

New St. James Presbyterian Church

Palm Sunday

Sunday, March 29, 2026

“But Emptied Himself”

Philippians 2:5-11

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

Since the earliest days of the church, Christians have expressed our faith by singing. Hymns and songs allow us to articulate the faith in ways that can't otherwise be replicated; the one who sings prays twice (as our Director of Music sometimes reminds us).

We know that the earliest Christians were singing their faith; in the Letter to the Ephesians, for example, we hear the call to “sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts” (5:19). So we know that they were singing, but—apart from psalms, which we continue to sing today—we don't know exactly what they were singing. Those early hymns have, for the most part, been lost...

However, one of the earliest Christians hymns has in fact been preserved, because it is quoted in the New Testament—indeed, it is quoted in our Epistle Lesson from Philippians that we heard this morning. See, in that letter, Paul writes like he normally writes, in his usual prose...then all of a sudden, his writing shifts into poetic, metrical language, with an unmistakably musical quality; it's the language of a hymn.

This is easier to see in the original language, in Greek—but you can pick up on it in translation, too. In fact, a lot of English translations lay it out on the page as poetry; take a quick look at your pew Bibles, page 197 in the New Testament, and you'll see it. Biblical scholars have long taken this passage to be a hymn that St. Paul is quoting; just as I sometimes quote a hymn when I'm preaching, Paul here is quoting an ancient hymn of the early church! This is essentially an artifact of the early church, preserved right here in the New Testament.

So you might wonder, ‘what's this hymn about?’ I'm glad you asked. This is an ancient hymn that tells the story of Christ in a remarkable way; it's a hymn that tells the wide sweeping story of Christ, all the way from before creation. And for that reason, this has come to be known in the church as “the Christ Hymn”; and as we listen to the Christ Hymn, we discover how the earliest Christians celebrated the stunning story of the grace and love of God in Christ.

This hymn begins singing of Christ “who, though he was in the form of God” (v. 6)—See, this story doesn't start at Holy Week or the Baptism of the Lord or even at the Nativity in Bethlehem; no, this hymn begins by reflecting on Christ's life “before the foundation of the world” (Ephesians 3:4), the life of the Son of God before time, before creation, when there was only the perfection of the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in a fellowship of self-giving love. This is beyond our understanding, of course, yet the Christ Hymn stretches back to the life of the Son of God before the incarnation; as John Calvin wrote in the 16th century: “Christ, [...] before the creation of the world, was in the form of God, because from the beginning he had his glory with [God] the Father” (Calvin).

And yet, as the Christ Hymn puts it, “though he was in the form of God,” Christ “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited” (v.6). For the Son of God, divinity was not like “a prize to be seized [and] held onto” (Thurston). Christ, the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, could have delighted in the perfection of divinity forever. God did not need to create the universe; creation is grace, not necessity. And yet such is the self-giving love of the Trinity that this love poured forth to create the universe, so that God could love and redeem his creation.

Such is God’s overflowing love that God created a universe—created us—to love...and then God, in Christ, entered that creation! The hymn continues: Christ, “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” (vv. 6-7). Christ “emptied himself”—a powerful and poetic way of telling how the Son of God chose freely to lay aside the glories of divine life to be born as a human being.

In Christ emptying himself to be born as a human being, we see God’s “generosity and love” (Garrett): Christ, in becoming human, did not cease to be divine, but showed us that God—out of love—chooses to share our limitations, “display[ing] [...] power [...] in what look[ed] to the world like weakness” (Pauw). This challenges what we often think of God; we sometimes make the mistake of thinking that God is just about power and omnipotence—but that isn’t the God revealed in Christ, the God who entered into weakness and whose power was perfected in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).

“And,” the hymn continues—“being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross” (vv. 7-8). This hymn tells of God’s long downward slope in Christ—from the perfect glories of the Trinity to incarnation and finally—and brutally—to crucifixion. In Christ, God’s love comes all the way down, to the depths of human suffering; Christ “emptied himself,” to be born a human being, and “humbled himself,” to accept servanthood and suffering and the cross.

That isn’t the end of the Christ Hymn. Just as the Gospel doesn’t end on Good Friday, this movement down into the depths gives way to a rising movement of redemption and restoration, of Easter and Ascension; the hymn continues:

“Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name” (v. 9).

Christ will be raised to life and restored to the glories he once laid aside...but not yet; today, Palm Sunday, marks our entry into Holy Week; today—as we journey with Christ in the memory of the church toward the cross—today we linger at that moment in the hymn when Christ “emptied himself” of the glories and privileges of God.

And today the Christ Hymn teaches us something of what is really happening on Palm Sunday, as Christ enters Jerusalem. Think about it: Christians believe that God—the eternal Son of the Father, the Word through whom the universe was made, the Second Person of the Trinity—we believe that God rode a donkey! That’s a very strange thing to say—and a surprising testimony to the humility of the God revealed in Christ. How then does our understanding of the story of Palm Sunday change when we hear it alongside the Christ Hymn?

The Christ Hymn helps us to recognize the deep grace of God in Christ, “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”—

as we remember on Palm Sunday—

and in great humility,

with love for the world and for all its hurting people,

rode a donkey unflinchingly and faithfully

toward the place where he would die,

and in this way—

“became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.”

As we enter Holy Week, the Christ Hymn retells for us the story of a God who, out of love, laid aside the glories of divinity to be close to us all the way down in the depths. Last Sunday, we reflected on Psalm 130, and its message of hope that—when we find ourselves in the depths—that God is there with us, listening for us.

And on Palm Sunday, today, in the Christ Hymn, in this ancient song sung by Christian believers in the earliest days of the church—in the Christ Hymn, we see just what this looks like: we see God descending all the way down into the depths to be with us, as Christ empties himself and humbles himself and rides a donkey toward death; we see God descending all the way down into the depths to be with us, coming alongside us in suffering and in death, so that—when we suffer and when we die—we will not be alone, but will be with God. Amen.