



Sermon for Palm Sunday, April 2020

Self-Emptying as the Way of Jesus: the God Who Gives and Gives, Because of Love

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Matt. 21:1-11](#) [Isaiah 50:4-9a](#) [Ps. 31:9-16](#) [Phil. 2:5-11](#) [Matt. 26:14 – 27:66](#)

[Opening Prayer]

Today we stand at the threshold of Holy Week, unlike any other Holy Week we have experienced, as across the world we all shelter in place during this period of trying to stave off rampant infection of the coronavirus. It has been a season of Lent unlike any other Lent, as we have given up things we never before thought were the things we might give up or fast from – and we have done so not only for our own sake but for the sake of others. It is a strange time for a triumphal entry into Jerusalem, or any city.

But here we are, crossing over that threshold on this day that marks the beginning of our movement into the heart of the Christian story – the entry of Jesus Christ into the life of the city and the place of religious and political power, to face refusal, betrayal, denial, and death head on, to give himself completely to those he loved and to the whole world, to be crucified and die, and then to rise again to life.

Today is a day in the life of the human city, where humanity regularly acts out its parades and plays that reveal just what we are as humans and just what all of our systems amount to. And what are we? We are a people eager to do the right thing, but easily tugged this way and that by all the things that grab our fickle nature, and easily over-zealous for our own self-protection and security – a people driven so easily by passions and impulses and the winds of the world around us. Even during this time of sheltering in place, we see fickleness and zealousness and indifference at play. People – even churches, and sheriff's offices, and governors and state legislators – defying orders and pressing to trust their own skepticism. Churches gathering in a trust that God will protect them from infection – succumbing to the temptation to put the Lord their God to the test. And, the winds of intensity blow across the internet, stoking impulses.

Jesus enters the city – and he is raised up by those in the city, and he is cast down and driven out and murdered by those in the city.

And, it is a choice. It is a path freely chosen. Jesus willfully and intentionally chose this path.

Tucked away in between our readings today from Matthew's Gospel, between the cries of "Hosanna" and the cries of "Crucify him," is this amazing, powerful, poetic passage about Jesus from Paul's letter to the Philippians. This passage captures the whole intentional movement of Jesus through Holy Week – and not only through Holy Week, but through his whole life as God-with-us,

God in human flesh and blood – and even beyond this, as the very core of who God is. In Jesus Christ, we find the God who willingly becomes empty, pours everything out.

Emptying himself. Humbling himself. Not just passively. Not just giving in to the forces around him. But facing willingly forward along a path that was leading into the threat of betrayal, injustice, denial by friends, cruelty by people in power, denial of responsibility by the powerful, savageness, suffering, and death. Willingly. Intentionally. Emptying himself for all whom he encountered.

This time of emptying ourselves – a bit. It is not a path we have chosen. It is, though, a path we choose to follow, for the sake of others and not just for our own sake. Please, friends, meditate with me on this. Let this time open up just a bit of a picture of what it means to empty ourselves for the sake of others. Whether that calls for radical action, or radical quieting. Whatever surprising turn it takes. This is a taste, too, of what it means to follow Jesus.

Jesus empties himself willingly, and gives himself intentionally over to—

- The ugliness of the betrayer's kiss.
- The hurt of friends denying any relationship or connection, to protect themselves.
- The pain of a repentant betrayer, and the cold cruelty of repentance refused.
- The detachment from responsibility of someone with power to make a difference.
- The jabbering taunts of the crowds in their own pockets and bubbles, distancing themselves from suffering by belittling and mocking.

And then, there is Joseph of Arimathea – one spark of kinder humanity, at the very end. Joseph, like any who put themselves at risk. The outsider. The healthcare worker on the line today. The surprising kindly neighbor or stranger. Like the good Samaritan, the one not really expected to help.

He gave of himself. He emptied something of himself. For the one he found himself calling Master, Teacher, Savior, Friend, Lord. Because he was stirred by love, and sorrow, and hope for that love to continue and to be remembered with reverence.

Go, friends, meditate and think deeply on these things.

Where in your life have you been fickle? Where have you seen human fickleness?

Where in your life have you sought an escape that left others hanging, or denied association with people and causes you actually cared about, or refused responsibility, or played at indifference and detachment at the cost of others, or succumbed to the behavior of the crowd?

Where have you chosen to follow a path willfully, intentionally?

When have you chosen to follow a path, intentionally, that involved emptying yourself purposefully for the sake of others?

It is this interesting mix of purposeful, tenacious self-giving and self-emptying that seems to be at the very heart of God. And, really, doesn't that make sense? This is the God from whom all creatures come, all being flows, all creativity pours out across the universe and throughout our world and into every thing that is. This is the very heart of God, to be endlessly, purposefully, tenaciously giving of Self and emptying of Self and pouring out of Self for all that God loves – all creation, including every human of every type, no matter what.

To follow Jesus is to learn to choose this path. And, to fail, and, to falter. And, to begin again, because we find Jesus reaching to us to forgive and heal and set on our feet again, saying once again, "Come, follow me."

On this day, this is what I want you to hear – that Christ Jesus came into the world, and entered THIS CITY, with purpose and resolve – that Christ Jesus rode into the sea of fickle human passion that would at one moment claim him as king and at another moment drive him from the city and do everything possible to obliterate him – that Christ Jesus came into the world to save all of us. ALL of us. And that Christ Jesus, God the Eternal Word, made a choice from all eternity to give up everything for our sake.

Jesus did not simply submit as a cowering figure, passively giving up any will. At every moment, Jesus is making choices. Jesus is riding into the storm. Jesus is calling the betrayer's game for what it is. Jesus is willfully refusing to play the schemers' blame game or the ruler's game of chess. Jesus is choosing to turn the questions, and at every moment, holds up the mirror before others.

At the heart of Christ is immense courage to choose such a path – and to follow that path with such calm, such submission – willful submission!

How have we followed Christ in this way in our lives? How have we failed? How are we now called to follow Christ in this way, giving up ourselves ON PURPOSE and WITH PURPOSE?

Let this same mind be in you, that was in Christ Jesus.

Let this same mind be in you.

Followers of Jesus, this is our path. It flies in the face of all else around us in our self-absorbed society and world. It is the path of grace. Oh, God, grant us the courage to move forward with your Son, through this week and through the rest of our lives, that this path of grace may be opened wider and wider, in more and more places.