

The Story That Changed the World
The Rev. Amy Spagna
Palm Sunday – April 10, 2022
Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 22:14-23:56

Human beings are experts at telling stories. For millennia before Gutenberg perfected the printing press and made books widely available, we passed along information and wisdom, and entertained each other, by word of mouth. Stories are still very important ways of conveying information and wisdom. Regardless of what modes of communication we choose, nearly all of the content we create for and with them involve telling stories about anything and everything. These tales range from everyday and mundane items, like a bear getting into the trash or how much it cost to put gas into the car, to those of the world-changing variety, like: the war in Ukraine; 9/11; Apollo 11 landing on the moon; and the fall of the Berlin Wall, to name but a few of the ones which have happened during our lifetimes.

And then there are the couple of chapters world-changing story we've just told. It's about a small-town rabbi whose insistence on speaking truth to power was not well received in the least. In common with all the rest of the world-changing events, it features anger and bad intentions breeding yet more anger and bad intentions; people being swept up in something due to a tide of emotions they don't necessarily understand; and people retreating into their homes and hiding places because they are too afraid and too tired to do anything more than caring for themselves and their immediate circles.

The story of that first Palm Sunday and the days which followed it begs the question: IF hatred, violence, retrenchment, and giving in to the will of the mob are allowed to exist as the only operative forces in the world, then how can the world be

changed for the better, much less be saved? If we want to hold out any hope that things might turn out differently this time, we also have to ask what else might be at work in this situation: "What if there are other forces that have been set free in the world, other currents that are rising from the deep, dear core of things?"¹

St. Paul tries to get at the answer: "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. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:5-7, NRSV).

Paul is writing this letter to the Church at Philippi from prison. Where he's being held, and how he got there aren't things he considers of particular importance – if he did, he would have included them. What's much more important to him at that moment is how a group from the church he planted in the seacoast town of Philippi found out and sent one of their own to care for him at great personal cost. Paul responds to their selflessness with high praise. He then reassures them that, even if they don't see each other again, he trusts that they are "standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by [their] opponents" (Phil. 1:27-28). That they can do so is a gift from God. It is also a testament to their commitment to living their faith, particularly when it requires putting aside their own needs in favor of the needs of others.

Which brings us to this hymn fragment. Its origins are the subject of much scholarly debate around whether Paul wrote it himself, or if he got it from another

¹ Thomas H. Troeger, *Sermon Sparks: 122 Ideas to Ignite Your Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 20.

source, and whether he had taught it to the Philippians the first time he visited them. Just like Luke's gospel – which Paul very likely knew in its earliest draft stages – this hymn tells the story of Jesus, God found in human likeness, and how he gave it all up and died like a condemned criminal. The theological implications of this statement are massive. They start with a Christ who is fully human and fully God, and end in the same place as the 23rd chapter of Luke does, with Jesus' lifeless body being prepared for burial.

In its context within the letter, this hymn is undoubtedly intended as an exhortation for the Philippians to hang in there through their troubles. They are to act like Jesus, the one who chose to empty himself in order to do God's will, and not exclusively in their own interests. It's entirely up to them: "The choice was to abandon an option which was directed towards what some would have seen as self-advancement. Nothing indicates that, had [Jesus] gone with that option, it would have worked for him. He chose to align himself with the divine will and that meant willingness to go the whole way in solidarity with human beings."²

This is their story. It's our story. And above all else, it's God's story. That we continue to tell it matters, and not just because we need to remind ourselves about who we are and why we are here. The world still needs to hear it, especially at this time in our history, when it feels like bad intentions are multiplying rapidly and threatening to consume everyone in their path. That God can, and does, choose to intervene directly to change how people relate to one another and how they understand God's presence in the world, is the whole point of this week. Whether we're reduced to just the words, as

² William Loader, "First Thoughts on Year A Epistle Passages from the Lectionary: Pentecost 16. <https://billloader.com/AEpPentecost16.htm> [accessed April 4, 2022].

we were in 2020 and 2021, or we have actions like blessing palms, breaking bread, and taking all the decorations away to go along with the words, all that we say and do over these next several days are at the core of who we are as Christ-followers. No matter how we explain it, the heart of the matter is this: Jesus, God's own Son, took on human nature, gave up all that he had, and was murdered. And the rest of the story, which is about what God did to transform that event, is a whopper whose first whispered tellings changed the world.