

**Philippians 2: 1-11**  
**Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church**  
**March 24, 2013**  
**Palm Sunday**

On this day we remember Jesus entering Jerusalem. We picture him on the high ridge overlooking the city of Jerusalem. We imagine him pausing amid the groves of olive trees on either side of the road and wonder about his thoughts and feelings as he hesitates—just for a moment--before descending the long and sometimes steep way down into the Kidron Valley and up again to the east gate of the city.

He has chosen to ride a donkey. It is a conscious and symbolic choice. He is choosing to connect his ride with the prophecy of Zechariah:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!  
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!  
Lo, your king comes to you;  
triumphant and victorious is he,  
humble and riding on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey! (9:9)

Alone of the disciples and the growing crowd, Jesus understands the subtle yet fateful message of Zechariah. Yes! Jesus is the king. He is the messiah. His entry fulfills the prophecy from long ago. But lost in the shouting is the whisper that he comes humbly riding on a donkey. The Hebrew word translated “humble” literally means “lowly” and “afflicted.”

The power of Palm Sunday lies in this simultaneous truth. Jesus *is* the king. Jesus *is* victorious. Even on this day two thousand years ago Jesus trusted that the outcome of

the traumatic events yet to come would be victory and joy. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews captures this when he writes:

(look) to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith,  
who *for the joy* that was set before him endured the cross. (Heb. 12:2)

In his resurrection Jesus' trust in God is vindicated. And now as we walk with him we share that trust. Jesus is *victorious*, not only over his own death, but ours as well.

German poet Rainer Maria Rilke defines joy as the experience of facing our worst fear and believing it cannot harm us. Whatever our greatest fear is—and for most of us it is death in one form or another—we confront it face to face with the faith that it has no power. As Christians we believe that Jesus faced this terror for us and when God raised Jesus from the dead the terrible fear of death was overcome *forever*. This according to Hebrews is the joy that led Jesus to endure the terror and pain of the cross. He foresaw the freedom that would come to you and me when we claim this joy for ourselves through faith in Jesus.

Yet for Jesus this joy was no anesthetic. It did not numb the dread and the anguish that as a fully human being he felt as he paused before beginning his descent from the Mount of Olives. In many ways this was a dress rehearsal for the experience of the Garden of Gethsemane. "Take this cup from my lips; but not my will but thine be done." This dread no doubt mounted as the crowds grew and hailed him King for all the wrong reasons. How did he bear the certain knowledge that misplaced faith inevitably leads to disillusionment which then turns on the object of that wrongly placed trust?

Thus he rides trusting in the joy but equally certain that this tragic misunderstanding will lead to rejection and anguish. There is no doubt that Jesus is *afflicted*. He experiences inside the physical pain he will endure just a few days later.

When Paul quotes one of the very first Christian hymns in his letter to the Philippians he leads us through this journey.

Let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
who, though he was in the form of God, did not  
regard equality with God something to be grasped,  
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave (that is)  
being born in human likeness. And being found in human form  
he humbled himself and became obedient to the point  
of death—even death on a cross.

Paul pictures the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as a grand sweeping movement which begins high in the heavenly realms with God. It pictures the descent beginning with his letting go of any right or privilege or special status he might claim as coming from God. Where does this lead? It leads him to find himself in human form. And even here he did not hold on to the identity of being divine. He lived his life as a servant, actually the Greek here is *doulos*, a slave—a person with no rights. The hymn describes this as spiritual emptying of any and everything that wants personal power or recognition. And it eventually leads him to painful rejection and death.

The danger of Palm Sunday is that we stop here. We do not allow ourselves to claim the joy that comes on Easter Sunday. For if the message ends here then we are left in the grips of death. I suppose there is something dramatic about leaving this place with a sense of dread and doom. Perhaps another preacher could so have the trust of

the congregation that he or she could have you leave in despair trusting that all will be made well in a week.

But, at least this year I am convinced that that even here is the opportunity to proclaim Good News. It is why we celebrate the sacrament of baptism for Mason Moslander. For baptism is truly an immersion in Christ's death. Mason has come from God to his mother and father and he begins a journey with Jesus. That journey includes encountering sadness, sorrow and pain. Mason will experience disappointment and discouragement. But today we know and we want Mason to know that whatever the pain of life, Jesus has already passed through it. Mason will never be alone spiritually in his journey of life whatever happens.

But that is only half the message. Jesus has not only passed through any and all circumstances of Mason's life he has carried them with him in the victory of his resurrection. *It has already happened!* There is no power on earth that can separate Mason, he family or anyone from the love of God in Jesus Christ. It is the job of Mason's parents and family and you his family of faith to so love him and teach him that he will discover this wonderful spiritual freedom for himself. So the day will come when Mason will join us in rejoicing:

There fore God also highly exalted Jesus and gave him the name that is above every name; so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth, and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus id Lord to the glory of god the Father.

Amen.

