

LIFE IN CHRIST: LIFE IN HUMILITY

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Philippians 2:5-11

About 1300 years before Jesus, the Israelites lived as slaves in Egypt. With assistance from God, Moses led the people out of Egypt and toward freedom to a land that God had promised them. On the night before their escape from Egypt, the spirit of the Lord covered the land and struck down each first born in the land. The Jews who had marked the doors of their homes with lamb's blood were spared. It is said that the Lord 'passed over' them. Today, Passover is one of the prominent observances of the Jewish calendar. It celebrates the people's liberation by God from slavery in Egypt.

It was this same Passover that Jesus celebrated with his disciples at a meal that we know as the Last Supper. In Jesus' day, Passover¹ was a major festival. Thousands of pilgrims streamed into Jerusalem for the week-long celebration. The Romans mustered extra troops to quash any Jewish revolt or uprising that may take place during the festival. Passover was a powder keg of politics and emotions. The Jews were chaffing from the Roman occupation as they congregated in Jerusalem to remember a past act of freedom from foreign oppression. The Romans knew that anything could happen. It is into this mix that Jesus arrives in an event we, as Christians, call Palm Sunday.

Jesus and his disciples and followers convened in Jerusalem for the Passover feast. Prior to their arrival to Jerusalem, Jesus dispatches two of his disciples to enter a village outside Jerusalem and obtain a donkey. They bring the donkey to Jesus who then rides it into Jerusalem. As this point, Jesus and his group of disciples and followers are merely a subset of the much larger procession of pilgrims streaming toward the capital. Riding on this donkey, Jesus attracts attention and sparks the theological imaginations of the people in the crowd. They recognize the image that he projects as they recall the ancient prophecy of Zechariah: *Your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey* (9:9). Do the crowds believe that Jesus really is their king? Probably not. But in the spirit of the Passover festival they cheer when they see this man riding on the donkey. If I am in Nashville on a busy Friday night and I am walking up Lower Broad and I pass a guy on a corner dressed up looking like Johnny Cash and singing *Folsom Prison Blues*, I'm going to smile. I get it. The crowd of pilgrims—they get it, too. And they respond by shouting from the Psalms: *Hosanna. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord*. The 'hosanna' means literally "save now." These words come from Psalm 118, *Save us, we beseech you, O Lord. Blessed is the one who comes in the*

¹ Pasesch

name of the Lord (Ps 118:25-26). The people then enter into the drama by creating a royal path for the king with leafy branches and palms.

What we find here is a throng of pilgrims marching into Jerusalem. In the midst of that crowd are Jesus' disciples and Jesus himself riding on a donkey. The sight of the man on the donkey inspires the crowd to respond as they would to a king.

But why a donkey? Honestly, we don't really know. The obvious reason is because a donkey is referenced in the passage from Zechariah. *Lo, your king comes to you... humble and riding on a donkey.*

The Jewish people were actively anticipating a king—a messiah—who would deliver them from the rule of the Romans. I believe Jesus chose to enter Jerusalem on a donkey because of the message it would send about who he was. He was king, but not that sort of king. He wasn't a warrior king or a political king. Those kings would certainly arrive at the capital surrounded by the trappings and displays of power. Not a donkey.

In 1977, January 20 was a cold, icy day in Washington D.C. The temperature was 28°F and the wind chill brought that down to the teens.² On this day, James Earl Carter, Jr.—Jimmy Carter—former governor of the state of Georgia, was inaugurated as the 39th president of the United States. As president, Carter followed Gerald Ford who had been named vice-president when Spiro Agnew resigned. He then became president when Richard Nixon stepped down. After being sworn in at the Capitol, Carter did something no president had done before. He walked. Instead of riding in a carriage or a limousine as many presidents had done before him, Carter chose to walk the mile-and-a-half from the Capitol to the White House. Carter wrote in his diary that by walking he wished to convey “a reduction in the imperial status of the president and his family.” If Jimmy Carter had ridden in a large limo marked with the seal of the presidency and adorned with American flags, no one would have thought anything of it. That was the norm. But by walking the parade route—down Pennsylvania Avenue—waving at people and shaking hands, he sent a message. He was saying to the nation that we are a democracy. The president is one of the people.

