

**Sermon Text – Sunday, March 24, 2023 – Pastor Paula Kraus
Palm / Passion Sunday**

**1st Reading: Isaiah 50:4-9a; 2nd Reading: Mark 11:1-11
Scripture for Message: Philippians 2:5-11 “Power”**

Imagine with me – if we were “creating” a savior for the world what would they look like or act like? Would our savior be powerful enough to fight for truth and justice and defeat warring factions, like maybe Superman or Captain America? Would our savior have strength like Hercules? Would our savior wear the armor of a strong warrior and ride a white horse like many of the heroes of our childhood?

We seem to live in a culture that wishes virility and strength in our heroes, not meekness and humility. But, Jesus comes to us, on this day, not as we expect or even as we desire a hero or savior to appear. The mechanism of our salvation through Jesus is not one we would choose, not one the people of Judea at that time would choose either. Praise God for choosing for us!

We have read from Mark’s Gospel that Jesus chose humility over grandeur by riding into the city on the back of a lowly colt, some would say a mule or donkey. The point is he didn’t take advantage of his privilege as the Son of God but chose to meet the people where they were. He couldn’t however change the people’s reaction, they had witnessed Lazarus coming out of the grave, they witnessed exorcisms and healings beyond their imaginings – how could they not praise him with shouts of Hosanna. They hadn’t a clue! Jesus, the God they got was not the god they expected.

We can see by reading Mark’s Gospel that Jesus warned his disciples and the people in his circle about the fate that awaits him in Jerusalem, yet they do not fully grasp his meaning. Even to the point of rebuking Jesus for saying such a thing. The people on this day saw only the celebratory and triumphal entry of their “Messiah.” But, according to Mark’s Gospel this triumphal entry is anti-climatic. Jesus enters the temple, looks around, and leaves – because it is already late, maybe too late. There is no turning over of tables, no righteous indignation, no hint of a “warring” savior, or an insurrectionist – only Jesus, who looks around, and acknowledging the lateness of the hour, leaves for Bethany. This is not what the people expected and probably not what they wanted to see.

The words Paul writes to the Philippians compel us to think differently about our mindsets when it comes to following Jesus. “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” who emptied himself and became obedient to the point of death. Jesus gained power through his humble service, not exalting himself but serving others. Serving the ones society oppressed, the demon possessed, the sick, disabled people, and the blind – not to mention those who just need words of comfort and reassurance as well as those who need physical

and spiritual nourishment. Jesus emptied himself and offered to others compassion, kindness, mercy, and attention.

Jesus does not diminish his honor by his self-emptying but enhances it by his obedience, even to death – for that obedience it is God who gives Jesus exalted status at God’s right hand and gives Jesus the name “Beloved Son.” Even in this parade scene from what we read in Mark’s gospel this morning it is not Jesus who exalted himself but the people who lifted him up as Messiah with their shouts of Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. As the week goes on, those very same people are the ones who shout for Jesus to be lifted on the cross and crucified – again lifting up Jesus to the glory of God the Father is definitely not what they expected.

I think what Paul writes to the Philippians is that it is precisely in giving up status and equality with God that Christ gained more power. Christ Jesus sets aside divine privilege to become one with humanity, one with the powerless. He came to us to serve not to be served – we will see that as we journey with him this week to the cross.

Humility as opposed to power. In our reading from Isaiah 50, we read words that although written in a different time and for a different purpose focus us on the suffering servant. [In fact, this section of Isaiah is one of the four “servant songs” in Isaiah.] Looking through the lens of Jesus Christ we read it as telling us that Jesus was not rebellious and he willingly gave his back to those who would beat and torture him. I wonder too if these words can remind us of how fleeting power really is. Isaiah says – “who will declare me guilty? All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.” The power of an Empire, such as the Roman Empire is fleeting, coming and going at the whim of the people. In much the same way the power of democracy can be torn down systematically at the whim of the people. Only God’s power is eternal because only God is eternal.

Can we also attribute Isaiah’s message to those of us who would be “servant” in the same mind as Christ Jesus. Through these words God compels us to listen and “learn the purposes of God.” Like the servant, it’s an urging to rely on God for our vindication – it is God who helps and sustains us. Carolyn Sharp writes, “The servant gives himself wholly to his mission, demonstrating a spiritual resilience that can be inspiring for all who struggle.”¹ This definition of servant can be applied both to us and Jesus the Christ. A servant chooses humility over power, Jesus drew power from God the Father and from service.

