

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11 (p. 951)

MARCH 25, 2018

MARK 11:1-11 (p. 823)

BLAINE

PALM SUNDAY

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Gracious God, God of Glory, and God of Passion, encourage us now with a Word addressed to our lives. Expand our minds Lord. Open up our hearts to the gentle whisper of your Spirit. Cause our meditations to be correct and true, so that we might truly grasp who you are! We ask these things in the Name of our Risen Savior, Amen.

“HUMBLE”

These passages are familiar, aren't they! We hear them every year on Palm Sunday. “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus”. “In your relationships with one another,” it says, which may be a part that we miss, “have the same mindset as the Messiah”. Between you and me, between you and the person sitting next to you, between you and your least-favorite person at church, your attitude, your mindset, how you treat them, what you think about them, needs to be just like that of Jesus”! Simply put, if you are going to be a follower of Jesus, you are called to have the same outlook, the same thoughts and feelings as our Lord. Who, by-the-way, humbled Himself, even though He was God! Jesus took on the nature of a servant, even though every knee should bow at the mere mention of His Name, in both heaven and on earth, and every tongue confess Him as Lord!

That's hard to comprehend, isn't it? It is far bigger than we can get our heads around.

The God of Glory, the Creator of all that there is, willingly stepped down into this world and became a servant, to us and for us! The Son of God became like us, so that we could become like Him! That's a "status shift", on a scale that we cannot even imagine! From all Glory and Honor, to a humble servant! Have you ever, in your entire life, experienced anything even remotely along those lines?

I remember my first day of Seminary. It wasn't anywhere near the same, but my emotions were like bookends on my own little ego scale. On the one hand, I was feeling a bit cocky, arrogant even. I had just finished my Bachelor of Arts Degree, graduating Magna Cum Laude! I had a successful business and knew personally most of the business owners in Southwest Michigan! I had a great wife, and two wonderful kids, money in the bank, and lots of friends. Things were clicking along fairly well!

But on the other hand, I was presently scared to death! I was starting Seminary. And in all honesty, I felt completely out of my league! I was surrounded by Scholars, Professors and Students who were obviously the religious elite! Each one of them was called by God! Each one of them had a rock-solid faith! How could I ever measure up?

On top of that, though, I had just "failed" my Writing entrance exam. This was something brand new for the Seminary. The first time they ever required one! And the last, I might add! But I had failed it miserably, the only person in the entire school to do so! I was devastated!

I of course chalked it up to nerves. And having to drive four-and-a-half hours to get there. I had actually received straight A's on every writing assignment, in every writing class, prior to that day, in all of my undergraduate work! But realizing that, didn't help a bit! I just knew that I was "unworthy" to be a Seminary student, let alone a Pastor! I obviously didn't belong!

Then, on the first day of class, I walked into "Spiritual Formation Class", and I was almost physically shaking! This was a class designed to rattle our faith—to make it stronger, but to do so by making us wrestle through! I was in a tizzy! Why was I here? Why wasn't I back at work, where I belonged? And there, right on the front wall of the classroom, was a great big paper target! I thought, yeah, that's exactly how I feel!

Standing next to the target was the Professor, holding a handful of darts! He told us to line up, and then write the name of someone who had hurt us, or who we had an issue with on the target. He said that we could draw a picture if we preferred, just as long as it represented a real-life situation. He added that this exercise would help us heal old wounds.

The first lady in line drew a picture of the woman her husband had run off with. The second, an older man, wrote the name of his brother in great big letters across the Bulls Eye—a brother, he hadn't spoken to in over ten years! The next woman drew a stick figure of her boss, although even with the explanation it was hard to tell! And then, it was my turn.

Several images came to mind. Almost immediately I thought about the guy who had given me that stupid writing test. My list of possibilities was far larger than it should have been! But if this was going to help, spiritually speaking I mean, then I was in!

So, let me ask you, if you were there, who's name would you write? Who comes to mind? Who's on your list? Who has hurt you to such a degree that throwing a dart at their name, or their picture, or at them, would make you feel good? Remember, this exercise is supposed to help!

When we had all vented our anger and frustration with the darts, the instructor walked over and slowly tore the top sheet of paper off of the wall. There, underneath, was the face of Jesus! It had holes and gouges everywhere, covering His face. Wounds and scratches marred His beauty! The entire room fell silent! It was difficult for most of us to even take our seats!

