

4.2.2023 Palm Sunday

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 27:11-54

“He emptied himself”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Today, with Christians around the world, we shout “*Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*” Palm Sunday marks the beginning of the Holy Week journey that has shaped Christian identity from the very beginning.

This week, we walk with Jesus on the way of the cross to the Last Supper and his arrest. We wait and pray with him in Gethsemane, and we stand alongside Peter as he denies knowing Jesus. We stand with Jesus at his trial before Pilate, and we stand among the crowd shouting, “*Crucify him!*” We witness Jesus’ suffering at the hands of soldiers, and we walk with Simon the Cyrene carrying Jesus’ cross. We watch as Jesus is unjustly crucified between two criminals, and we also say with the Roman centurion, “*Truly this man was God’s Son!*”

As we listen again to the Passion of Christ, we realize that we are not bystanders, nor are we simply readers of ancient history. For this week to make any sense at all, as we shout “*Hosanna!*” as we must also be confronted on Friday with our ongoing sinful neglect of Christ in this world. For this week to make any sense at all, we must approach his table where he shares himself with forgiveness for all, and as he washed the disciples’ feet, we too, must become servants of all. We must remember moments when, like Peter, we have not spoken up for Jesus in our neighbor. Rather, we have looked the other way by denying Christ, and swayed by the emotion of the crowd, we have also shouted about our neighbor in Christ, “Arrest them; crucify them” For this week to make any sense at all, we must stand next to Pilate, judging the Son of God, and we must stand next to Christ, unjustly judged. If, like the centurion, we wish to say, “*Truly this man was God’s Son!*” – then we must also carry his cross.

Holy Week is about both receiving the grace of Christ’s suffering for humanity, while also seeing our failure to be bearers of his grace in this world. As we shout “*Hosanna!*” we also remember that we have shouted “*Crucify them!*” about our enemies, forgetting that Christ also died and was raised for them. All of our human complexity and contradiction are present in the Passion story. We must see ourselves in Christ’s Passion if we hope to meet him risen on Easter morning.

Paul wrote to the Philippians, “*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.*” In the

most moving passage Paul ever wrote about Jesus, Paul identifies three things we are to imitate in Christ: his self-emptying, his humility, and his obedience to the cross. Self-emptying of all but love, humility before power, and obedient service to God – these three things define the journey of Holy Week and every week for Christians around the world.

Paul wrote these words to the church at Philippi because there was disunity in that church. People were headstrong and proud. Like the crowds that shouted, “*Hosanna*,” they praised God with their lips, but like the crowds before Pilate, they also could tear into their neighbor, saying, “*Crucify them!*” Paul reminds us on Passion Sunday, that we must have the same mind as Christ.

Paul says, “Empty yourself of all privilege and power, becoming slaves and servants to God’s love for this world.” *He emptied himself* – can we empty ourselves of all grasping at power, so that freed from empty ambition, we might live with humility and obedience for others? Before the Passion narrative in Matthew, as Jesus prepared to enter Jerusalem he taught his disciples that they were not to be like the leaders of this world who “*lord it over others*” (Mt. 20:25-28); rather, they were to become servants of all. On the way to the cross Jesus emptied himself becoming a servant.

Yet we live in a world where leaders continue to make war, to lord themselves over others, where they continue to grasp at self-serving power. Reflecting upon Paul’s words to the Philippians, Martin Luther wrote in his sermon *Two Kinds of Righteousness*,

Christ will treat all of us in like manner whenever we, on the ground of our righteousness, wisdom, or power, are haughty or angry with those who are unrighteous, foolish, or less powerful than we...For you are powerful, not that you may make the weak weaker by oppression, but that you may make them powerful by raising them up and defending them...This is Christ’s example for us, as he says, “*For God sent the Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him*” (John 3:17).

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.* Empty yourself of pride and selfishness; wearing his yoke, learn his obedient love and humility for others. Empty yourself and he will fill you with grace. He will take your sin, your pride, your fears, your doubt and fill you with his righteousness, humility, peace, and faith. Let him reign in your heart. Christ’s self-emptying journey is also your journey, not only this week, but as you empty yourself in loving service to others over your lifetime.

Standing before Pilate in the halls of power, Jesus emptied himself of human power, revealing his strength in love and suffering. He was crucified with criminals, so that he might raise all sinful

people to new life. He died alone so that no one will ever die alone again. Only the suffering God can help. The centurion, a man of power and authority, humbled himself, before the cross, saying, *“Truly this man was God’s Son.”*

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.* Christ emptied himself for you and for your neighbor. Empty yourself in humble and obedient service with him. If you are strong, help the weak. If you have gifts, power and authority, use them to lift and defend others.

Be of the same mind as Christ and share in his suffering. Walk with him this week. Eat at his table, watch and pray with him in Gethsemane, and carry his cross. He emptied himself. *“He became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich”* (2 Corinthians 8:9).

He emptied himself so that you might imitate him. Empty yourself. He will fill you with grace and courage to love others.

When you, like him, breathe your last, he will fill you with resurrection. Empty yourself in service with him, and he will fill you with life. Amen.