

“The Prophet-Slave from Nazareth”
Matthew 21.1–11 & Philippians 2.5–11
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Most of us love Palm Sunday. It’s kind of a “rah-rah” celebration in the church as we remember Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. We get to wave our palm fronds and walk in procession and declare that it’s Jesus who is our leader: not Herod, not Pilate, not Caesar, *not even our political leaders in Washington – but Jesus*. Yet, it is a celebration that is tainted with bittersweet overtones. Unlike those first-century Judeans, *we know* that Jesus will stick by his guns and confront the powers that be; *we see* the crowds of well-wishers and know they will vanish when the going gets tough; *we understand* that Good Friday is coming.

And it’s not a typical parade that we re-enact, either for our time or for the first century. A *triumph* in Rome was a particular kind of military celebration that was accorded a general who was victorious in battle. The Senate¹ would vote to allow such a grand parade that included the display of booty and slaves taken from the losing side and brought to Rome. It included troops passing in review. And finally, it included the general riding victoriously in a triumphal chariot drawn by white horses. In imperial times, he was crowned with a laurel wreath and wore a purple tunic embroidered with palms under a purple toga. Interestingly, the chariot also held a slave who suspended a golden crown above the head of the general, and the slave was also to offer this reminder to the victor: “All glory is fleeting.”

Contrast that with the parade of Jesus and his well-wishers. Yes, there were palms, though not embroidered into a toga. Yes, there was animal transport: a donkey rather than a team of white stallions in front of a chariot. Yes, there was a hero.

But, rather than having the establishment authorize the parade, this one was organized by peasant followers of the movement. Rather than a glorification of empire, it would confront imperial power. Rather than celebrate victory in battle, it would lift up the victory of God’s shalom. Rather than put slaves on display, it would honor the one who “took the form of a slave.” And rather than fleeting glory, this glory is here, now, and forever.



The reading from Philippians is actually a *hymn* to Christ; it’s the earliest recorded hymn in the Christian tradition, which Paul recalls in his letter to the church in Philippi. In a world of slaves, peasants, and wealthy patrons, who would choose to be on the bottom of the heap and “take on the form of a slave?” That isn’t typically the way one becomes influential. But Paul writes that Jesus “emptied himself” to do this. That’s *radical humility*: Jesus, containing a healthy portion of the divine essence, and rather than playing it up, or just playing it down, Jesus *empties himself*. This “downward mobility” is called *kenosis* in theological circles: being willing to forgo glory, give up security, care less about wealth, and get to the essence of our being; it is a radical letting-go. It is the antithesis of the Roman triumph. The Buddhists call *kenosis non-attachment*, and they see attachment (to things, people, physical needs) as the root cause of all suffering. By reducing our attachment to such things and through meditation, we empty ourselves and alleviate suffering. And this emptying or *kenosis* isn’t just repeated among various religious traditions, but among Christians in the modern era as well: monastics who give up their

¹ during the Republic

personal possessions; the Amish who live communally; even Thoreau, who urged us to “simplify, simplify”; and you who give of yourselves, when you could be making your lifestyle a bit cushier. What makes you choose “downward mobility,” rather than increased physical comfort and material security in your life?

In a world in which Jesus could have chosen to live in comfort, why would he choose to live as an outcast, a rebel, and then to come into Jerusalem, where there was real potential for political turmoil, including being captured and killed for his countercultural faith?

Kenosis is extraordinarily countercultural in a society that views itself as an economic engine fueled by increasing capital and which calls its members “consumers.” Most of the people I know in this congregation do a lot more than just “consume,” which isn’t to say that we all couldn’t live more simply. So, why do we tolerate a dominant worldview that categorizes as “consumers,” mere cogs in a mindless, heartless economic machine? To apply the Buddhist take on *kenosis* in the economic scheme of things, I would say that “Overconsumption causes suffering,” whether by taxing today’s environment and the future of our planet to get more petroleum cheaper, or by casting a blind eye at exploitive labor practices so that we can get more manufactured goods cheaper. “More” and “cheaper:” our overconsumption is not the kind of *kenosis* that Jesus had in mind.



When we cry out, “Hosanna!” we are saying, “Save us!” And what kind of salvation are we really asking for? A cushy eternal life in the glorious hereafter? Clearly, that’s not what Jesus’ first followers had in mind. Salvation in the Jewish mind was saving body *and* soul, not one or the other.

When we shout, “Hosanna!” are we asking to be saved at no cost to ourselves? Ours is not a no-cost or even a low-cost faith. There are joys and costs of discipleship. If your faith demanded it, how much could you let go of? How much emptying or *kenosis* would you be willing to engage? What would it take for you to give up everything? Your security? Your money? Your family? Your social status? Your life itself? How far would you be willing to go for the sake of being a disciple of Jesus? (I’d ask you to think about that this week.)

When we shout, “Hosanna!” “Save us!” it’s not a one-sided event: we have to put *ourselves* and *all our efforts* into the equation. And still, *we have someone to ask to save us*. Perhaps it is our overconsumptive lifestyle from which we need deliverance.



Think back for a moment to 1989 and the student uprising in China. What is the picture that comes into your mind? If you’re like me, it’s the photograph or the videotape of a solitary young man holding his ground in Tiananmen Square in Beijing as a row of tanks approached him. There he stood: one person (first in a crowd), unarmed, facing down a phalanx of military machinery, unmoving, unflinching. He knew what he was doing, that young man. His actions were speaking truth to power – the power of the domination system of his world. In the final analysis, he was alone...emptied...free.

When you think of Jesus entering Jerusalem, remember that he knew that he was confronting the domination systems of his day. He faced the religious establishment and the Roman Empire: one man (at first in the midst of a throng), unarmed, facing down the military machinery of Rome, unmoving, unflinching, alone...emptied...free.

It is difficult for us to imagine ourselves standing shoulder to shoulder with that young man in Tiananmen Square, or with that young man in Jerusalem. It is hard for us to think about giving it all up. It is unthinkable that we should sacrifice our political,

economic, or social wellbeing for anyone other than our immediate families. Yet, we, as a people of faith, have chosen the narrow path; it is not all parades and celebrations: sometimes it is the way of *kenosis*. But the way of emptying ourselves, the way of downward mobility, is also the path of radical freedom.

We who gladly wave our palm fronds today must be willing to hold them up and wave them on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, as well as on Easter morning. We must be willing to hold them high in the best of times and the worst of times, when we are in the majority and when we are alone. In other words, we must be willing to bear both the joys and the costs of discipleship.

Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! May it be so. Amen.