“Your attitude, with one another, should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, who being in very nature God,” stepped down out of Heaven, down off the Throne of Glory, and willingly took upon Himself the wrath and hate that our sins cause! He took on the punishment that we deserve! He died in our place! Our sins nailed Him to the Cross of Calvary! Can you imagine the magnitude of that love, the scope of that humility? No. We can't. But we still need to try.

Several years ago, I did some math, in order to try to and get a glimpse. Science tell us that the Earth is roughly 7,926 miles in diameter, a number difficult to even conceptualize. But the Sun is over 100 times larger, 864,938 miles in diameter! It's located over 93,000,000 miles away! We really do not have any sense of scale. It's simply too big. But just for perspective, if the Sun were eight inches in diameter, instead of 800,000 miles, the size of an average bowling ball—and sitting up here on the Pulpit—then Mercury, the closest planet, would be about the size of a pinhead, way over there at the edge of the first row of chairs! I know, I paced it off.

Venus then, the next planet, would be about the size of a peppercorn right over by the edge of the wall. And Earth, our little corner of creation, would be a second peppercorn, out in middle of the sidewalk! Mars would be another pinhead, about halfway across the parking lot. And Jupiter would be the size of a Pecan, roughly twelve steps east of the corner. Are you with me so far? Saturn would be the size of a Hazelnut, a little over a football field further down the road. Uranus, Peanut-size, would be just this side of the Putney barns! Neptune, another Peanut, or a Coffee Bean maybe, would be situated three football fields further east, two hundred and eighty-one yards to be exact.

Now Pluto, the last of the planets, which used to be a planet, but supposedly isn't anymore, would be another pinhead, stuck out in the middle of Frank and Bonnie's front yard! And remember, that's if the Sun is eight-inch, instead 800,000 miles, a difference of 6.34×10^9 , for all you teachers!

What I'm saying is, our Solar System is huge! Incomprehensible really! And our Solar System is only a tiny little speck in the Milky Way Galaxy! If our Solar System were the size of quarter, the Galaxy would take up the entire North American Continent! And our system of planets is actually situated out on the edge of the Galaxy, about 8,000 parsecs from the center, I'm told. And a parsec, in case you don't know, is roughly 19.2 trillion miles! So, do the math!

Light travels at 186,000 miles per second, if I remember correctly. So, imagine the distance light would travel in a year. The Milky Way Galaxy is over 100,000 Light-Years across. So, again, do the math!

Our Sun is just one star in an average sized Galaxy, filled with Billions of stars! And our Galaxy is only one, of 170 Billion "Visible Galaxies", in what scientist call the "Known Universe"! As one Astronomer put it, "The Milky Way is our little puff of dust, amid the infinite sandstorm of known reality"! Or as I prefer to say, along with the Psalmist, "The heavens declare the Glory of God"! "When I look at your Heavens Lord, the Sun and the stars that you have set in place, I can't help but wonder 'who is man that you are mindful of him?'"

My point is, the Creator of all this, stepped down out of Heaven for you and me! The Word became flesh and dwelt among us! Almighty God willingly humbled Himself, became nothing, and then took everything that we, and the world could possibly throw at Him, and continued to love us anyway! And now our attitudes need be the same as His!

Today is Palm Sunday! Maybe you've noticed? Today the Anointed Son of God rides into Jerusalem majestically, at the head of a spontaneous parade! This is a future hero for most, a king, a conquering general. This is the one who will overthrow the dreaded Romans and restore the Davidic kingdom! Excitement permeates the air! And yet, in just five days, this same Jesus will hang lifeless on a Cross, on our behalf, by His own choice! I assume you know the story!

What kind of God does that? What kind of God draws cheers of "Hosanna, Hosanna!" one day—and then, within a week, angry taunts of "Crucify Him, Crucify Him!"? What type of King allows Himself to be captured and killed! What sort of "Lord" steps down from Glory and humbles Himself, willingly, for sinners like you and me? How do we go from Palm Fronds and Coats spread across the road in a celebratory Red Carpet of honor and praise—to a Bloody Crown of Thorns driven cruelly down into His brow in just a few days? Who would willingly do that? Who would do that for strangers, and sinners, for those who openly rebel against Him? ...Is that your attitude towards those around you?

