

MARK 11:1-11 (p. 823)

MARCH 28, 2021

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11 (p. 951)

BLAINE

PALM SUNDAY

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

God of Glory, God of Passion, encourage us now with your Word. Expand our minds with Holy Wisdom. Open our hearts to the gentle whisper of your Spirit. Cause us to grasp who you truly are! And then, respond accordingly. We ask these things in the Name of our Risen Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Christ! Amen!

“HUMILITY”

I'll bet you've heard these passages before! Or at the very least, I'll bet they seem familiar! I mean it's Palm Sunday, right, the beginning of Holy Week. And we read these passages every year! But I wonder if we actually hear what they say? What do you think?

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus”. Notice the operative word here; “Your”! In your relationships with one another, you need to have the same mindset as Jesus, the Messiah, the Holy One of God! Between you and me, between you and the person sitting next to you, between you and your least-favorite person in the Church—your attitude, how you feel about them, what you think, how you treat them on a daily basis, really—including when you talk about Politics or Taxes, when they have a polar opposite stance on Masks or Social Distancing, in your discussions on Immigration Policy or Military Spending, the Church, Tithing, whether you need to be in Worship every Sunday—in all of that, your attitude needs to be exactly the same as Jesus' attitude! Who by the way, died for them! Died n their place! On their behalf! On our behalf!

Think about that! If you follow Jesus, then you are called to have the same mindset as Jesus. The same compassion. The same thoughts and feelings. The same love. For each and every one of your Brothers and Sisters in the Faith! And Jesus humbled Himself, remember, even though He is God! He stepped down from Heaven and took on the nature of a Servant, even though at the mere mention of His Name, every knee should bow, in both Heaven and on earth, and every tongue confess Him as Lord!

That's a lot to get your head around, isn't it, to comprehend! At least if we take it seriously! Talk about humility! The God of Glory, the Creator of all that there is, all that ever was, and all that there ever will be, chose to step down into this world and became a Servant for those who don't deserve it! The Son of God became like us, so that we could become like Him! That's quite the "Status Shift", don't you think, on a scale we cannot even imagine! There are no words powerful enough to describe it! I know, I tried to find them all week! We simply cannot fathom the sacrifice, the humility! But we need to try!

So, think back, if you will. Think of a time when you found yourself humbled. Forced to be humbled, maybe? Or better yet, willingly embraced humility! Think of a time when you went from a "really great place", to a, well, "not such a great place"? How did that feel?

Pastor David and I were talking about his Seminary experience earlier this week. And I couldn't help but recall my own "very first day". My emotions were like polar opposite ends of 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 thought I was “all that”! I had a successful business, with over a dozen employees! I personally knew most of the business owners in Southwest Michigan! I had a great wife, and two wonderful kids! I had a house I loved, money in the bank, and lots of friends! Things were clicking along fairly well!

On the other hand, though, I was scared to death! I was about to start Seminary! And in all honesty, I felt completely out of my league! I was surrounded by Scholars, and Clergy, and Professors, and Students who were all obviously part of the Religious Elite! Every single one of them had been called by God, right, or they wouldn't be there! Each of them must have a rock-solid Faith! They all knew what they were doing, and where God was calling them to go! How in the world could I ever measure up?

And then, like icing on top of a “Self-Doubt Cake, I “failed” my Writing Entrance Exam! This was a brand-new practice for the Seminary, the very first semester they ever required this kind of test! And the last, I might add! After my “epic fail” they decided it was something they didn't really need! But in between, I failed miserably! The only person in the entire school to do so! And since it isn't required anymore, the only person in the entire history of the School to ever do so! I wonder if my name is on a plaque somewhere? It certainly was on the Test Results List, which all the incoming students had to of course read! I was devastated!

I had to make an appointment with the Dean of the Seminary, and somehow try to convince him to admit me on a “provisional basis”! I had to prove, that if given a chance, I could demonstrate my worthiness! Here I was, thinking I shouldn’t even be there! And now, I was going to have to wear some kind of “Scarlet Letter” for the next four years, or a Dunce Cap! Like I said, I was devastated!

I tried to chalk up my test score to nerves! Or the fact that I was older than most! I must just think differently! I am a Construction Guy, not a Scholar! Besides, I had to drive four-and-a-half hours just to get there, and would have to drive four-and-a-hours home too! No one else had to do that. I even tried to console myself with the fact that I had actually done quite well in my Undergraduate work, including Writing Classes! There was that whole Magna Cum Laude thing, right? Only it didn’t help! I just knew that I was “unworthy” to be a Seminary Student, let alone a Pastor! Obviously, I didn’t belong! Or, so the enemy tried to tell me yet again!

