

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon For Palm Sunday – April 5th, 2009

Philippians 2:5-11

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Dear Children of God,

When we lived out on the East Coast, we took a vacation to Washington, D.C. One of our stops was Arlington National Cemetery. Since the cemetery grounds are higher than most of D.C. we had a breathtaking panoramic view dominated by the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Monument, and the Capitol building. What struck me most about the view was that it was, by and large, manufactured. It was carefully designed by people to look that way. The buildings and layout of our capital are intentionally designed to take your breath away—to boast the power and the magnificence and the importance of the United States of America.

Jerusalem at the time of Jesus was much the same. For more than forty years King Herod's family had been sparing no expense in converting Jerusalem from a dusty ruin of a city into the Washington, D.C. of the region. If you go to Jerusalem even today you'll find some of its splendor still standing in spite of 2000 war-filled years. The purpose of Herod's design of Jerusalem was the same as that of Washington, D.C.—to take your breath away. To boast the power and magnificence and importance of those who ruled there.

And then, during a week when thousands were pouring into this city of splendor to celebrate the Passover, a poor man—who doesn't even own a house, much less a palace—rides through its gates not on a horse but on a donkey, sitting not on a saddle but on some donated cloaks, surrounded not by soldiers and royalty but by fishermen and commoners. He had no apparent power or magnificence or importance. And yet the Bible says many people—crowds of people—turned their attention away from the pomp of the city and threw their cloaks and palm branches down to pave the way for this average man to enter it. Shouting out before and behind him, Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!

I wonder if any onlookers wondered, Is this a joke? Imagine crowds of tourists in D.C. turning their backs on the Lincoln Memorial to praise an average man riding a bicycle. Most people would think that this was a joke -- that something wasn't right about so much praise given to someone so unpraiseworthy? But the events of Palm Sunday were no joke. Certainly nothing at all laughable. The crowds who turned their attention and praise to Jesus had every reason and right to do so. The humble servant on a donkey—although he didn't look it one bit—was greater and more worthy of praise than King Herod and King David and the United States of America and every other power on earth combined. He was (and is) the King of kings and Lord of lords. And he was coming to Jerusalem to save them. And so they were right to shout Hosanna: Hebrew for, Save us! The apostle Paul in our text from Philippians 2 explains to us what the Palm Sunday crowds apparently understood:

Theme: What Kind of King Is This?

- 1. A King who humbled himself to save us**
- 2. A King we can serve in humility**

People who study cultures and generations have used, in recent years, terms like Generation X and Generation Y and Millennial to describe what they have observed. I've also heard people refer to our present

culture as the “Look at Me” generation. Would you agree that we could call our culture today in America the “Look at Me” culture? It may be an appropriate description. For example, think about how many so-called “reality shows” have filled the airwaves the last ten years or so. Anyone who has a desire to be featured on one of those shows has to literally be saying to people, “Hey, look at me! Look at me doing this, and look at me saying this -- yes, look at me pretty much every single moment of my life!” In a somewhat different way, isn’t there also a “look at me” culture in much of the sports world? So often we see athlete after athlete interrupting the event, in which they are participating and during which they have made some nice play, by thumping his chest and raising his arms, saying, in effect, to the twenty or the twenty thousand or the twenty million people on TV who are watching, “Hey, look at me! I just made a basket, or I just scored a touchdown, or I just kept somebody else from doing what they wanted to do. Look at me, everybody, because I am really special!”

Now, obviously, it’s one thing to be a person who lives in reality and not in some make-believe world, and, obviously, it’s one thing to enjoy athletic competition and to be successful at it and to show emotions while doing so. But crossing the line to being too proud or a show-off or putting other people down just makes somewhat arrogant and small, because it doesn’t show at all the kind of humility that is the good and decent thing to do.

Would you say Jesus was a “Look at me” person? In a way, I guess we could say he was. He did say believe in me and come to me and pray to me. But the reason he did so was because he wanted us so much to know how much we can depend on him for life in heaven and for comfort on earth. However, did Jesus ever draw attention to himself in an arrogant or a show-off way? Not at all. After all, when he lived on earth, if you didn’t know anything else about him, wouldn’t you have said he was just an ordinary guy – a common, every day man? When you looked at Jesus growing up in Nazareth or walking around Galilee or suffering and dying in Jerusalem, would you have automatically said, “That man must be the Son of God?”

Palm Sunday is the day we celebrate the humble entry of Jesus into the city of his death on the back of a lowly pack animal. That makes this day a good day to think about what the humility of Jesus means to us, as we go about our every day life. As we today begin Holy Week, let’s listen to these words from the apostle Paul and see what it means that Jesus was not in any way a person who said, **“Look at me!”**

Jesus is the second person of the Trinity, God himself. He’s been God forever and ever and will continue to be God forever and ever. But about 2000 years ago Jesus also became a man—we celebrate that at Christmas. So what was Jesus before then? Was he still God? He was God through and through. But he has also a human—through and through. 100% both. Why? Why would Jesus—why would God, the most glorious and most powerful ruler of all that exists—want to become a human? The apostle Paul tells us. So that as a human he could take off the power and glory that belonged to him as God and set it aside.

