

April 14, '19, Anthon UMC, Phil 2:1-11, "Running on Empty"
By Pastor Sheryl K. Ashley

Have you ever felt like you were running on empty? Well you're not the only ones. On Palm Sunday it is customary to speak of the acclamation Jesus received as he entered Jerusalem. To those watching, it appeared to be a scene of triumph at the time, even though he was on his way to the cross...something Jesus had shared with them but which the disciples had ignored or forgotten. In that parade, unbeknown to them Jesus was running on empty. All the acclaim must have seemed like fake news for Jesus knew what was to come.

Here today in our reflective Lenten 6-week journey to the cross our own darkness and repentance are interrupted by the relief of this cheerful parade. In fact, some Easter lilies came in early this week from some generous people and we didn't wait for Easter. We displayed them in the sanctuary today because today we remember that day in Jerusalem of waving palm branches, and coats that carpeted the road as they celebrated Jesus' coming into their midst.

Of course, for Good Friday services this week we will strip this place of any signs of flowers and colorful decorations. But today in the midst of the darkness of Lent, with the candles on our cross being put out one by one, we're in countdown to the crucifixion. On this day, called Palm Sunday, like the unaware crowd back then we will take time to enjoy a few flowers gracing our sanctuary. And today we too are focused on that seeming triumph of Christ entering Jerusalem. In the opening part of our worship, we reenacted it with palms waving and coats being thrown down and children marching and adults praising this one who revealed his Messiahship as he rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey...the sign of a king. But wait! Why no powerful steed, no war horse

with an army behind? Why a lowly colt of a donkey? I was reading that in Jesus' time a conquering king would ride into a city on a powerful stallion, much like a president would fly in on a private jet, intimidating everyone with his power and majesty and his intention to take control...but to ride in on a donkey, that would be a king who already owned the city and he would be followed, not with warriors but by those who are like him, those who come in peace. That would mean the battle had already been won. And for those who know the ending of this power struggle, the battle had already been won. He and we know who the victor of this week of passion will be. And so, Jesus rode toward the eastern gate of the temple to enter the city as an established king already in his reign.

But as we all know, that peaceful joyous triumph ended up being a brief moment in time, a quick glimpse of Jesus' true glory, the glory he left behind in heaven some 30 + earth years before. In the midst of all the clamor of the great parade and the shouting in the sunshine, Jesus knew all along how short lived it would be. Before the week was out Jesus knew he would be on a cross. So "Palm Sunday" also rightly shares the name, "Passion Sunday" and the passage we read from Philippians is one of the suggested ones to be shared on this day to remind us of the price Christ paid to get his message across.

This year we are choosing the Passion to prepare us for what is to come, as we cross the threshold into Holy Week and Good Friday that awaits us wearing the mask of death. Paul writes of this plainly to the Philippians using the words of a hymn of the ancient church. That insightful scripture song, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself..." That insightful song tells us

that Jesus chose to run on empty, devoid of his glory, setting aside his power, and for what? So, he could be one of us, that's what. So, he could experience and pay fully and in obedience for our sin. How much easier and safer it would have been just to back off when the forces arrayed against him began to flex their muscles! He could have gone back to Nazareth, reopened the carpentry shop, and made a career for himself. Instead he chose to be obedient and increasingly it was evident that such obedience would cost him his life. He didn't want to die. He wasn't courting death. But he had surrendered his own ambitions to the carrying out of his mission. He was determinedly obedient to defeat the sin that crept into the world because of that first determined disobedience in the Garden of Eden, a determined disobedience which has sprung anew in each and every one of us ever since.

Jesus' sufferings would bring God the very taste of suffering and death that always comes with sin, something God could never have known otherwise, had Jesus stayed wrapped in all His glory and in the safety of eternity. According to divine plan put in place since eternity, Jesus chose to empty himself in order to accomplish this heaven and earth-shaking task to take into himself the sin that separates us eternally from our Father.

I have not been able to discover who wrote it, but some years ago there was a contemporary song of today's church that reminds me of the song in Philippians. It goes like this: "He was born in a stable so I could live in His palaces. Made lower than angels so I could inherit the heavens. He had nothing so I could have everything. He was forsaken by all He loved so that I would never have to be alone. He was made sin so I could know righteousness. He emptied himself so I could share in His glory."

We have little in the way of clues as to what Jesus really gave up to become one of us. We cannot know the extent of the glory that was His. We cannot know what it meant to give up his close oneness with His Father. And we cannot know what the God-head of the Trinity suffered as a Father for His only begotten son to walk in our limited flesh. Never having known such glory, we can't know all Jesus gave up. We only know that he emptied himself of all of it to be with us and for us and to die in our place.

