

The Form of God

Gene McAfee
Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio

Palm Sunday
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Isaiah 50:4-9a; Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 21:1-11

“Let this 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.”
-- Philippians 2:5-6

For the first time in at least a decade, we’re observing Palm Sunday in this church, and not Palm-Passion Sunday.

Those of you familiar with how we do things here will recall that it has been our custom in previous years to combine two services into one on this last Sunday before Easter – the liturgy of the palms and the liturgy of the passion. The service would open, as this morning’s service did, with a procession and distribution of greenery by the children and then, after the younger children had gone to childcare, a series of readers would lead us in a reading the passion narrative, that series of events from the last week of Jesus’s historical life on earth: the Last Supper, Judas’s betrayal, the arrest under cover of darkness, the sham trial, the cowering disciples, the blood-thirsty crowd crying, “Crucify him!” and the eventual and almost inevitable granting of that horrid wish by Pontius Pilate.

All of this and even more make up what the church has, for many centuries, called the passion of Jesus Christ, and in this church we rolled as much of that story as we could, along with the gospel reading from today, the account of Jesus’s staged entry into Jerusalem, into one Palm-Passion Sunday service, and it made for a long and peculiar time of worship.

In the space of just a few minutes, the mood of the service whiplashed from the upbeat “Blessed is he!” that we sang at the beginning to the grim and mortifying account of the best being done in by the worst as Jesus is tried and executed.

And now that we’re free of it, at least temporarily, I can confess that Palm-Passion Sunday was a service I never particularly cared for, even though I’m the one who’s been forcing it upon you for the past ten years.

And the reason I and thousands of other pastors laid this ungainly liturgical burden on all our shoulders is so that the relatively many of you in church this morning will hear parts of the story you will not hear if you’re not back in church with the relatively few on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. We pastors bowed to the inevitable some decades ago and acknowledged that most of our folks come to church weekly, not daily, so that if we wanted them to hear the true story of Holy Week, and not just its sunnier moments of Palm Sunday and Easter, we needed to cram as many of the gloomy bits as possible into today. And so we did. That’s where Palm-Passion Sunday came from.

Until this Sunday in this church; and the reason I’ve been able to unpack Palm Sunday for you is because of the two services we will be having here on Good Friday. In those services we’ll read more of the story of Holy Week, and I encourage all of you to make an exception to your usual weekly worship habit and return here, either for Maundy

Thursday or Good Friday or both.

And I encourage you to do so because the rest of that story matters; it matters a very great deal. Easter means nothing without Good Friday, and not Good Friday only, but the entire story of Jesus's life and teachings and ministry, which we will hear more of and reflect more on than we've been able to do at the ecumenical Good Friday service we've shared with our Hillcrest siblings for the past several years. I have mixed feelings about the loss of that service – one of the few times when we Christians actually behave as though we are, in fact, one body – but as we say over the backyard fence, when God closes one door, God opens another, and the door that I invite all of you through are the noon reading of the passion on Good Friday and the 7 p.m. vespers that day, which will be a contemplative service of silence, readings, and prayers.

Those services, like this one, are based on the shape of Jesus's life, and they give shape not only to Holy Week, but also to every week in the Christian calendar. And today, as you heard the choir sing earlier, is when he rode into Jerusalem.

We know the script and we know the props: the crowds shouting "Hosanna!" as Jesus rides by on his first-century version of a pope-mobile. Does Jesus wave back at the crowds waving their branches? We don't know. Are the crowds smiling? Hard to say, but given that the word "hosanna" means "Please save us" and not "Huzzah!" I'm inclined not to imagine smiling faces among those pleading for Jesus to save them. People desperately in need of help tend not to be wearing their happy face.

The people shouting hosanna were ordinary Jewish people asking for help. They were suffering under Roman occupation, taxed and worked nearly to death to support their imperial masters. They're not thriving, they're struggling, as a great many of the world's people have across the centuries. The people asking Jesus for help are not the haves; they're the have-nots. And part of what they feel they do not have is leadership, either from the government officials imposed by the Romans or from their religious leaders who claim to represent a God of justice as well as peace. To these people, the people lining Jesus's route into the holy city, the priests and the scribes seem to be more like collaborators than leaders.

And so these folks are looking to Jesus to save them from the grinding, inescapable poverty that marks their daily lives; from the invisibility that comes from being poor; and from the powerlessness that comes from being marginalized and abandoned by those entrusted with power. Save us, Jesus, Son of David, from all of this and a great deal more.

But the Son of David, as our text from Philippians says, comes to these pleading, suffering people in the form of God, and that form came not with the power that the people expected, but rather with the power they needed. Jesus, the Son of David and Son of God rode into Jerusalem not on the back of speed and might, with flashing armor and banner and spear, but rather on the back of plodding, patient servitude in obedience to a sacred call. And it was by his obedience to that call, and not the siren call for violent overthrow or revenge, that Jesus saved those people and saves all.

"Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Whenever I drive east on Wilson Mills Road, I notice the yard sign of one of our neighboring churches, which proclaims, with an exclamation point, that Jesus is Lord.

