

Dear God, we give thanks for this day of triumph and tragedy, when glory and sorrow are mixed, when courage and fear are met together. Help us to understand that just as you entered the city of hope and trial, so we are called to take up our work in an imperfect world, not waiting for the kingdom of righteousness but working for it, in confidence that you are always with us. Amen.

This morning, (as we gather and give thanks for so much but especially for the fact that snow is not pelting the backs of our necks) we heard part of that beautiful passage that Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians. It is thought to be from an even earlier hymn. “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, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness... Therefore God highly exalted him and gave him the name above every name...” The name that is above every name. That only seems right and proper for the Son of God. Think of all the pomp and glory we give kings and presidents and prime ministers – stretch limos, Air Force One jets, parades, royal yachts, military bands – the works. There’s even that special sort of royal hand wave that seems to graciously acknowledge our cheers and praise without losing the dignity of the occasion. So it only seems appropriate that God should get some honors too.

Was Jesus highly exalted because he ruled his subjects so well? Because he increased the Gross National Product by 5% or fought to keep the unemployment rate below 4%? Jesus didn’t do any of those things. The glory Jesus received was not due to the laws he signed or the wars he won here on earth. It was due to the very opposite reason. Jesus chose to be a servant. Right from the beginning of his ministry he was offered “all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor” (Mk 4:8) And he turned it down. He did not know the movers and shakers of 1st c Palestine. He sought out the loan sharks, the bag ladies, and the pedophiles.

Why did he do these things? Was he a masochist?
Did he suffer from low self esteem?
Why would someone who could do anything
choose to do such little things in the eyes of the world?
Why would someone who could probably have financed
the equivalent of all kinds of retreat centers and fleets of limousines
with the offerings of his adoring followers
choose a life of poverty and homelessness?
Because Jesus, as Paul says, took the form of a slave.
Paul talks about forms and shapes in this passage –
Jesus in the form of God, Jesus taking the form of a slave,
Jesus being found in human form.
Those forms carry echoes from 400 years earlier,
when Plato wrote of the eternal forms that exist in eternity
and the not-so-eternal forms that exist in this world.
Jesus carried within him the eternal form of God
but he lived as a human being.
So this passage speaks of eternal and transitory forms
but more importantly it speaks of the form,
the shape of Jesus' life. And what was that shape?
Was the shape of Jesus' career an arrow pointing upwards?
Did he move up the ladder of success, acquiring more titles,
more responsibility, more things?
Did he begin with the idea that he was equal to God
and move on from there?
The trajectory, the shape of Jesus' life was not the upward movement
that so many of us are encouraged to seek, that so many of us do seek.
Jesus didn't move into a 5,000 sq. ft. house
with an entertainment center and an elaborate Weber grille.
He didn't move up the corporate ladder, collecting stock options
and a generous pension plan along the way.
He did not grasp equality with God.
He chose the form of a servant.
The most unimpressive, least respected person in any society.
He became what would be the lowest caste in India,
the street sweeper in China, the garbage collector in the U.S.
He became the kind of person we don't even notice –
the background noise –
the pitiful worker who makes as much in a day
as most of us make in an hour.
He didn't become this kind of person due to bad luck or injustice

or some sort of handicap.

He chose what we could call a downwardly mobile way of life.
So downwardly mobile that it ended in the complete humiliation
of crucifixion, a punishment reserved for criminals
and others of equally low status.

He was an embarrassment to his family,
a troublemaker to the Roman authorities,
and the best friend to tax collectors and prostitutes.

And so this servant, this apparent criminal,
ended his life in the most shameful way possible – death on a cross.

What does this mean for us? What is the shape of our lives?

Society tells us that the shape of our lives should be up and out and on – up the
corporate ladder, out to the suburbs,
and on to the nicest country club.

If we aren't a supervisor by the time we're 30
and making at least at least 6 figures,
we are to be pitied and our sanity or our competence questioned.

We are pushed by so many things to shape our careers upwards.

It's not just advertising but our own egos too that strive for titles
and bigger paychecks and the importance of being needed 24/7.

It's almost as if we were balloons
and society is encouraging us to get bigger and bigger
but the only thing inside us is a lot of air.

Jesus did what he did because having emptied himself as Paul says,
he became filled with the truth and power of God
and that became his life's work. That became his message.

He emptied himself.

We have gotten to know something about emptiness over the past year – so many
kinds of emptiness –

empty grocery shelves, empty hugs, empty streets.

The pictures of Times Square devoid of people
send shivers down our spines.

The emptiness makes us feel hollow, disoriented.

It's not a pleasant feeling.

Maybe we've had too much emptiness recently
but this day, Palm Sunday, this week, Holy Week,
are all about losing our lives so that we can save them,
becoming empty and open so that we can make room for God.

This Holy Week is all about letting go
of the cramped self-interest of our egos,
and awakening to the spaciousness of God's vision for the world.

We are invited to strip away the nonessentials to make room for the eternal – all that is beautiful and true and whole.

Churches, synagogues, mosques, communities of faith are some of the few places left where the message is not bigger and showier but smaller, emptier.

It's not just Paul but the other writers of the Bible too, that although separated by many hundreds of years, all say the same thing. They weren't crabby, anti-social protesters or closet communists.

They were really clear-headed prophets, lit with the fire of truth and wanting so much that all of us who read their letters and books and gospels would believe that same truth.

“God is at work in us, enabling us to will and to work for God's good pleasure.”

That is one of the most exciting statements.

Without actually turning us into robots, God has done everything possible to enable us to do God's good work here on earth.

Sending angels, prophets, apostles, martyrs, and most especially Jesus to tell us, to show us the true shape of our lives.

We were not created to be buried under the mound of things we have accomplished and irresistible bargains we have accumulated.

We were created to be as empty as the tomb on Easter morning, ready to make room for God and to become all that God hopes we will become.

“(God's) blessing keeps nothing for itself.

You can find it by following the path of what it has let go of, what it learned it can live without...

So come and sit in this place made holy by its hollows.

You think you have too much to do, too little time, too great a weight of responsibility that no one but you can carry.

Lay it down, just for a moment...

Lift up your voice and let it ring against these spacious walls...

Do this until you can feel the hollow in your heart,

Where something is letting go, where something is making way.” Amen.

(Blessing that Becomes Empty as it Goes, Jan Richardson)