So, as I walked into my first day of “Spiritual Formation Class”, I was almost physically shaking. This was a class intentionally designed to rattle our Faith—to make it stronger, they said, but to do so by making us wrestle through things! I was in a tizzy! Why was I even here? Why wasn’t I back at work, where I belonged, where everything was comfortable and right? But I walked in! And there, on the front wall of the classroom, was a great big paper Target! I thought, “Yep, 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, one at a time, write the name of someone who had hurt us on the Target, or who we had an issue with. 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, psychologically, or even spiritually, then I was all in!

So, let me ask you, if you were there, who's name would you write? Or whose picture would you draw? 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 personally, 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. And there, underneath, was the face of Jesus! It had holes all over the place! Slashes and Gouges covered His face!

Wounds marred His beauty! His smile was almost completely gone! The entire room fell silent! It was difficult for most of us to even take our seats!

“Your attitude 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 compassion? Can you fathom the humility? No! I don’t think we can! But again, it’s Palm Sunday, the very beginning of Holy Week! So again, we need to at least try!

Years ago, shortly after we built this sanctuary actually, I was sitting in here praying, overwhelmed by a sense of God’s Majesty! So later, I did a little math. One of my Junior High Science books said that the Earth is roughly 7,926 miles in diameter. Which is a difficult number to even conceptualize. But picture all the places on this planet that you’ve been. Now imagine more, because my guess is, you haven’t been to them all.

Now try to picture the Sun. It’s over 100 times bigger than the earth, 864,938 miles in diameter! And it’s 93,000,000 miles away! We don’t really have any sense of that scale! It’s simply too big! It would be like Washington spending 1.9 Trillion Dollars, or 3 Trillion plus, on “whatever they thought was best”!

Anyway, just for perspective, imagine the Sun being eight and a half inches in diameter, instead of eight and a half thousand miles, say the size of this Bouncy Ball. Well, if that's the case, 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, 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! Are you with me so far?

Mars would be another Pinhead, about halfway across the parking lot. Jupiter, the size of a Pecan, would be roughly twelve steps east of the corner. 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! And 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!

And Pluto, the last of the planets, which used to be a planet, then wasn't a planet, then was again, then wasn't—would be another Pinhead, stuck out in the middle of Frank and Bonnie Putney's front yard! And remember, that's if the Sun is eight and a half inches in diameter, instead of 865,000 miles, a difference of 6.34 times ten to the ninth, for all you teachers out there!

What I'm obviously trying to say is, our Solar System, our little cluster of planets is huge! Incomprehensibly so! And our Solar System is just a tiny little speck in the Milky Way Galaxy! If it were the size of Quarter, then our Galaxy would be about the size of the entire North American Continent! And our Solar System is actually situated on the edge of the Galaxy, about 8,000 parsecs from the center! And a parsec, in case you didn't know, is roughly 19.2 trillion miles long! So, do the math!

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

And our Sun is just one star, in an "average-sized" Galaxy, one 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 puts 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, 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? And make no mistake, we are all sinners!

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? Tell me, is that your attitude towards those around you?

Let's be honest, Christians aren't big on sacrifice these days. At least not here in the United States. We don't even understand what the word means! They are places in the world where Christians do sacrifice daily! But we don't really have a clue!

No, we talk about Blessings, and Church Growth! We think about Rewards, Heavenly, as well as Earthly! We focus on the “Power of Positive Thinking,” on Fellowship, or Institutional Maintenance, on Personal Happiness and Joy! But Sacrifice, and Obedience, Faithfulness, and Discipline, those thoughts are quite rare! And therefore, we have a hard time understanding Humility! Let alone the magnitude of Christ’s Humility! But isn’t that the very core of the Christian witness? Isn’t that, actually, the lesson of Holy Week? Isn’t that the journey that we are about to take?

Today is Palm Sunday, when we realize who our King truly is! Today the Church celebrates Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem! But today is 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, to be sure! Post 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 this next week!

Along with His Disciples, we have 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, our own denial, 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 this next week, 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 same two who asked to be seated on His right and His left in Glory, just a couple of verses earlier! Do you think those who wish to exalt themselves are taught that the "First Shall Be The Last"? Are the arrogant told to wade through manure-soaked straw, and procure humble transportation, and thus be transformed? I wonder!

We stand at an intersection this morning, 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, have we? "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 between the two! We simply cannot sit on the side of the street anymore, or straddle that cozy fence! Fence sitting causes scabs and blisters, and possibly far worse! We can't be neutral anymore! 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! It calls for "Chesed", to borrow a Hebrew word, "Steadfast Love", our theme throughout Lent this year! It calls for us to give of ourselves, humbly! And all of God's people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Lord, some of us have had a rough week. Some 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...