I don't doubt that he is, but I do doubt whether most people zooming by that declaration have any sense of what it means for Jesus and not someone or something else to be Lord, not just of us individual Christians, but also of us as a so-called Christian

nation.

The late Fred Phelps had a pretty clear notion of what the lordship of Jesus looked like, and he and the members of his Westboro Baptist Church took that message across the country, picketing the funerals of veterans and others with signs saying, "God Hates Fags," "You're Going to Hell," and "God Is Your Enemy." Fred Phelps believed he was preaching the gospel under the lordship of Jesus Christ, and Fred Phelps was as wrong about that as anyone can be. But I often wonder if we understand the lordship of Jesus Christ much better than Fred did.

Last Wednesday evening, this question arose in my mind as our Lenten study group heard from Betty St. John about her daughter-in-law's uncle, who had been a little Jewish boy in Germany when the Nazis came to power. The child was smuggled out of Germany and into the home of a Roman Catholic family in Belgium, who risked their lives to raise him until after the war and he could emigrate as a young man to Chicago.

All of us in the room on Wednesday evening, who've been studying the life and work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer this Lent, knew of the ordinary women and men who risked their lives to save Jewish people, especially Jewish children, from the horrors of the Holocaust. As we watched newsreel footage of the displays of Nazi power – the torch-lit processions, the mass rallies, the impassioned rhetoric of Hitler and Goebbels and the other propagandists promising a false salvation to the German people – all of us were also aware of the quiet, frightened heroes in places like Belgium and France and England who actually were engaged in the work of salvation. They were saving not only the Jewish victims of Germany's collective pathology, but by their non-violent resistance to the Final Solution, they were showing all of us the path out of the cycle of violence.

Many resisters perished, of course, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of them. Historians disagree about Bonhoeffer's exact role in the plot to assassinate Hitler, but what there is no disagreement about is that Dietrich Bonhoeffer lives his life in radical obedience to the lordship of Jesus Christ. We have raised him to heroic status, and some of us even call him a martyr, but for Bonhoeffer himself, he was simply trying to be a Christian, as obedient to his Lord as Jesus had been to his. Bonhoeffer realized, as those righteous Gentiles who risked their lives to save Jewish people realized, that the life and teachings of Jesus are not to be admired or venerated or even adored; rather, they're simply to be obeyed. And in that simple obedience is simple Christianity, perfect freedom, and eternal life.

Friends, the form of God the Messiah took is no more recognizable to us than it was to the Jerusalem crowds. We see salvation in strength, security, and control, exercised by force when persuasion fails. In the pantheon of the gods we modern western people worship, independence, autonomy, and success reign supreme. Humility, gentleness, vulnerability – those forms of God we recognize on Palm Sunday, greet as they pass by, and keep safely and securely inside these four walls.

When Edmund Muskie wept defending his wife against newspaper attacks in 1972, we Christian voters despised his weakness and elected George McGovern instead to run unsuccessfully against Richard Nixon. We American Christians know the form of God to which we'll give our allegiance, and it had better not shed a tear.

But history's judgment is finer than ours, and God's will is sovereign. The mighty empires in which we have for so long placed our trust – the Egyptian, the Babylonian, the Assyrian, the Greek, the Persian, the Roman, the British, and now our own – they have risen in their splendor and fallen in their might. In our mercantile age, we let our multinational corporations do our conquering for us, and we pacify our consciences by saying how much better life is now that even poor people have smart phones.

But the form of God who rode into Jerusalem so many years ago conquers neither

by armies nor by corporations nor by keeping his head head down and living a quiet, pious life. Jesus was proved to be the highly-exalted Christ because he gave his life for many and still gives new life to those willing to make his life their own.

I want to close by returning to those dark days of the Luftwaffe, the Blitzkrieg, and the death camps. In July 1941, three prisoners escaped from Auschwitz. To deter other escape attempts, the camp Kommandant ordered that ten prisoners be chosen at random and locked in a cell to starve to death. When one of those prisoners, Franciszek Gajowniczek, cried out that he had a wife and children, another prisoner, who had not been condemned, stepped forward and took his place. That prisoner, a Franciscan priest named Maximilian Kolbe, perished with the other nine men over the three-week course of their dehydration and starvation. On the tenth of October, 1982, Pope John Paul II declared him a saint.

We low-church Protestants aren't quite sure what to do with saints, but the very worst thing we can do with them is to put them on a pedestal, safely out of our reach, and make them lovingly ornamental to our lives. Perhaps, in our modern world, where everything has to be explained at the level of a sixth-grader, we need to be reminded of the words of Lesbia Scott's hymn for children, which says, among other things,

They lived not only in ages past,
there are hundreds of thousands still.
The world is filled with living saints
who choose to do God's will.

That's all Maximilian Kolbe, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero, Jean Donovan, Dorothy Kazel, Maura Clarke, Ita Ford, Martin Luther King, and so many others were: simple Christians trying to follow Jesus and thereby to do God's will.

"Therefore, God has also highly exalted him and given 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."