Let's be honest, Christians aren't real big on sacrifice these days, are we, at least not here in the United States. We really don't even understand what the word means, let alone take it upon ourselves as a mantra! They are places in the world where Christians do sacrifice daily; Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, the Sudan, China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, Indonesia, just to mention a few! But we really don't have a clue!

Instead, we talk about prosperity and blessings. We think about Heavenly Rewards and Earthly Rewards! We focus on the “Power of Positive Thinking,” on Social Justice, on Fellowship, on Institutional Maintenance, on happiness and personal joy! But Sacrifice, Obedience, Faithfulness, Discipline...these are all quite rare! And Humility!

But isn't that the very core of the Christian witness? Isn't that, actually, the lesson of Holy Week—the journey that we are about to take? Isn't today Palm Sunday, realizing who our King really is, the day on which the Church celebrates Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem—but also Passion Sunday, the day when we begin to recall the events of Jesus' last week here on earth, and realize just what that means!

In just seven days we will celebrate the Empty Tomb—the Resurrection and the glorious promise that this holds for believers! We are Easter People! But in order for us to get there, to move from Glory to Glory, from Palm Sunday to Easter Morning, we need to journey through next week!

Along with His Disciples, we need to deal with the fact that we don't always understand what Jesus is teaching us! And like His Disciples, we need to face the truth of our own rejection of Jesus as Lord, and our own betrayal of Him as our friend, and our own tendency to abandon Him again and again and again! We need to sit at the Table of Fellowship with Him and allow Him to wash us clean! We need to say goodbye to our old way of life and step out in faith into the new! We need to kneel at the foot of the Cross

and shake in fear and awe, witness the tragedy caused by our sin!

Only then, with tears streaming down our cheeks, can we humbly embrace the love that is so freely offered! Only then can we walk through the Garden and discover the Good News of Easter Morning! If we don't do that, then all we are really doing is changing the table decorations from Palms to Lilies! And without the Passion, neither one has much meaning!

Jesus rode into town on the back of a borrowed donkey, not in a golden chariot pulled by beautiful Arabian Stallions. Two of His followers went to get it, to untie it and lead it away. And I can't help but wonder if it was James and John, the two who asked to be seated on His right and His left in Glory? Are those who wish to exalt themselves taught that the first shall be the last? Are the arrogant told to wade through manure-soaked straw, and procure humble transportation, and are thus transformed? I wonder!

We stand at an intersection, with one foot on the Palm laden highway, looking for personal glory—and one foot on the path to the Cross, realizing that we are called to serve others! We haven't quite gotten to Easter Morning yet. “Hosanna” and “Crucify Him” are both still on the tips of our tongues!

But starting today, on the dusty road to Jerusalem, Jesus calls us to choose. We simply cannot sit on the side of the street anymore, or straddle that cozy fence. Not if we are paying attention! Being a spectator, or even a member of the gawking crowd, simply won't do in the eyes of the Lord! A Cross-Centered life requires more than that! And all

of God's people said, Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Lord, many of us have had a rough week. Many of us have had our Christian values put to the test. And some of us have had our faith stretched to its limits. A few of us Lord have flirted with moments of despair. We have let the darkness close in. We have lost sight of the light. We have momentarily lost hope. So, we have come once again to be filled with your Presence. We have come to be held in your loving arms and protected by your mighty strength. We have come to be reassured by you, that we are indeed loved, and indeed valued, and honored by you beyond price! Thank you, Lord, for calling us here!

Father, we have opened up our hearts to you in silent prayer. We have shared with you our utmost cares, and we have laid down before you our worries and our fears. Now, Lord, we lock our spirits together as your church, as one people and one body, called together in your Son's name, called out of the world in order to minister to it. We open up our hearts collectively, Lord, and focus our minds in unison, and together we place before you our shared concerns. Loving God please be with Please touch these lives in ways that only you can do. Please pour out your blessings upon them, granting to each the things that they need most right now. And please, use each one of us as humble instruments of your love and compassion, to touch each of these dear people as well. Help us Lord, to witness to you, for your glory and honor and praise. Help each of us Lord, to see your blessings in our lives. And help us to realize just how much you care. Lead us and guide us Lord. Walk with us as we stride into the future. And fill each of our hearts with your own Holy Spirit, now, and each day of our lives! We ask these things in

Jesus' name, as we pray together now the prayer that he taught us saying, Our Father...