

**Giving It All Away**  
**Isaiah 50: 4-9a; Philippians 2:5-11**  
**March 24, 2013 (Palm Sunday)**  
**Rev. Dr. Charles Parker**

## **I Introduction**

We enter into this high and holy season together this week. I'm, of course, referring to March Madness. And many of you know that I am a Buckeye by marriage, and so, Friday night we were in front of the television for the obligatory rout of whatever small team they were playing at the beginning of the tournament. And there was this moment in this game when the Ohio State team member shoved a pass to one of his colleagues who was flying mid air and who caught the ball and this incredibly dramatic single-handed slam dunk just brought the audience to its feet. And there's something very soul-nurturing about that, right? Maybe it's for those of us who have a Y chromosome, I don't know, but there is something inside of me that says, you know, wow! To do something of that power and with that finesse and beauty in front of a national audience, it's like, okay, now I could die happy -- which segues to our sermon series which is actually, of course, on happiness and what does happiness look like for us.

As we have discussed, happiness is, of course, an unusual topic for the penitential season of Lent. But we have been taking our cue from John Wesley who told us that we are created to be happy in God. And so, over the last several weeks, we have been exploring, what does that mean and what does that look like, and discovering, hopefully, that sometimes where we look for happiness is a little misguided,

and that we find true happiness, lasting happiness, in places that sometimes are a little unexpected and counterintuitive. We've also been linking that to our evening series of contemplative communion services and reflecting on the process of finding happiness not in the stuff that is happening around us or the stuff that we have, but as we journey inside and find that place where we encounter the divine.

In a very powerful way, Palm Sunday represents the penultimate piece of that journey as we, in very explicit and dramatic ways, watch Jesus turn away from the First Century equivalent of a slam dunk on national television to walk the way of the cross. And we're going to reflect this morning on this journey of humility and self-emptying that our scriptures talk about.

## **II. Singing the Lord's Song**

Our scripture lessons, both from Isaiah and this wonderful Letter to the Philippians, are songs. They were composed as songs when they were written. And this Isaiah passage is from that same section of the book of Isaiah that we talked about last week, this piece that we call Second Isaiah. Isaiah is a very large book, one of the largest in the entire Bible, and most of it was written by an Eighth Century prophet in Israel. This second portion is attributed to someone whose actual name we don't know, but who saw connections with this initial prophet and we call him Second Isaiah. He wrote during the time of the Babylonian captivity when the homeland of the Hebrew people had been conquered by the Babylonians when Jerusalem had been destroyed and the temple burned, so that their whole political and religious life is upended. And this prophet gives them a word of hope in this period of utter desolation.

In this particular passage -- this is the third of what we call the Servant songs, and we hear a lot of this language in Handel's *Messiah* because Handel draws on this very heavily -- but Isaiah, in these passages, encourages the Israelites to re-look at where they are. And instead of looking at it as a place of punishment and desolation, Isaiah wants the people of Israel to understand that maybe what is happening to them is actually something that God is using to do a new thing. And he used that very phrase in last week's passage. But in this week's passage, he says he's speaking on behalf of the servant, and the servant might be him, the servant actually might be the people of Israel, but it also, of course, powerfully echoes Jesus' story this week. The servant explicitly chooses to walk into a place of suffering and humiliation with the understanding that somehow as he does that, God's will starts to get worked out in the context of the community. He doesn't understand why exactly, but he understands because he's gone to that silent place where he can listen to God -- that's our contemplative space -- and he understands God calling him to choose this path of humiliation and suffering so that God, through that process, can do something new and life-giving in the world.

Now, this is an important transition because the people understood their suffering to be something imposed on them, and on some level, it was. What Isaiah is offering is a way to re-think where they are and to move to a place where they can choose to have this suffering be a tool of God's redemption. It's not inflicted on them anymore. They can embrace it knowing that God is going to use it to do something new and dramatic in the life of the world. This is not dissimilar from Mahatma Gandhi's call to non-violent resistance. Non-violence for Gandhi was not passively being beat up on. It is choosing

explicitly to be and place oneself in the place of suffering, knowing that that suffering is going to be redemptive and transformative for the world around you. And this is what Holy Week is about.

Jesus is not crucified because, oops, he slipped up and got caught, right? Jesus goes into Jerusalem knowing what the end of the story is going to be, knowing that the cross is in front of him and choosing to walk that way, knowing that somehow that self-emptying becomes transformative for the life of the world. Jesus has a deep sense of the irony of this day as he rides through the streets and everyone is singing hosannas, and the children are waving palm branches and all of the trappings of kingship are laid out before him, and knowing that in a very, very short time, all of that is going to shift, and he walks the way that leads to the cross, even on this day.

Which is what this wonderful hymn from Philippians is about. We've been singing hymns since our very beginning. And interestingly, Pliny the Younger, the Roman governor of Bithynia-Pontus, wrote to the Emperor Trajan right about the time that the Gospel of John was being written, trying to explain to Trajan what these strange Christian people were about, and said one of the things that they do is they sing hymns to this Christ character as if he were God.

