, his death, his resurrection. This is no fleeting spiritual experiment we're part of. We are inheritors of a faith tradition filled with many of history's greatest thinkers, with people of courage and integrity and wisdom. For nearly 2000 years, our forebears of many cultures, speaking many languages, have sought to say why Jesus Christ has captivated their hearts and imaginations and given meaning to their lives. For nearly 2000 years, writers and artists and preachers have tried to name the truth of Jesus Christ and tell it to the world.

Some have managed to capture it in words. The last two Sundays, we pondered the words of the gospel of John which include the pithy, beloved verse, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life." John 3:16—it's the biblical reference that people put on banners to wave at football games, hoping that the television cameras will focus on them and the word will get out to the masses watching the game, and people will believe. 20<sup>th</sup> century Reformed theologian Karl Barth called it "the gospel in a nutshell." Indeed, it contains many answers to the central questions framed by our faith: Who is Jesus Christ in relation to God? What motivates God? And what must I do to be saved?

But while the community gathering around John's teachings concerning Jesus was forming, the Apostle Paul was also establishing communities of Christian belief scattered across the Mediterranean world. And we know what he was teaching them through the letters he wrote to them. Contained in his letter to the church in Philippi, a Roman colony in Macedonia, is this hymn. For some, a single sentence like John 3:16 memorably captures the meaning of Christ, but for others, a song says it better. It's likely that the Philippians knew the song even before Paul used it in his letter. He was reminding them of what they sang.

I think it's easy to identify with this. The songs of our faith teach us, too. Their phrases come back to us at significant moments and we suddenly understand, or understand in a new way, what we've been singing for years. Music, rhythm, melody—these envelop the words, give voice to the meaning, and stick in our memories.

So we have these seven verses which have been the subject of theological musing since the earliest centuries of the church. Like John 3:16, this hymn answers many of the questions of our faith. Who is Jesus Christ in relation to God? What was his motivation, his purpose, his mission? And what must I do in response?

Seven verses, in the shape of a valley. He was with God, he emptied himself, he humbled himself, he poured himself out, he gave himself up to obey death. Death on a cross. The means of capital punishment of the Roman Empire. Thousands of others died on crosses. He became one with the lowest of the low, the meanest of the mean, the weakest of the weak, the poorest of the poor, the most wretched of the wretched of the earth. From the highest place in heaven to the lowest place on earth, death valley. The creed describes this descent even more crudely, saying “he descended into hell.”

This week we sit with that knowledge, that truth. This week we admit that our lives are not lived in the heavenly places, or even on earthly mountaintops. We dwell much of the time in canyons of sorrow, sin, and despair. We walk through the valleys of the shadow of death. We live in hell, sometimes of our own making and sometimes created by the world’s sin. We’d rather sing “happy” songs, uplifting songs, songs in major keys with simple melodies and easy words. And then life intrudes with broken relationships, tragic events, sickness and suffering, shameful choices, and complicated decisions. The truth of sin and evil and death isn’t answered by happy songs. Our faith tradition has lasted for 2000 years because it contains so much more than parades and parties.

Christ became one of us, so that we might become one with God. Karl Barth once prayed, before a sermon on Philippians,

Lord our God.

You have humbled yourself in order to lift us up.

You became poor so that we might be rich.

You came to us so that we might come to you.

You became a human being like us in order that we might participate in your eternal life.

(Quoted by Daniel Migliore, 2014, *Philippians and Philemon*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, pp. 84-85)

Where do we find Christ in our world today? We find him where people are hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and in prison—literally and metaphorically. We find him where there is pain and cruelty, where we hear agonizing cries for help, where we feel abandoned and alone. And we find him when we become Christ for others, for this bleeding world.

For the hymn, the song of God’s mission, does not end with the cave of Christ’s death. At the point of no return, God returns. Christ is lifted up. And all creation should bow, all creation should exult, for all creation is set free, so all creation should celebrate with one another and with God. This is the eternity, the highest heaven, the goal of life, the purpose of God we struggle to see and name. This is where Christ desires to live with us. This is God’s will and plan toward which we aspire.

The word “therefore” which begins the second stanza of this hymn is not the turning point toward the inevitable, the reward Jesus knew was coming as if this were a Disney movie in which we know the pauper’s nobility will make him a prince. Rather, it is God’s inscrutable way of transforming death into eternal life. Christ did not empty himself in order to be exalted. The second stanza of this hymn simply declares that God did exalt him, did triumph over death, did name Christ as Lord of all. The entire song sings of the character and purpose of our gracious God, who in Christ gives up everything for love, and in Christ elevates and restores all for love.

Once again, Karl Barth helps us with a phrase, what he calls the “wondrous exchange.” Christ exchanges his comfy life in heaven for a gritty life on earth. He exchanges his life for our death, his

sinlessness for our sin, his wealth for our poverty. Makes you wonder, doesn't it? Why would he do that? The answer? Love. Wondrous love. Because Christ, as the icon of God, is divine Love.

For God so loved the world. . . .

Christ emptied himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.

Beloved of God, God will do anything to communicate Love. A sentence, a song, or a story—whatever it takes to get the message across. So this week we will also retell the story, the story which occupies many pages of the gospels, the story which Holy Week relives. Here it is.

He came to Jerusalem to fulfill his destiny. It was the Passover, when thousands of Jews gathered in Jerusalem, so the Empire made a point of showing its power and suppressing any thoughts of an uprising. On the west side of the city, a military parade complete with legions in armor, flashing their weapons, astride the finest horses accompanied the Roman governor's entrance into the city. Jesus entered through the east gate, on a donkey, hailed by children and peasants waving their cloaks and palms. Though he was the ambassador of the Lord of the Universe, he humbled himself. He was, after all, the prince of peace.

But he scared the powers and principalities of the world, for they perceived him as a threat. He spoke truth, he healed and taught God's way. He challenged the way of power and force, so power and force took their revenge. They convinced one of his followers to betray him, they held a sham trial, and many people were seized with a crowd mentality. "Crucify him," they shouted.

So he was whipped and tortured and hung on a cross to die between two who had been charged as thieves. The soldiers and others taunted him, and gave him vinegar to satisfy his thirst.

And some saw past the cruel death, recognizing God's suffering on that cross. And they wept, saying, "Surely this was the Son of God."

His dead body was placed in a tomb which was sealed, and guarded by soldiers.

Let us sing of this story, #215, "What Wondrous Love is This."