

The Self-Emptying Journey  
Mark 15.1-39 and Philippians 2.5-11  
Sunday, March 25, 2018  
Palm + Passion Sunday  
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St. Charles Ave. Baptist Church

I think this week is misunderstood. This week so central to the life of the Christian Church. This week of symbolically, liturgically marking the steps along a path of one marked for death. This week that so many Christians now hold up as an exclusive story separating the Jesus tribe from the rest of the world. This week moving toward resurrection and new life yet simultaneously in need of some resurrection and new life poured over it in interpretation. This week is terribly complicated not just because we talk about sin and death and betrayal but because we often miss the mark in what this week is asking of us. Maybe we think this week is asking us to shame ourselves and take on the burden of Jesus' death when, really, the arc of this week, including Jesus' death, is asking us to rethink what we know of life.

Karoline Lewis calls this week, "the center of Christian identity, articulating what a Christian life looks like beyond Easter Sunday."<sup>1</sup> What do you think she means by that? How do we look at the entirety of this week and see a picture of the Christian life? Just this morning we have begun traveling that arc from delight and "Hosannas" at the top of the hour to the reading of the Passion. Thursday night will take us into Jesus' final instructions to his very closest friends and followers before we enter the silence of Good Friday and Holy Saturday. It is only then that we return next Sunday with our "Alleluias" at the ready.

We see in the scope of this week the inward journey and outward journey, the life of faith walked alone and the life of faith walked with others. We see the necessary interplay of each one of those as we understand that the inward journey with others is feet under the table, holding onto a love so revolutionary that it not only changes the lives around that table forever but keeps showing up around loving tables forever. Jesus will model for us the silent practices of prayer and the public practices of telling truth to power, organizing a movement to resist injustice,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=5117>

teaching and studying and returning to the story of scripture, then carrying a fresh word out for his people in a way that prepares them to organize, tell truth, and resist on their own. It's this flowing loop of fellowship and love in community (which we adore! we're good with that inner work) and then the outpouring of that fellowship into love of neighbor pushing out into the world for action and change and public demonstration, even if the consequence is death on Empire's cross.

A couple of years ago I came across this image from Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan that forever changed my experience of Palm Sunday.<sup>2</sup>

"Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year... One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, and his followers came from the peasant class... On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus's procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire... Pilate's military procession was a demonstration of both Roman imperial power and Roman imperial theology."<sup>3</sup>

There's something happening here in Jesus' actions. His choices are specific. The crowd's reaction is specific. This is not just about momentary praise for a popular rabbi, and the procession isn't arbitrary. There is a theological and political statement wrapped in the symbols of this procession. The choice of a donkey didn't mean poverty or weakness, it mean ruling as a king who does not conquer—leading a movement that is not built on coercion and force.<sup>4</sup> The march toward Jesus' death is the march of a leader of a movement into the center of power for his world, knowing that the ones who reign over this earthly kingdom by means of tremendous conquering are marching in on the other side.

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<sup>2</sup> Thought originally shared here: [http://www.scabc.org/Sermons/20March16\\_WelcomingParade.pdf](http://www.scabc.org/Sermons/20March16_WelcomingParade.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://onemansweb.org/theology/the-year-of-mark-2015/jesus-rain-on-my-parade-palm-sunday.html>

<sup>4</sup> see *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, "Donkey, Ass" p. 215

How hard is that image for us to imagine? One way equipped with the largest military capacity the world had ever known, harnessing the world's money through unjust taxation, favoring the rich on the backs of the poor, and caring even more about amassing power and keeping it. And this other way marching through that capital city toward the seat of power, no war horse or coffers, just passion and creativity and imagination and love pulsing through them with their story of another kingdom and a better way.

The students of our country right now are helping us imagine what that might look like. An estimated 800,000 people gathering in D.C. yesterday, likely to be determined as the largest protest in the history of our nation's capital. What does revolutionary love look like? What does it mean to embody a faith so completely that the work of the inward journey—community, study, prayer, affection, compassion, empathy, loving kindness—necessitates an outward counterpart. The inward journey fills up and pushes us into an outward expression of some sort (it won't look the same for everyone and for every group), but the outward journey is essential to the inward journey.