¹ Sharp, Carolyn J. “Isaiah 50:4-9a – Connecting the reading with Scripture” *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*. Ed. Green, Long, Powery, Rigby, & Sharp. Westminster John Knox. 2020. p.120

This is not the message of power that we hear in our world today, it is not the message of power that most of us want to hear either. Christianity calls us to be of the same mind as Christ Jesus, calls us to submissive obedience knowing that this will probably not lead us to a life of richness and comfort. But, when we follow Christ, we know that God will vindicate us and enable eternal salvation. The way to be exalted, the way to gain power, is to be humble.

Jesus expresses this in his teachings, we read it throughout the gospels, “The first shall be last” and “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” This is what Paul is trying to tell us in his letter to the Philippians. The only way to succeed in Christian life is to walk the road that Jesus traveled – that means following the path of humility and servanthood. We who choose humility now will be raised higher than the proud, we who give ourselves to others gain so much more. We who empty ourselves as Jesus did will find our true and better selves.

Of course, we know how this will turn out for us, in this world we will be considered wimps, people who “can’t make it in this world.” That is the insult and shame the world would heap on those of us who choose love above success or who seem to prize humility more than power and fame. However, the words of Isaiah and Paul and Jesus ring in our ears – The Lord God helps me, God is our strength and shield. The source of Christian power is to become like Christ. Christian power comes through prayerful listening and resilient trust in our redeemer by the grace of God.

The trouble in our scripture reading today is not power itself but how one gets behind it and to what end one uses it. How does the church seek and perceive power? How does the church exert the power it has? These are things that we need to consider when we look to the cross, when we journey with Jesus during this holy week. Where do we think our power comes from?

As vulnerable humans, we dream of a god who controls what we cannot control and who carries power as we would carry it. The belief of the powerful is that Christians are weak, dull, too cowardly to make it big in this world. Our culture is such that someone always has to be less than – people need to feel better than some other group or person, the general perception is that there must always be a “little man.” The cross however compels us to see that whatever basis we might have for thinking ourselves better than whether in intelligence, looks, wealth, education, or heritage those things become utterly insignificant when we chose to emulate Jesus as the one willing to abandon his rightful claim of full equality with God even to death on a cross.

The cross is our stumbling block to visions of power as well as prideful arrogance. It’s only when we identify with Jesus’ cross and put to death all claims

to superiority that we can fulfill Jesus' mission on earth and care for others as Christ cared for us. It is the mission of this church to honor God and share the love of Christ with our neighbors – we can't do that if we consider our neighbors inferior to us. Jesus Christ chose the shame of the cross for the honor of God, we as individuals and as a church community must consider humility and servanthood as our power.

The truth of the matter is that with God nothing is impossible, it is not a stretch to imagine that God's divine power enables us to walk the road Jesus traveled. Paul tells us that one day, every knee shall bow – that is not only a promise but also a statement of truth. Putting it bluntly there will come a day when even those who are now unwilling to acknowledge Jesus' lordship will bend the knee on that day of final judgment. It is a joyous feeling for those of us who acknowledge him now of our own free will. It is joyous too for a church that follows the way of humility now in full obedience to Christ.

Whatever our thoughts of what a savior should look like, God overturns those visions by giving us Jesus whose life was spent in service and whose humble obedience to his Father even to the point of death on the cross leads to our salvation. There is nothing more powerful than the grace and forgiveness we have received through Jesus' self-emptying love. As individuals and as a congregation of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) we must acknowledge that true power is gained not by aligning with the "empire" or economic powers that be, but by aligning with Christ and following the way of the cross.

Today – as we enter Holy Week and look at the parade and the people shouting Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord – don't forget that he did not exalt himself but rode in humility on the back of a colt. Do not forget that the people who exalted him wanted a king, they wanted a warrior but instead they got Jesus. They did not get what they expected, they were not prepared for what they did get. Church, just as Jesus did when arriving in Jerusalem, take some time to look around and prepare; for what is coming is not what you expect; power comes from unexpected places.