Paul says that Christ shared the nature of God, but he didn't seek to exploit that equality with God. Jesus knew who he was. He knew His Father loved him. He knew even in the flesh he was in a right relationship with God. He had nothing to fear. One would expect, then from a purely human standpoint, that Jesus would take advantage of his unique position and get away from an involvement with this messed-up world. Jesus remained adamant and chose to suffer to redeem us. Jesus willingly laid aside his divine rank to identify with the human family.

How many fairy tales have been written about some Prince Charming, dressing like a common man, in fact sometimes as a poor man, to see if the woman he desired would honestly love him for himself, rather than for his riches and position? That is what Jesus did. He threw off his glory, emptied himself of his power and came to earth to make it easier for us to identify with Him...especially the poor and destitute among us, whom he loved and wooed as a bridegroom courts his bride. The test: Would we love him if he didn't reveal himself? How many times after a miracle did Jesus say, "Don't tell who did this."?

So, he came to us naked of all his vestments and crowns. When he arrived naked in Mary's arms, he had nothing but the swaddling clothes she wrapped him in. He had it no better than the least of us. He was raised in poverty, apprenticed to a trade of weary work, discouraged by failure, saddened by disappointment, a walker of roads, moved to tears, sufferer of pain, knowing betrayal, bearing wounds, feeling abandoned, dying a torturous and humiliating death—Jesus knew it all and to a degree greater than we can ever know. Emptying himself as he did, he had nothing but the compassion of his human family and the faith that his Father would look after him.

We are challenged by this ancient hymn of the church recorded in Philippians. We too need to do some emptying...Lenten emptying. Paul says that we are to have "the mind of Christ." To receive something of the thoughts of God there are some things that have to be emptied out of us first—self importance, arrogance, bravado, pride to name a few. Only then we can be filled with something that makes us useful. Only then will we have room for the compassion of Christ to enter our being.

The next thing that Paul gives us is this revelation...that Jesus took the form of a servant. Being a servant is not easy and who would choose it? John Alexander, in his book You and Your Money, tells how a couple of years ago he spent a month in Asia, mostly with people who had servants, and he didn't like what he saw. "I don't want to be a servant," he said. "Servants are people who drive you to restaurants, and sit in the car while you eat. Servants are people who run in from the next room to get the salt for you because it's a foot out of your reach. They wash your dirty underwear by hand. Sometimes they sleep in a closet or on the floor in the hall. The essence of being a servant, is not existing. If you're a servant, you do all sorts of jobs without anyone ever

noticing that you exist. He goes on to say, that whenever I visited a new house during my trip to Asia, I was introduced around. But a few people were left out. Eventually, I realized that they were the servants. They do not exist.

Yet, that is the role that Jesus chose for his life. On this Palm Sunday we celebrate his triumphant entrance into Jerusalem. On that occasion he was exalted, but he did not capitalize on it or use it to his own advantage. Instead that same week, he fulfilled the role of a domestic slave and washed the feet of every one of his disciples, including the one who would betray him. He said, "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve."

To ask to have the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus, along with those ancients who sang this hymn we must empty ourselves of worldly ambitions and embrace what Christ embraced. That is not the life most of us envision for ourselves. To accomplish this, we would have to give up putting anything before serving God. How do we give that much of our selves that unselfishly? It is only when we are willing to get empty of our own selfish "me" desires and bend our knee to Jesus Christ confessing that he is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. So, few are willing to do this, even if it would open us to receive the power of God.

But Paul tells us that one day there will be no choice of when to bend our knee and confess...that one day there will be no place in heaven and on earth and under the earth that the knee won't be bent. When that time comes, I don't want to be among that number that bends my knee because the glory of God is so strong, I have no other choice. I don't think that those being forced to worship Jesus will find a reward in it, for by then for it will be too late.

Let us right now start emptying ourselves of what is not Godly and let us be filled with the joy of our salvation that God can use us here and now. When you allow room for the mind of Christ to be in you, this life is not a drudgery nor the work a sacrifice, but rather something energizes you with a taste of the glory of God in Jesus Christ. Because of Christ's obedience God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name. This is the amazing name we who call ourselves "Christian" claim. The good news to be heard here is that obedience done for the glory of God may bring challenges, but in the end, it brings great glory. So don't hesitate to empty yourself of self. Making room for God's infilling means you will never be "running on empty," because Jesus was willing to empty himself for you.