

Sermon 3-29-26
Pastor Ray Lorthioir
Trinity Lutheran Church
W. Hempstead, NY

Based on the Second Lesson for Palm Sunday, Philippians 2:5-11.

Fulfilling The Life Script

Last year during Lent we took a long look at what is this morning's second lesson, Philippians 2:5-11. These verses are an ancient hymn that Paul incorporated into his letter to the church at Philippi. We have no idea who wrote its words. But, it's an incredibly sophisticated statement about Jesus of Nazareth that incorporates the full scope of salvation history. Yet, all this sophistication is poured into easily memorized phrases, much like one of the creeds.

The exhortation into which Paul incorporated the hymn has to do with Christian behavior. We read in Philippians 2:1-4, "1 So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, 2 complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

Do you realize how difficult it is for any two people to be of one mind about anything? Yet, the apostle exhorted the whole church to be of one mind, one heart and concerned for each other. On what basis could the apostle say this? We find out in Philippians 2:5-11, "5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

What does verse 5 say? There is a mind greater than all of us. He is God. Yet, He's also one of us. He is Jesus. And if we are joined to Jesus in the mystical union of the believer with Messiah — if we are in Christ — Messiah's mind is ours. His ways are our ways. That's how Paul says the impossible can happen in Christ's Church. Therefore, the statement made in verse 5 — that the mind of Christ is ours — that statement has to be believed by faith. And contrary to all the stuff this world throws at us to contradict such a powerful promise, the church can be of one mind and one heart when its people have faith in a word like that and refuse Satan's nonsense.

Now, what does Paul exhort the church to be of one heart and mind about? Jesus, of course. And that's why Paul launched into this credal hymn about Jesus. Being of one mind in Jesus has a very positive effect in the life of the church. But, that's not our primary concern this morning. Rather, we're going to concentrate on Jesus Himself and the task He came to fulfill.

The hymn begins by declaring that Jesus came in the “form” of God. This is an assertion of far reaching consequences and infinite mystery. God being God, He can do anything He wants. So, if He wants to appear in His creation as one of His creatures that’s a doable thing. The question is — why He would do such a thing? The assertion at the end of verse 6 answers the question. Messiah Jesus came in the form of God and is God, so that He would not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.

That is perhaps as bizarre a statement as you’ll find anywhere. Jesus is God. Yet, He didn’t count equality with God a thing to be grasped. What does that mean? The answer lies in the next series of assertions.

In verse 7 we read that Jesus “emptied” Himself, by taking the form of a servant or slave, being born in the likeness of men. It’s clear that Jesus wasn’t God masquerading as a human. He gestated in the womb of the Virgin Mary and was born to her in precisely the way humans come into this world. He nursed at Mary’s breasts. She weaned Him and raised Him to adulthood. This is what human mothers do for their human children.

Thus, the reality of Jesus’ humanity is confirmed in verse 8. God was found in real human form. And, in real human form, He humbled Himself and became obedient to God. As a real human being He suffered another real human experience — physical death. He even experienced the horrible, torturous death of Roman crucifixion.

All of this is an incalculable divine mystery of the highest order. Jesus is true God and true man unified in one person. And for centuries the church has struggled to understand this Personal Union of the Christ. In the process various theses have been put forward to describe the Personal Union. Many theses did not survive scriptural scrutiny and were ultimately rejected as heretical. The controversies that were necessary to arrive at what we know as the proper catholic understanding of Jesus caused great turmoil and even warfare in the church. Indeed, a set of rejected theses became Islam in the late 600’s. And Islam has remained at war to this day with those holding the catholic understanding of Jesus’ Personal Union.

Even in the modern western church controversy remains. For instance, there is controversy over what the Greek word translated “emptied himself” in verse 7 seven means. The Greek word here is “keno-oh,” from which we get the name of an old heresy called Kenoticism. Kenoticism is the thesis that when God the Son became incarnate in the womb of the Virgin Mary He absolutely left behind in heaven all of His supernatural God capabilities and powers. It was only when the ordinary human, Jesus, was baptized and the Holy Spirit descended on Him visibly like a dove, that He could perform miracles. Kenoticism declares that Jesus’ miracles were all the work of God, the Holy Spirit, alone.

This heresy has foolish and dangerous consequences when applied to the church. For if Jesus was just an ordinary human through whom Lord Holy Spirit opened the eyes of a man born blind and resuscitated a man four days dead, then any Christian ought to be able to do the same miracles by the power of Lord Holy Spirit.

There’s a church in California that has had huge influence in Charismatic circles, that teaches Kenoticism. In recent years, the two year old child of a worship leader died. They left the child unburied for a week, expecting that they would be able to resuscitate the child from the dead. There was enormous fallout when they failed. For, Kenoticism is a foolish and dangerous false doctrine, long ago rejected by the church. Anyone who insists on teaching this long rejected heresy about Jesus has to be under the deception of the devil.