Several years ago, North Carolina Pastor Ricky Woods wrote a commentary on the challenge of Palm Sunday that invites us even deeper into the story of this Jesus-led procession as we continue to consider the thoughtfulness of the imagery:

"What is often overlooked in this text is how palm branches serve as a symbol of resistance to foreign rule. In an article by John Hart entitled 'Judaea and Rome the Official Commentary,' he states, 'From time of the Maccabees, palms or palm branches had been a national symbol. Palm branches figured in the procession which celebrated the rededication of the temple in 164 BC and again when the winning of full political independence was celebrated under Simon in 141BC. Later, palms appeared as a national symbol on the coins struck by the Judean insurgents during the first and second revolt against Rome.'

For Jesus to enter Jerusalem amidst shouts of affirmation and waving palm branches could be seen as an act of defiance against Roman rule...

The church is sometimes called upon to engage in [bold, brave, and sometimes] dangerous activity, whether it is speaking out on issues of injustice or providing theological clarity about the church's purpose in a culture that craves entertainment. Palm Sunday," writes Pastor Woods, "is more than another day of celebration by the Christian Church as it awaits Easter. It is also a day of reflection on how the presence of believers in dangerous places can transform them into places of hope. Palm Sunday is God's reminder to us of what can be done when courage, humility, love and hope coalesce and enter places of danger and what can happen when those filled with these character traits engage in [bold, brave, and sometimes] dangerous activity—this all leads to salvation." The inward journey and outward journey are necessary partners in Holy Week and in the life of faith. Together they are freeing us from something old and inviting us into something new.

One of the themes of the new testament is the self-emptying nature of this journey.

Paul writes of this reality in his letter to the Philippians:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, <sup>2</sup>make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup>Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup>Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup>who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, <sup>7</sup>but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, <sup>8</sup>he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. <sup>9</sup>Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup>so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup>and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.  
(Philippians 2.5-11)

It's not that the journey automatically does the work of emptying self—like a self-cleaning oven or a Roomba that we turn on as we leave for work. The journey is

doing something with our ego. I love the great benediction used by John Claypool, "By the love of God, fully revealed in Jesus the Christ, you are being redeemed." This is an unfolding process, and redemption is continually happening to us. When we give ourselves fully to this Jesus Way, the ego must die. The self must pour out. Yes, this journey is for the healing of the world, and it's for the healing of ourselves. It's both; flowing back and forth. The inner work fuels the outer work, which necessarily shapes and changes the nature and structure of the inner work. And this journey draws us into the Spirit, the compassion, the sympathy, the joy, the mind, the love of Christ, all along the way, shedding more and more of ego.

The point of this march into Jerusalem is not just the public demonstration or even the hard work of healing the world (bold, brave, and sometimes dangerous work). The march into Jerusalem is about the dynamic, simultaneous healing of self and healing of world. The scope of this Holy Week will show us that the stuff of faith doesn't work if it's only one way. It is imbalanced to care endlessly about the stranger in our midst and push against systems but ignore our closest neighbor and neglect ourselves. That is abusive of self and likely entirely wrapped up in ego.

Likewise, if our faith is just making us feel good, comforting us in our private lives, assuring us we have the password to a good eternity, then it's not good enough. This story isn't about comforting us in our already comfortable lives.

This story marches up to the face of power and says: We will not live as you do. We will not live by fear and by power, we will live by compassion and by love. We will not live by excluding and hoarding, we will live by generosity and welcoming. We will not live by destroying and terrorizing, we will live by healing and restoration. The love we feel and know that burns in our bellies is a love that compels us to love each other. And the love we feel and know that rises into our chests when we are loving one another compels us to get up from our comfortable tables and walk out of our closed doors and love the world. This is a love that can rule a kingdom without a sword. This is a love that shines like light in darkness. This is a love that rids me of my fragile and foolish ego and heals my life by connecting it to yours. This is a love that can be nailed to the Empire's cross and still say "Forgive them." This is the journey of Holy Week. I invite you to join me as we enter in.

Amen.