Why? Why wouldn’t Jesus want the power and glory of God? The apostle Paul tells us. So that he could humble himself so much that he could rightfully be called nothing. So that, stripped of anything even reminiscent of majesty he could die the worst of deaths—on a cross. Something outside of Jesus was more important to him than the equality with God he possessed as God: so he set aside what belonged to him as God, so he became a servant, all so that he could suffer hell and die.

Can you put yourself in Jesus’ shoes as God in heaven? What would it take for you to do what he did? To give up your power and majesty and splendor and glory and honor and strength all so that you could become nothing and die? To give up your place in heaven so that you could suffer hell? What would it take for you to do that? I wouldn’t do that, not for anything in the universe. If I were God, I wouldn’t need to. I would already have everything in the universe.

I can’t put myself in Jesus’ shoes as God in heaven and understand why he would give up a spiritual crown of glory for a thorny crown of shame, the highest honor in the universe for the greatest disgrace in the universe, the splendor of heaven for the suffering of hell. Because my attitude is so much different. I’m selfish. I, according to my sinful flesh, sinfully put myself first. I watch my own back. I always look to see how I can help myself. Oh, I often help others, but even then at least a tiny part of it is motivated by what’s in it for me—even if it’s nothing but a passing feeling of satisfaction that comes with doing something I consider good. If I’m completely honest with myself, I have to admit the most important person in my life

isn't any member of my family, isn't my fiancée, isn't any of you, isn't even God. I am the most important person to me. Even though God says, Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, even though Jesus said the greatest commandments are to put God first and your fellow man second; I don't. That isn't my attitude. And—even without the ability to look into your heart and see your attitude—I know it's not yours either. Because God says you have the same sinful nature I do. And God says that sinful attitude that often but not always displays itself in sinful actions earns us physical and eternal death.

Jesus, with a far different attitude from ours, went into action to change that. Motivated only by his holy attitude that put us first, with absolutely nothing in it for him, he stepped down into a position even lower than us and died a shameful death we deserved to die and suffered an eternity's worth of hell we had coming to us for our selfish, sinful attitudes to make us right with God. To free us from condemnation and give us salvation. Jesus humbled himself and became obedient to death on a cross so that he could take what we deserve, so that he could give us what he deserved. The greatest display of selflessness the world has ever seen.

We're in Holy Week. Today we see the creator and ruler of the universe receive a smidgeon of the praise he deserves as God as he rides into Jerusalem on a donkey. But the praise is going to quickly fade. Jesus isn't entering Jerusalem to flex his muscles in any way. He's entering Jerusalem to be betrayed, to be unjustly tried, to be mocked, to be crucified, to suffer the torments of hell, and to die. He's entering Jerusalem not to serve himself, but to serve us and to save us. That's why we joined the Palm Sunday crowds in the hymn before the sermon, Ride on! Ride on in majesty! In lowly pomp ride on to die. We cry out too as we remember his ride into Jerusalem, Hosanna! Save us! And we know that's what his suffering and death did. It saved us.

When you come to the Tenebrae service at 7:00 on Good Friday evening, you're going to find this room dark by the end of the service as we meditate on the death of the author of life. A dark day indeed, when the Son of God died for the sins of the world. When you return on Easter Sunday morning, the lights will be on, white lilies and other flowers in bloom on the altar, sunlight beaming through the windows. The setting will be as opposite of Good Friday as we can make it, because at Easter Jesus' humiliation ended and his exaltation began. **“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”**

Still true man but no longer nothing, on Easter Sunday God restored his Son to the position he occupied before. The greatest power, the highest name, the loudest praise again belong to him who made himself nothing to save us. God's plan to save us brought Jesus from exaltation to humiliation and back to exaltation. Take comfort in that. Take comfort in that when you struggle against your sinful nature and its selfish attitude. Your Savior Jesus who humbled himself and died to take away those sins now lives and rules everything to help you fight against them and overcome them. Take comfort in that when you feel overwhelmed by the troubles of this sinful world. Your Savior Jesus who humbled himself to face those same troubles knows what you're going through and now lives and rules to carry you through and bless you in the process. Take comfort in that when what you see with your eyes makes it seem like evil has triumphed over good, like Satan has won and God has lost.

Your Savior Jesus who humbled himself to defeat both Satan and every evil is now ruling in the highest place—and the day is coming when every knee of every person, whether believer or unbeliever, whether angel or demon, whether willingly or unwillingly, whether in joy or in fear, will bow to Jesus and every tongue will confess that he is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Take comfort that on that day you will join your Savior King in exaltation and glory and power and honor and strength that will never end. The breathtaking views of Herod's Jerusalem or Washington, D.C. won't compare to the glory of the city in which you will live. The cheers of Palm Sunday won't compare to the praise we will give our Savior King forever and ever. Amen.