This hymn from Philippians is one of the very earliest pieces of our New Testament witness. It is a hymn that most scholars believe was written and sung much earlier than even Paul uses it. The assumption was that it was sung in Philippi so that when Paul puts it into this letter, he is helping them understand the gospel through their own words. So, he takes this hymn that the people in Philippi have been singing and maybe even have written to help them understand what the gospel message is about at

its very core. He may have tinkered with it also, scholars think, to maybe give it a little bit of a twist that wasn't on the original hymn. It's poetry, but it's not Greek poetry -- and, of course, it's written in Greek, but it's got echoes of Hebrew poetic structure. Scholars think that it may have been written in Aramaic or Hebrew that preceded this Letter of Paul. But then, Paul talks about this downward spiral of Jesus' journey, of moving from this place where he is pre-existent, this is before his physical body, his physical presence on earth where he is pre-existent with the Father and the Spirit. This is one of our earliest echoes of Trinitarian theology and moves from that place of utter power into this world, and as if that were not enough, continues the journey to experience death, and Paul notes, even death on a cross.

Now, remember that we talked about this Letter to the Philippians last week and talked about the fact that Philippi was a colony that was very heavily populated by retired Roman military folks. They all had this deeply keen sense of crucifixion as being the most degrading, humiliating kind of punishment that they had ever experienced. That's why the Romans did crucifixion, not just to kill somebody, but to kill them in a deeply humiliating and painful and long-lasting way. So that when Paul says, even death on a cross, he knows how that's going to echo in their ears. That this is how far Jesus is willing to come -- from being pre-existent and divine to experiencing human life, and then choosing to experience the most humiliating death that they could imagine. Paul's language here is very explicit that Jesus chooses this. In a lot of Paul's other letters, Paul talks about God sacrificing His only son on the cross, as if it's God's action.

In this passage, he makes very, very clear that Jesus chooses this, very much in that suffering servant way of Isaiah, knowing that somehow through this process God's

redemptive power gets released into the world. The first two verbs of this hymn have Jesus as a subject -- Jesus choosing to empty himself and experience death on the cross. The last two verbs of the hymn have God as the subject, because then God takes Christ, takes a sacrifice of Christ, transforms our reality, and then lifts Christ back up to the place where He is truly exalted above every name.

### **III. Downward Mobility**

This is a deeply theological passage, but for Paul also, it's a deeply practical passage, because what Paul tells us is that then becomes the model for how we live and live our lives most richly and fully, that completely counter to any normal understanding of how we would seek happiness, how we would seek fulfillment, that the model that Christ has laid out for us is not seeking the glory moments, the walking, the-riding-the-colt-down-the-street-with-hosanna moments, the-nationally-televised-slam-dunk moments, but intentionally seeking those places where we can empty ourselves of our own ego, of our own agenda, and get used by God in some ways that may seem profoundly difficult and yet knowing that as we listen to where God calls us, God uses that sacrifice to transform our lives and to transform the world.

In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis writes, "Now, the Christian belief is that if we somehow share the humility and suffering of Christ, we shall also share in His conquest of death and find new life after we have died, and in that become perfect, and," Lewis says, "perfectly happy." This means something much more than our trying to follow Christ's teaching. People often ask, what is the next step in human evolution?

But in the Christian view, that has happened already. In Christ, a new kind of person has appeared and a new kind of life which began in Him and is to be put into us.

So, the invitation in this is where in the places in our lives do we find ourselves drawn to the limelight, drawn to power, drawn to glory, where we have the opportunity to intentionally step away from that, to humble ourselves. That's an unattractive word for us, right? I will tell you, I had a hard time even deciding to preach on it today. Don't laugh too hard. Because this is not normal for us, right? This is not natural. It doesn't feel natural for us, to let go of the place where we get positive feedback and the glory and the affirmation to step away from that and choose to walk a path of humility, even to the point of suffering. Trusting that somehow in that process, God's will gets done.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

I thought it was a very hopeful sign when our colleagues in the Catholic Church chose as their leader a man who seems to have lived with a lot of intentionality around this issue, and eschewing a lot of the trappings of his high office, to live a life of modesty and connection with people. Even in the little things that he did like not standing on the box as he delivered his first address to give himself more elevation is a powerful statement and a wonderful witness, I think.

I will also just in closing note that this week we lost a man of great humility and servanthood in the death of Gordon Cosby. He founded the Church of the Saviour and died this week at age 95. He lived a life that I think more than any pastor in the city has shaped the life of our city and did so not by grandstanding and preaching powerful sermons in the limelight but by in very gentle, very unassuming ways shaping

communities that have transformed the life of our city. Reverend Cosby, though he had a national following, was very intentional about not building a great, huge church, but as the community grew in numbers and reach, it always subdivided so that the Church of the Saviour communities are now all over the city; small, deeply committed, passionate involved groups of people. That's an amazing witness to the power of humility and the gift of becoming a channel of God's grace to the world.

Amen.