

Palm Sunday A
Matthew 26:14- 27:66
Philippians 2:5-11
The Rev. Bonnie Underwood

Emptying Ourselves

Today's readings can stretch us in emotional ways. We began with the liturgy of the Palms and Jesus' triumphant procession into Jerusalem, recalling the joyous shouts of the crowds, rejoicing as they proclaimed, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

But we didn't stop at that point, but continued into the liturgy of the Word, with Matthew's jarring passion story, a story of betrayal and denial, of angry mobs, and the conviction and brutal death of the Son of Man. We are still a week away from the good news on the other side of this pain-filled lesson — a week away from a joy-filled Easter. Today we're left right here, gazing up at that body on the cross, hearing the fading echoes as the great rock comes to rest at the mouth of the tomb, and there's a cosmic hush as the story pauses . . . If we take the time to listen, to hold on to this moment, without rushing to look a week ahead, we can find ourselves feeling unsettled, uncertain, and empty.

There is purpose in spending some time here, as uncomfortable as it may be and I invite you to hold gently onto this idea of emptiness, as we begin this holiest week of our Christian year. This will be counter-cultural, for in the West, emptiness has a bad connotation. Emptiness is something unfulfilled or unfilled — a thing to be avoided. We learn early on that society thinks it's much more acceptable to view a glass — and our lives — as "half-full" rather than half-empty, regardless of how we really feel. Empty time, time not doing something, needs to be filled, for empty time is wasted time. We live in a culture that urgently seeks to fill that which is empty.

So why am I asking you to hold gently onto this idea of emptiness?

Take a look at Paul's letter to the Philippians. This passage is believed to be part of an early Christian hymn, a hymn that describes the early Church's understanding of Christ. The hymn's theology includes the incarnation of the Word, the reconciliation between humanity and God through Christ on the cross, and the meaning and purpose of the resurrection and ascension. And it all starts with this: though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself.

Jesus emptied himself.

This New Testament reading is assigned every year at the beginning of Holy Week, teaching us that the Son of God chose to empty himself. And we are encouraged to have "the same mind" as this Christ, to empty ourselves, just as Christ emptied himself.

In today's readings, we can begin to understand, just how fully Jesus emptied himself — not once, when he became incarnate, and lived among us — but again and again, throughout his earthly life, by giving of himself to those he taught and healed and saved, until he hung, a body emptied of spirit and breath on the cross, as empty and as useless as a broken pot.

It is unsettling. But I wonder if we allow ourselves to be open to this discomfort, could we discover during this Holy Week, that this unease is where God's power and promises can be seen? I wonder if this empty space isn't exactly where we finally allow ourselves to be both

found and filled by God. Because when we are left empty, with no resources of our own — no thoughts, no plans, no insights — it's then we realize we can only trust wholly in God.

For many of us, we discover this stark truth in painful and jarring times: when we hear that the cancer is terminal; when we receive that devastating late night phone call; when someone cherished or something precious is lost or broken, and cannot be recovered. Those times when we know we can no longer rely on ourselves, but must instead rely completely and solely on God.

And such reliance and trust — that even these places, empty though they may be, will be filled by God's presence and purpose for us — that trust, that reliance, is called obedience. And it is the obedience that Jesus shows us in the garden on the eve of his crucifixion.

Jesus says, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." There in the garden, Jesus is still emptying himself fully, emptying himself of his own desires, wishes, and needs so that God's desires for him might be fulfilled: "yet not what I want but what you want." Such emptying takes courage and faith — a complete reliance that God's desires for Jesus, and for each of us — will, ultimately, save us all.

So, this Holy Week, I ask you to let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. Use this Passion week to empty yourselves. In worship and fellowship, in work and prayer, pour yourselves out this week, for God's sake, until we too are completely empty. For with God's help, we can open ourselves to being emptied with Christ on the cross, and simply be there — with and in that emptiness, as uncomfortable, difficult, and painful as it may be — trusting that our Lord and Savior will fill us, form us, and ultimately, transform us, for Christ is the way of our salvation. Amen.