

WGUMC Palm Sunday April 13, 2014
Matthew 21:1-11 and Philippians 2:1-11

Our passage in Philippians gives us the Jesus story in verse.

This was, in fact, an early Christian hymn about the Christ:

“who, though he was in the form of God, 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. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”

It must have been more sing-able in the Greek. Anyway, this hymn is about God emptying Godself; God laying down divine powers and giving up divine dignity in order to enter our human story. The Word became flesh and its name was Jesus.

This morning our children are going to act out the Christ hymn as I trace out the scenes of Holy Week. Beginning with Palm Sunday, the events of this week tell the story of Jesus emptying himself as he arrives in Jerusalem. He comes

prepared to give up everything, including his life on earth, so that we can have life with God.

Scene One: It's the Sunday before Passover. There are two processions coming into the city for the religious holiday, and there's a lot of tension in the air. Matthew says, "the whole city was in a turmoil." [Mt 21:10] There had been riots around Passover before. According to the historian Josephus, three thousand died during Passover around the time Jesus was born.

If that seems strange, remember that Passover is a celebration of a military victory over imperial Egypt. So it was a religious holiday that roused a lot of political passion. And that was a concern for imperial Rome. So the Roman governor of the Province would customarily ride up from his city by the sea with a cohort of Roman soldiers to beef up the garrison in Jerusalem, just in case.

This year, as usual, Pilate entered Jerusalem from the west, riding on a warhorse, ready for battle. But there was another

procession that week. A wandering preacher and healer came into the city from the east, riding on a donkey, just like the prophet Zechariah had said: “Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations.” [Zechariah 9:9-10]

What a contrast. Pilate, the ruthless governor, came into the city like a Roman god, to put terror into the hearts of any would-be troublemakers. But the wandering preacher, the one some had called the “Son of God,” didn't play up his power as Pilate did. Jesus didn't glorify himself but humbled himself. He acted more like a servant than a messiah, more like a slave than a king.

The peace of God's power met the violence of Roman power, and the donkey brayed at the warhorse. It was great political theater, and the people ate it up. So they joined in the

procession, calling to Jesus as the Son of David, the rightful heir to the throne of Israel. [Mt 21:9]

Now, Jesus could have grabbed that title and run with it. He could have used it to do some very righteous things. He could have gotten rid of the Romans, for one thing. But Jesus wasn't a king like David and his kingdom doesn't look like any kingdom in this world, where kings use their power to make people fear them and obey them. But Jesus wanted nothing to do with that kind of power. He refused to wear that kind of crown. Children, take the crowns away.

Power is not all that Jesus gave up. The next day, Monday, Jesus went into the great temple in Jerusalem and saw all the tables of the merchants in the outer court. Probably looked a little like Fisherman's Wharf. They were selling animals for sacrifice, exchanging coins for the temple treasury, everyone happily making a profit.

Jesus looked around and remembered the words of a

prophet. Jeremiah warned about the temple becoming a den of robbers. [Mt 21:13] How easy it would have been for Jesus to join them, hawking a healing here, selling a little forgiveness there. His slogan could be: Being nice has a price!

But if Jesus ever had any such thoughts, he quickly dispelled them. Instead, he confronted the temple racket. He overturned their tables of greed. You've seen it in the movies. Coins of the moneychangers flying everywhere. Lots of commotion and then Jesus, just standing there. What an odd sight: a king with no crown, a Messiah with no money. Children, take the coins away.

From the perspective of the religious authorities, it was bad enough that Jesus committed vandalism in the very house of God. But Jesus didn't stop there. Pretty soon he was making terrorist threats against the temple. Just like Jeremiah before him, Jesus started talking about the temple and how it was going to be destroyed. [Mt 24:1-2] That was it. That was

sedition. The authorities knew then they would have to destroy him.

By Tuesday, the priests and scribes were really starting to sweat. They were scared of Jesus, the Gospel of Mark says, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. [Mk 11:18] As Jesus went about the city, the people followed him. The crowd was listening to him with delight. [Mark 12:37] Meanwhile, the chief priests were scheming how to arrest him in secret. For if they did it in public, they knew they would have another riot on their hands and Roman swords at their necks. [Mt 26:3-5]

You know what happens next. Two days before the Passover, Judas went to the chief priests and tipped them off. [Mt 26:14-16] He told them about the garden where Jesus would go to pray after the Passover meal on Thursday. So the priests rounded up a posse.

The gospels aren't very clear about whether they were

Roman soldiers or temple police or just common thugs. [Mt 26:47; Lk 22:52; John 18:3] Whoever they were, they showed up in Gethsemane. Jesus said to them, “Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled.”

[Mk 14:48-49]

After taking a pass on power and wealth, Jesus gave up what few of us would be willing to hand over: our freedom. As an American, I reserve the right to be free, to go where I want to go and do what I want to do so that I can satisfy me, so that I can fully actualize me. But notice that Jesus didn't say, "Let *me* be fulfilled." Because he knew that he was part of a bigger story, and he wasn't the one writing the script. So he said, “let the *scriptures* be fulfilled.”

You know, it wouldn't have been that hard to escape his fate, if he had really tried. All he had to do was don a disguise

and get out of Dodge. But Jesus gave up his need to be free. Like the disciples he sent out, he went without purse or bag or sandals. And his bare feet obediently followed the path up the hill to the cross. Children, take away the sandals.

The night of his arrest, "all the disciples deserted him and fled." [Mt 26:56] So, Jesus not only gave up his freedom, he gave up his best friends. He had told them, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you." [John 15:13-14] But when crunch time came, they couldn't do what he commanded them to do. They couldn't love the way he loved, that is, without fear. So, they weren't good friends at the end. They forsook him and fled.

This is what we mean when we say Jesus emptied himself of everything. In one week's time, he gave up the power he could have used. He gave up the wealth he could have had. He gave up the freedom he could have loved. He gave up the

friends he was going to need. He gave himself up to the phony powers that be.

But the Christ hymn gives us a glimpse of what happens then. After being brought lower than low, he was lifted up by the awesome power that was and is and always will be.

“Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Children, lift up those palms!

This is the story of a Holy Week. And I invite you to read it for yourselves sometime this week. It's not so hard to imagine being there, because in a very real way, we are there now. Because of what will happen next Sunday, Jesus still walks with us.

But be careful, for there are still grand processions going on in our lives. Some of them come from the west, led by

those who are all saddled up for playing god, grabbing power or going off to war. Some come from the east, led by a guy on a donkey, the one who delights us with his teaching, the one they call the Prince of Peace. We just have to ask ourselves each and every day: which parade are we in? To find out, come to worship on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday. And, whatever you do, don't miss Easter Sunday.