

First Presbyterian Church
Philippians 2:5-11, “Where Are You Headed?”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 4/2/2023

It is great to be back after an amazing visit to El Salvador last week with Bob and Jan Irish along with Lou Savage.

We visited our mission partners from the
Reformed Calvinist Church in El Salvador,
otherwise known by the acronym IRCES.

It was a truly profound experience for all of us.

We learned things that have some big implications for how
go about our mission and ministry here in McMinnville,
so I hope to share all of that with you sometime soon.

Today I’m going to focus on Palm Sunday.

During the season of Lent we’ve been seeking honest questions
for a deeper faith.

Today’s question in that series is “Where are you headed?”

Rev. Bruce Reyes Chow suggests that

“Jesus’ unconventional and unexpected entry
into the city parallels the extravagant parade of Pilate,
the Roman governor.

As both leaders enter the city for the Passover,
they embody different directions. Pilate commands military
dominance and imperial power;

Jesus ushers in the kingdom of God and the way of peace.

Within the chaos and commotion of this scene,
which leader will you follow?”

In other words, where are you headed?

As you move through your work, connect with friends,
attend to daily tasks and anxieties,
what compass heading does your life point toward?

We rightly wave palms of celebration for Jesus on this day.

Jesus is king! But every year I wonder how many
cheered for Jesus in hopes of a triumphal kingship (similar to Pilate's)
and then turned their back on him
when he was led to the cross?

How do we know if we would be found among the women
who stayed by Jesus through the end,
or if we would fall away
when things turned toward the cross?

If we follow Jesus today, are we headed toward Jesus as he really is,
or are we headed toward Jesus as we wish he were?

Though it's Palm Sunday, I think that Philippians 2 is very helpful
for clarifying the direction that Jesus is headed.

In this passage Paul explicitly invites the church
to share the same mindset that Jesus had
when he moved steadfastly into Jerusalem
and toward his death, on Palm Sunday.

The way of Christ Jesus is on display here.

It reveals with stark clarity what was present under the surface
during Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

He wasn't coming to Jerusalem to fill his own cup.
He was coming to be emptied.

For anyone stuck in a rut, this passage is a startling splash in the face
with cold water:

the true God is a God who suffers...
and is well acquainted with the indignity
of life on earth.

Paul begins with an invitation to check the direction
we are headed in our relationships:

Paul says in v. 5, "*In your relationships with one another,*
have the same mindset as Christ Jesus."

Paul's saying that what follows not merely an academic exercise.

This is practical theology, it has an outcome
for our way of being a community.

What you believe about God – the specific theology you hold – has an impact
on how you work, how you befriend, how you point your life in the world.

“Have the same mind as that of Christ Jesus...”

Many believe verses 6-11 to be an ancient statement of faith,
a Christ Hymn from the early church.

In v. 6 Christ, who was in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God
something to be grasped, or more to the point,
“something to be used for his own advantage.”

One of the great mysteries of our faith is that Jesus existed as God
prior to being born to Mary.

Through the incarnation,
which simply means taking on a physical body,
Jesus demonstrates that he didn't cling to his divine status.

And as a human being, he did not rely on other-dimensional powers
to take it easy on himself.

For instance when tempted by the devil,
he refused to turn a stone into bread
to satisfy his own hunger.

Instead of loudly proclaiming that he was God's gift to the universe
(even though he was!) he took the form of a slave.

Was Jesus really a slave? Not in a legal or sociological sense.

Jesus didn't have an earthly master like a literal slave.

Paul is emphasizing that as a human being Jesus lived
in total submission to the One whom he served.

The one thing all slaves hold in common is their obedience to a master.

And Jesus was obedient at every point—

even in the manner of his death—death on a Roman cross.

It's common to hear about the cross of Christ at church or in scripture.

But we often forget that the cross was a Roman cross,
and that it held a particular kind of meaning in the ancient world.

Rome was *the* global superpower,
and crucifixion was the Roman way of humiliating
and shaming its enemies,
and demonstrating its supremacy.

Think of it: the Creator of the world took on a symbol of shame
from the Roman Empire.

So Jesus, who was in the form of God, emptied himself...
emptied himself.

This is to say, by taking on flesh, Jesus voluntarily relinquished
the experience of being God.

He therefore knew hunger, knew loneliness,
knew the grief of losing his friends to tragic death,
knew real temptation – Jesus knew life
just as we know it.

And he knew real death – a death that emphasized
the power of an Empire which called upon its citizens
to declare that *Caesar is Lord*.

This is where irony enters the poetic story that Paul tells.

The irony is that Rome thought this death was humiliating Jesus
against Jesus will. But in reality,
Jesus' whole life was an exercise
in self-emptying humiliation.

It's like the employee who gets in a fight with the boss,
and the boss says, "I'm gonna put you to work in the basement
filing financial reports for the next year, or you're fired!"
And the employee says ... "You can't fire me, I quit!"

You can't humiliate a person who is eternally God
and yet freely chooses to take the form of a slave—
such a person has already done that to himself!
Through the paradox of Jesus' obedient life and obedient death,
Jesus destroyed the foundation for the power of Rome
and every other Empire, big or small, that has ever existed.
Jesus thereby established an unshakable foundation for himself.

Remember our question? "Where are you headed?"
When we are headed toward Christ crucified,
we share this unshakable foundation.
If we choose to die to our own ambitions and pride,
then we enter into win-win territory:
If the world tries to shame us like Jesus, then we're on level-ground with Jesus.
And if the world is overcome by our humility and self-giving love,
then God is glorified.

The final element of this Christ Hymn is that God exalts Jesus
to the highest place so that all of creation
can see Jesus for who he really is.

Now, look: God doesn't do this as a reward, okay?
God the Father isn't saying,
"Well done, Jesus, you were a very good boy and suffered a lot.
Now I'll give you what you've been waiting for—
you've earned it!"

That would make the cross into a crude transaction
by which Christ suffers *in order to* attain glory for himself.
No, what we have here is God delivering on a promise of justice.
God shows that ultimately those who have been treated unjustly
will be vindicated.

Jesus suffered an unjust death, and God vindicated him...
thereby revealing to all of creation who Jesus *really is*.

And just to stick it to the Roman Empire (and all earthly superpowers)
one last time, at the end of time people won't be declaring
that Caesar is lord.

They will say that Jesus is Lord.

In short, Yahweh, the God of Israel,

came among us and lived a life of submissive obedience
in the countryside, in the city, at the lakeshore,
upon this same earth we live in today,
so that we could be free of ourselves.

In all of this Paul is saying,

“Because you are united with Jesus,
because you share in the empowering Holy Spirit,
because you are comforted by God's love,
point your relationships with one another in that direction.”

How do we do that? One way is to take some time this afternoon
really considering the people nearest to you in life –
the ones that look like you, the ones that don't,
the ones that share your line of work, and those who don't,
the ones who see the world the way you do,
and the ones who don't,
people who get you, and the people who always just seem
to be pushing against your initiatives.

Be especially honest with God about the relationships
in which you feel unduly burdened. Look around and take stock,
Think of everything you wish you could fix about them
that you see as wrong.

And then, voluntarily empty yourself. Even better, ask God to empty you
of your sense of supremacy over them. Ask God to give you a heart
of love for them and a desire for their safety and wellbeing,
for their flourishing in life. Ask God to help you forgive them.

That was the heart of Jesus on the first Palm Sunday. It can be our heart, too.