

**Philippians 2: 5-11**  
**Matthew 21: 1-11**  
**April 13, 2014**  
**Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church**  
**Palm Sunday**

At the class I took on Teaching Spiritual Formation in the Congregation the teacher spoke of three ways of understanding how we experience God in our lives.

The first way is the most common: We think of God as the power which *intervenes* in our lives. This is the God who we pray will change something: bring healing, direction, protection, an end to conflict, more rain, less rain. It is the God who we believe that if we do the right things we will be rewarded. In distorted interpretations, this is the God who is on our “side;” be it our faith, our cause, our nation or even our sports team. This is the God who is *out there* breaking into our plane of space and time who will alter the current direction or condition of the way we perceive things are.

The second way is less spoken of: It is of God as one who *interacts* with us. This is the God who is *with us*—with whom we have a relationship. This is the God who does not necessarily compel us to do God’s will; but rather who awakens in us a desire to follow in his path. It is a God who in the wonderful old song, “walks with us and talks with us” and with whom we walk and talk. This is heavenly Father/Mother to whom we go for guidance and reassurance rather than miracles. With the God who interacts with us we grow in seeing our life path more clearly and who invites us to intimacy.

The third way is this: the God of intention. In Reformed theology, this is the God of sovereignty and providence. In Paul’s words, this is the God “from whom we come,

unto whom we return and in whom we live and move and have our being. It is the God of the BIG PICTURE, of the Story which goes beyond all stories. This God has a clear intention for creation and all creatures, including humans. This intention is far beyond our understanding and we get into big trouble when we try to make God's intention concrete. When this happens we develop a god who has a PLAN for each person individually and for the world in general.

The concept of plan is dangerous for obvious reasons. It leads us to need to fit everything that happens into God's Plan. And since God is all powerful and all good at the same time then whatever happens happens for a reason and it is our fault if we fail to appreciate it.

But I prefer the idea of intention. Intention indicates a purpose, a direction; it is what God means to happen. We might refer to God's intention as the direction of the flow of the river of life. With such a flow there are times of serenity and turbulence, times of flood and drought; smooth movement and rapids waterfalls and swirling eddies. With the concept of intention we are not meant to interpret every little twist and turn. We are to trust in the overall flow and destiny of the river.

I say these things because they help me to understand Jesus' entry into Jerusalem in a new way.

Clearly the crowds who gathered to cheer Jesus and hail him as king saw him as a sign of God's intervention. He was the messiah sent to redeem Israel from the oppression of the Roman Empire as well as the structures of religion which had come to support that empire. They were looking for deliverance...now. Indeed, while the word,

“hosanna” popularly means “Praise the Lord” its literal meaning is “Save us now.” How easily the shouts of praise, expectation and demand flow together! How easily the crowd praises Jesus for how they expect him to intervene in their lives and deliver them from their troubles. How easily we do the same thing. We praise Jesus not always for who he is but for what we expect him to be able to do for us. And when our expectations are disappointed we are often angry or discouraged. We often experience a loss of faith.

Yet when we step back a little we notice that this is not merely a clash of expectations. The crowds are right in sensing that something big is happening. They are right in having high hopes that God is intervening. Nor should we who look to Jesus for help be afraid to expect great things for God. Yet how different the scene looks when we look upon this seen as an *interaction* between Jesus and the crowd. As he moves through the crowd seated on a donkey there is an exchange between Jesus and the crowd: Their hopes and expectations interacting with his deeper purpose. Notice that Jesus does not stop the parade and explain to them that they misunderstand his mission. He does not silence their cries. He receives them, misguided though they may be. And in return the crowds receive an indelible memory which will carry through the generations; a memory which will provoke dialogue and reflection. “Who is this Jesus?” “What is his purpose?” Or, more personally we ask, “Who are *you*, Jesus; what is your purpose for the world and for me; what may I expect of you; what do you want from me?”

I propose that when we see this procession as a meeting ground of our needs and expectations with Jesus' purpose the scene is transformed. It is no longer one dimensional but full of life and color and texture. There is room in this scene for joy and sorrow; celebration and dread and, perhaps most of all the awareness of God's greater purpose, God's *intention* for the world through his son Jesus riding in humble majesty.

It is our shifting of attention from God's plan to God's *intention* that allows us to experience Jesus' entry in to Jerusalem in a seamless and graceful way. The approach to the city, the "hosannas" of the crowds with its light and darkness, the symbolism of a conquering messiah "humble and riding on a donkey", the anger of the religious authorities and the events which await their terrible entry into the drama: all of these are part of a single flow of the stream of God's intention.

This deep current which flows through this day, through the week, through Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and to the life transforming event of Easter Sunday gives us a way enter the river of grace and simply go with it. Indeed I propose to you that we are already in it. We were born into it. We were baptized into it. Many of us have gone through life oblivious to this spiritual flow. We have focused so much on expecting God to intervene that we miss the fact that in Jesus Christ God *has already intervened* in every necessary respect. We are guided by God's deep intention that we come to realize that the very real events of our lives with all their ebbs and flows, turbulence and obstacles, is part of a grand intention. That intention is that in this life we seek our peace not in the things and circumstances of this world; but in the abiding flow of the

river which bears us all surely, not always easily, but surely to the life which sings  
beyond mortal life: the life we receive through Jesus' resurrection. Amen.