

March 24, 2024, Palm Sunday

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Biblical scholars John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg did a masterful job of contrasting two different processions into Jerusalem on a spring day in 30 AD. This description sheds light onto the meaning of Palm Sunday for us today. One is the procession of Pontius Pilate, a powerful Roman governor, leading an imperial cavalry and soldiers. Imagine: horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, drums, swirling of dust. The other parade is a peasant procession, led by Jesus, riding a young colt and cheered by his followers, waving branches and proclaiming the One coming in the name of the Lord. These two processions frame the conflict: human power that comes from force and domination, and the alternative vision, of peace: God's dream for us--the kin-dom, the kingdom of God that banishes war and makes us one.

This alternative vision is also captured in the reading from Philippians 2. It is based on an ancient song of praise, the earliest Christian hymn we know of:

“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 a thing to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, 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. . .”

Kenosis. That is Greek, the word we translate “emptied.” How do you feel about “empty?”

I remember being a new driver and a freshman in college I was driving a friend's car (a 1972 Ford Thunderbird). I can't remember where I was coming from, but it was near midnight; I didn't have much money in my pocket and had no credit card. The gas tank was running low, but I reasoned that I wasn't driving too far and thought I'd have no problem. But, as I was climbing a tall hill, the car sputtered to a stop. I was all alone on a deserted road, far from a phone. I managed to pull mostly off the road. I hiked to a phone and my friend came with a gas can. He was pretty upset with me. When I think of “empty,” I remember the feelings that resulted from the empty gas tank: fear, dread, and guilt.

We mistrust emptiness, don't we? Fill the silence with chatter. Fill closets, files, drawers, and garages with stuff. Fill our minds with worries, obsessions, complaints, things we need to control. Generally, we don't like “empty.”

This hymn that the Paul included in his letter to the Philippians sings of a God who, from love, empties out Divine power to be one of us. This loving God becomes like us, and who knows loss, suffering, and death. This is a God who understands us, and our lived, human experiences.

As we begin the walk through Holy Week—through the goodbyes at Jesus' final meal with his friends, through betrayal, arrest, humiliation, suffering—and the worst ways that people can treat one another—take heart in this: God is with us every step of the way.

When Paul wrote this letter, he was in prison because his teaching was deemed a threat to the status quo of the Roman Empire. Paul didn't know whether he'd be released or sentenced to death. Paul wrote to the leaders in the church at Philippi, realizing that they may need to forge ahead without him. He urged them to be unified. To be emptied of anything that would set them apart from one another. Priest Matthew Fox notes that "A truly emptied person is so vulnerable to beauty and truth, to justice and compassion, that she or he becomes a truly hollow and hallowed channel for divine grace." Paul's message, and the way of Jesus, is that we are to be empty of all that sets us apart from one another.

What separates us from one another? What separates us from God? We embrace healthy humility when we empty ourselves from all the separates us: fear, self-satisfaction in our own achievements, and privilege. Insecurity.

True humility, in the scriptural sense, is about care for the other. In the New Testament context, the plea to "regard others as better than yourself" is not about self-esteem, but about our behavior. Self-esteem is a modern concept. The humility of Jesus, has to do with concrete, everyday lives. It's about who has access to what they need and who doesn't. And how we care for others.

I know that many here are marvelous hosts. Think about how as a host you would go out of your way to serve guests, to put their needs above your own. Paul's admonition to "regard others as better than yourself" was not aimed at the poor, the women, the slaves, because they were expected to be humble. No, his words were aimed at the privileged ones.

Have you noticed that the more comfortable we are, the more insulated from suffering, the more isolated and judgmental and disillusioned we tend to be? Often, it is our experiences of suffering, and loss, that grows our compassion for others. When we lose our job, our partner; when we mourn dear loved ones—these are manifestations of the loss that permeate our life together in these mortal bodies, on this fragile and beautiful emerald and cobalt-blue planet.

What have you lost? Kenosis. Emptying. It is when the heart is broken that compassion can begin to flow through it. Ecologist Joanna Macy said, about the world, our planet, and the states of war: "We are in grief, together."

Chapter 2 of Philippians begins this way: "If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." (Philippians 2:1-2)

None of us can thrive while any of us are struggling to survive. Our unity is in a generous care for others. It strikes me that this hymn from Philippians is an anthem appropriate for St. Andrew, who has such an identity in love of and care for the planet. We are literally, gradually,

emptying ourselves of consuming that which hurts the planet, and we aim to pull together to save it.

Are there other things we need to be emptied of, in order to make space in our hearts and lives for God's love to grow deeper? And how do we do that? Well, we invite you to bring that question, to walk the Labyrinth here on Saturday.

A labyrinth is NOT a maze. A maze has many paths, and you can get lost. But the labyrinth has one way through to the heart of it. Christians have walked the labyrinth for centuries as a spiritual practice. As you enter the labyrinth, you are invited to let go, to be quiet and open to God. It's about emptying and shedding. . . as you walk and make your way to the inevitable center.

At the center, emptied, there is space, and quiet. We are opened to what blessing the Spirit has to give: peace, a creative idea, an inner silence. . . Then, we return on the same path, out of the labyrinth, the path of transformation and unity.

On this Palm Sunday, we walk with Jesus, who shows us that the greatest power is in self-giving, trusting in God's enduring love and presence. And as we begin the journey through Holy week, the fellowship of Maundy Thursday and the betrayal and suffering of good Friday, may we remember that we walk the valley of the shadow of death, and God with us.