By choosing to ride the donkey in the Passover procession, Jesus is demonstrating that he is not a king of power but of humility. *Lo, your king comes to you... humble and riding on a donkey.*

Here is a question to consider: What if, instead of a donkey, Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem on a war horse—a large, powerful beast like that used by military leaders riding into battle? What would have happened when he got to Jerusalem? Likely, given the tense political environment, it would have started a rebellion—

² https://www.weather.gov/lwx/events_Inauguration

assuming that the Romans didn't kill him first. Such a powerful symbol during this festival when the city was packed with believers could have created a wave of rebellion. History would be different.

But by riding a donkey, Jesus declares his kingship, not of power, but of something else—humility.

Our reading for today is from Paul's Letter to the church in the city of Philippi. Paul has great affection for these people as he seeks to guide their Christian formation. Paul is writing this letter from prison. The church in Philippi had heard of his imprisonment and they sent Epaphroditus to Paul with gifts and supplies. Paul writes this letter and Epaphroditus carries it back to Philippi.

In the letter, Paul urges the people to live their lives *worthy of the gospel of Christ* (1:27). They are to do this by living in humility.

Humility is a strange concept. We tend to associate it with weakness. The humble person is the one who can't fight. If you are weak you must be humble. If you are strong, let everyone know your power; don't hide it. Paul offers us a definition of humility here. He says, *In humility regard others as better than yourselves* (2:3). Humility is not pulling yourself down, rather it is lifting others up. As Paul writes, *Look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others* (2:4).

During this season of Lent, I have brought you this sermon series called *Life in Christ*. Using the texts that we associate with Lent and Easter, I have asked you to explore what it means to live in Christ. Today, in Paul's letter we can see that living in Christ means living in humility. It means using our power not to coerce or extort, but to lift others up. To live in humility is not to draw attention to ourselves but to our neighbor.

Paul calls the people in Philippi to imitate Jesus and be of the *same mind* that *was in Christ Jesus*. Paul calls them to have a Christ-mindedness, to live in Christ. Paul then incorporates the lyrics of a song (or a hymn) to make his point. We don't believe that Paul wrote these words, but did use them in his plea to the people. Today, we refer to this hymn as the Christ Hymn.

This song has three sections. The first describes how Jesus emptied himself. *He was in the form of God, however, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness*. Here, we are reminded that Christ has the power of God. He is God. Yet, he chooses not to exploit this power but instead chooses to become human. Jesus pours himself out. He humbles himself. When Jesus entered Jerusalem he could have stormed in with guns blazing accompanied by the armies of heaven. That would have been an impressive display of power and strength, but it would not have lifted anyone up.

In the second section of this hymn, we sing of Christ's sacrifice—how he, in human form, *humbled himself* and *became obedient to the point of death*—crucifixion. Humility has its consequences. Humility, however, is not a weakness; it is a strength.

But then in the third section, we sing how God has now exalted Jesus lifting up the name of Jesus above all names. Christ is triumphant not because of his great power but because of his great sacrifice.

The German reformer Martin Luther had this to say about Christ' humility: "What terrible judgment must come upon those who fail to imitate the ineffable example of Christ; who do not humble themselves below their neighbors and serve them, but rather exalt themselves above them! Indeed, the example of Christ may well terrify the exalted, and those high in authority; and still more the self-exalted. Who would not shrink from occupying the uppermost seat and from lording it over others when he sees the Son of God humble [and eliminate himself]?"³

In this season of Lent and Easter, we know the cross is ahead of us. It is the symbol of sacrifice. Christ did not exploit his power as he could have. Instead, he became a model of obedience to God. To live our lives in Christ, we should be Christ-minded and practice imitating his humble service to others in God's name. Amen.

³ Martin Luther, *The Sermons of Martin Luther*, Vol. VII: 169-180 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House), 179-80.