So, what does it mean that Jesus “emptied” Himself? The correct understanding is that when God the Son humiliated Himself and consented to be gestated in the womb of the Virgin Mary as a human child, He did not leave His divine characteristics and powers behind. He merely cloaked them. In case you don’t realize it, Jesus is the model for the story of Superman — the man of steel who cloaked himself as the mild-mannered reporter, Clark Kent. Just watch out when Clark slips on his Superman outfit, however!

Hmmm. Superman. This reminds me of a story I once heard about the late, world champion boxer, Muhammad Ali. On a flight, Ali supposedly declined to put on his seat belt before takeoff, telling the stewardess, “Superman don’t need no seat belt.” The stewardess looked at him and replied, “Superman don’t need no airplane, either.”

So, if we can understand the Superman story, we can understand Jesus. God the Son cloaked Himself in human flesh. Thus, when Jesus performed miracles, He let His God powers slip out from under His cloak, so to speak. Only on the Mount of Transfiguration did Jesus take off His cloak enough to give Peter, James and John a peek at His divine majesty. Even in His resurrection appearances, Jesus left His cloak on, only it had changed into the cloak of an immortal, resurrected human body that could appear and disappear in rooms.

So, God the Son, cloaked His divine powers, humbled Himself and consented to be born of the Virgin Mary. He consented to live a human life as a real human. He consented to die a human death as a real human. Our almighty Creator God became one of us. What for?

This is where we come back to the peculiar doctrine of verse 6. Even though Jesus is God, He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. We’ve gone over what happened in the Garden of Eden many times. But without understanding what happened there, we can’t understand ourselves and our world. Most importantly, we can’t understand why God the Son condescended to take on human flesh. We can’t understand Jesus and why it was totally necessary that as Adam’s replacement Jesus NOT grasp at equality with God.

Again, Adam and Eve were created in the Image of God. Like any image, they reflected the real thing. They reflected their totally righteous Creator, in whom there is no darkness at all. And there was no darkness in them.

When Yahweh created Adam and Eve, He designed them (and us) to be in a total righteous union of love and commitment with Himself. However, in order for any union of love and commitment to be valid, both parties must have the freedom to walk away from each other. Otherwise, such a union is that of master and slave. Interestingly enough, the Koran says that the relationship of the false god, Allah, with his Muslims is the relationship of master and slaves. But Yahweh makes no slaves. He has freedom to walk away from us. We have freedom to walk away from Him. And that Yahweh doesn’t walk away from us sinners is all we need to know about His righteous character. He has chosen to be committed to us no matter what. That’s Love with a capital L — real Love. That’s why Scripture says Yahweh is Love.

Now, another being came to the Garden of Eden — the Serpent. This creature is a mystery that the New Testament associates with Satan. One thing is certain, however. Created by Yahweh as a sentient being, the Serpent once had the Image of God. For some reason that Scripture doesn’t quite explain, Satan, the Serpent, decided to walk away from Yahweh and become his own god. When he did so, he entirely lost the Image of God. He was plunged into complete evil; complete rebellion against Yahweh. The Serpent became a perverted denier of anything Yahweh considers to be “good.”

Being Creator of the universe, anything that Yahweh originally wanted is “good” by definition. But Yahweh left alternatives to His good in the creation — behavioral alternatives. And this is where love, commitment and freedom come in.

In their original, undamaged Image of God, Adam and Eve were free to embrace Yahweh and all of Yahweh’s good. Not being sinners, this was very easy for them. They easily obeyed the one command they had — not to eat of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. For, being righteous creatures, they had no need to know anything about evil — all the stuff Yahweh doesn’t want.

But the tree was there. It represented the real freedom necessary to make love real. Every time Adam and Eve ignored the fruit on that tree, they affirmed anew their freedom to love Yahweh, their Creator as He freely loved them.

Exactly why the Serpent chose to interfere in our existence we can’t know. It’s not revealed in Scripture. But there are hints, and out of those hints there was a theory current in Martin Luther’s time that Satan interfered out of jealousy about our position in creation. The New Testament reveals that our position is actually much higher than that of the created specie Satan belongs to. Therefore, the more I reflect on the Scripture, the more I think that this old medieval theory makes sense.

Anyway, the Serpent did interfere, and with devastating results. He deceived Eve into grasping at equality with Yahweh, just like he had. The Serpent deceived Eve by telling her she would become like God, knowing good and evil. Instead, Eve became her own god, defining good and evil for herself and pathetically unable to resist evil. Eve enticed Adam to eat of the fruit, and Yahweh’s appointed gatekeeper of the universe fell with her into what we call Original Sin. Thus, all of us are doomed from conception to be our own gods, defining good and evil for ourselves and woefully unable to resist what Yahweh defines as evil. All the evil, both great and small, that has ever been done or experienced on earth has its root in the disaster that befell the human race in Eden. All evil comes from us creatures stupidly grasping at equality with our Creator — something impossible by definition.

But none of this came as a surprise to Yahweh. For from the foundation of the world, it has always been Yahweh’s plan to send Yahweh, the Son, into the world as a real human being to undo the disaster of Eden and its tragic consequences. And the disaster could only be undone, if a second Adam were to successfully resist the temptation to grasp at equality with God. This was the mission of Messiah.

Now, in order that we could know centuries later that Jesus succeeded in His mission, Yahweh — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — established a life-script for Messiah and revealed it in bits and pieces over a thousand year period to Moses and the Prophets. Thus, Messiah’s life-script was hidden in plain sight for centuries. It wasn’t until the resurrected Jesus breathed Lord Holy Spirit upon His disciples on Easter evening that anyone was able to fully assemble the bits and pieces of Messiah’s life-script into a coherent whole. But once Lord Holy Spirit made it possible to assemble the life-script, it became clear that out of all the people who have ever lived, only the life of Jesus of Nazareth conforms to Messiah’s life-script. For the odds against any one person in history being able to fulfill all the approximately 308 prophecies of Messiah’s life are absolutely astronomical.

Jesus was the only human born on this earth without Original Sin. We know this because He was conceived and born of a virgin woman. Therefore, as a human being, the God/man, Jesus, was immune to all the normal temptations that afflict us like greed, lust, sloth and power. Satan, the Serpent, knew this and didn’t bother Jesus with any of the

normal temptations. Instead, Satan concentrated on the only sin that could defeat Jesus and make the human race Satan's forever — grasping at equality with God. Therefore, at numerous points and various ways, Satan tempted Jesus to rewrite the life-script written for Messiah. Indeed, Satan insisted that because Jesus is the Son of God, He not only had the right to do so, He had the power.

On the First Sunday in Lent we saw Satan directly hit Jesus with the first three temptations. Rewrite the script by changing a stone into a loaf of bread. That seems innocent enough if you're coming off a forty day fast. But it's not in the script. Change the script by jumping off the parapet of the temple and causing angels to reveal themselves as they catch you as per what is written about Messiah in Psalm 91. That would cause a surge of faith in the spectators. Only it would be the wrong kind of faith — not faith created by the Word and Lord Holy Spirit. The script says that Messiah will draw all the nations back to Yahweh that had fallen into paganism. Satan told Jesus that there was an easy way to accomplish that. If Jesus bowed down to Satan, worshipped him and became his messiah instead of Yahweh's, Satan would easily arrange it. To which, Jesus essentially said, "nonsense," and pursued His course.

We've also spoken of the agents that Satan used to tempt Jesus. First there was Peter screaming that the prophecies about Messiah's rejection and death couldn't be so, and using his devoted friendship with Jesus to get Jesus to say it wouldn't be so. To which, Jesus replied, "get behind me Satan." Then, there was Jesus' family. His brothers urged Jesus to reveal Himself as the victorious Messiah at the Feast of Tabernacles. But Jesus refused. Instead, Jesus revealed Himself as Messiah on what we call Palm Sunday, just ahead of the Feast of Passover where He would allow Himself to be sacrificed as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

And so, today is not only Palm Sunday, but the Sunday of the Passion that kicks off Holy Week. It was during Holy Week that Satan hit Jesus with the final series of temptations to rewrite Messiah's life-script. Therefore, the temptations will conclude with human agents of Satan scoffing at Jesus to come down from the cross so that they can believe that He really is the Son of God. Jesus won't do it. But Yahweh will threaten the scoffers with a supernatural darkening of the sun for three hours, an earthquake when Jesus breathes His last and the curtain separating the Holy of Holies in the temple being supernaturally torn in two from top to bottom. The Roman centurion supervising Jesus' crucifixion will cry out that surely Jesus was the Son of God. But, Jesus' enemies within the Jewish leadership will remain as intransigent as ever.

Nevertheless, on Good Friday, the God/man Jesus will do what Adam failed to do. By His suffering, Jesus will complete the Messianic life-script without grasping at equality with God. And this will be triumphantly confirmed with Jesus' resurrection from the dead in an immortal human body on Easter Sunday.

Thus, the ancient hymn of Philippians 2 concludes with the joyous assertion that having humbled Himself and become obedient unto death, even the miserable, scandalous death of Roman crucifixion written into Messiah's life-script, Jesus, the God/man was exalted to the highest position in creation after Yahweh Himself, so that at the Name of the God/man, Jesus, even Satan will have to put a knee on the ground and declare through clenched teeth that Messiah Jesus is Lord over the creation.

As for us, this means that one of us, Yahweh's trusted man, is at the head of the entire creation. The Serpent, Satan, no longer has absolute control over humanity. All those called

by Yahweh to believe in Messiah Jesus through the Word, the Sacraments and the power of Lord Holy Spirit can have the amazing gift of repentance and forgiveness of their sins. And on the Day of Messiah's return, all those found in union with Messiah Jesus will be completely restored to the Image of God forever in human bodies that will never again die, suffer or grow old. All this because Messiah refused to grasp at equality with Yahweh. To seal the deal, Jesus obediently suffered death on a Roman cross. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the ESV.