

When I Was Sinking Down

Matthew 21:1-11; Philippians 2:5-11

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Last year for my birthday Naomi got me an Apple Watch. This is an amazing little piece of machinery.

There are all kinds of things that it can do. It can monitor my sleep patterns if I so choose (I don't... I already know that I sleep poorly).

It can check sound levels nearby and notify me when levels reach “dangerous” levels that might affect my hearing (I disable this one, too—I love loud music far too much).

It can analyze my heart rate, evaluate my handwashing patterns, give me mindfulness suggestions. And of course, I can get emails, texts, and calls, podcast updates...

It can even tell time!

My first nine months or so with this watch has mostly been an exercise in learning how to disable features. As cool as this thing is, it was turning into a bit of a portable nag on my wrist.

One feature I have left on is the “Fitness” tracker. One needs to stay active, after all, and it's nice to see my steps and stairs and calories burned displayed with all kinds of impressive looking charts and statistics.

And so, my watch will notify me when I need to get moving. All those stats and graphs are enough to get me moving. I don't want to let my watch down.

Anyway, on Friday I went for a walk to keep my watch happy. I have a familiar route that I use to ensure that I check off all the requirements for time and steps.

It takes me past the first house we bought as fresh-faced 22-year-olds (which seems like an impossibility today!). I'm a sucker for nostalgia.

It also takes me past a sign that someone has hung on their fence. It's a large sign and it faces a busy street. The sign says:

Die on your feet before you live on your knees.

It likely won't surprise you to learn that this sign went up partway through the pandemic. Based on some of the other features of the yard, specifically some of the stickers affixed to the vehicle windows, I have a decent idea of the sign-owners' politics and perspectives.

I've pondered this sign every time I walk by.

One level, it is not hard to interpret. The sign is an assertion of strength, of defiance, of the heroic individual refusing to be trampled upon by the misguided herd. Don't bow down. Stand up and demand your freedom!

It would be easy to write this sign off as one more belligerent expression of a particular political persuasion. But I think that would be, well, too easy.

As much as this is (and is quite clearly intended to be) a political statement, I think it is also a human statement.

We may disagree on the end goals, but we all want our perspectives, the things we passionately believe in—about the pandemic or anything else—to be vindicated.

Don't be weak. Stand up for what you believe in. Assert your rights. Defend your views. Make sure your voice is heard.

Don't let all those bad people who don't think like you do win! *Die on your feet before you live on your knees.*

Well, this statement on the sign is an interesting one to consider through the lens of Palm Sunday and Holy Week.

Our texts today invite us to interpret Jesus' entry into Jerusalem through the lens of Philippians 2:5-11.

In this passage, Paul is quoting what many scholars believe to be one of the oldest hymns or poems of the church, possibly written only a few years after the first Easter.

5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

6 Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own
advantage;

7 rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

8 And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

This is a rather astonishing piece of theology.

First, it asserts that Jesus is God incarnate. *In very nature God*. This was a scandalous thing to claim for Paul, a strict, monotheistic Jew.

He would have learned well in his scholarly training. *Hear, O Israel, the Lord is One*. Human beings were not and could never be identified with God. This was blasphemy of the highest order.

And yet, in the immediate aftermath of the empty tomb, the early largely Jewish church was already identifying the crucified Jesus of Nazareth with the Lord of heaven and earth.

And remember, this is only a few years after the first Easter. This is not some bit of theology that showed up a few centuries later as some enterprising theologians were trying to figure out what happened way back when.

It was and remains a staggering claim.

But that's not all the hymn proclaims. A hymn that begins with the heights of divinity goes straight downhill.

The One who was in very nature God...

- set aside divinity
- made himself nothing
- took the nature of a servant
- humbled himself
- became obedient to death

And not just death, but death on a cross. Our familiarity with this symbol should not obscure its horrible significance.

This was the lowest most shameful death one could die.

This Lenten season, I read Episcopal priest Fleming Rutledge's little collection of meditations on the cross of Christ called *The Seven Last Words from the Cross*.

One chapter discussed the two thieves on the cross and Jesus' words: "Today, you will be with me in paradise.

Rutledge pondered this scene in connection with Isaiah 53:12 where it talks about a mysterious "Suffering Servant" who was "numbered among the transgressors." Of the crucified Christ, Rutledge says:

He was not numbered among the members of the religious establishment. He was not numbered among the politically connected. He was not numbered among the good, upstanding pillars of the community, the civic leaders or the business leaders or the church leaders. He was "numbered among the transgressors," **for only "bad elements" were crucified. Jesus suffered "outside the city wall," away from the good neighborhoods, beyond the pale, cast out from the company of decent people.**

This is a truly staggering descent. And it is one that Jesus chooses.

Jesus knows the path he is embarking upon as he enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He is no helpless victim. He walks into Jerusalem knowing full well what is coming.

He knows that he will not be rising up to defend his rights. He will be on his knees, beaten, scorned, misunderstood, mocked, and ultimately killed.

Every year at Christmas time we sing, “Let earth receive her king.” Holy Week is the grim reminder of how earth in fact received her king.

Today, on Palm Sunday, this all remains mostly on the horizon. It is largely a scene of celebration, of joy, of jubilation, of expectancy and hope.

But glad and expectant “hosannas” will turn into angry “crucify him’s.”

At the centre of this big story that marks the high point of the Christian year is a massive collision between what people want and expect from their God and what they get.

The people in Jesus’ day knew what they wanted from God and from God’s anointed one.

They wanted a mighty king to rule from Jerusalem. They wanted the Romans out and a Jewish king in. They wanted punishment for their enemies—all those who had held their boots over their necks for long years. They wanted a righteous king and the fulfillment of all they had hoped for since they had been exiled centuries earlier.

But Jesus is different.

This king walks the pilgrim path up to Jerusalem at Passover time, fully aware of the eager crowd waiting expectantly for him to do what they’ve been wanting him to do and asks for a donkey to ride on.

Not a warhorse, as befits a conquering hero, but a donkey.

This king will not conquer the Roman occupiers of his people Israel, nor will he assume the throne of David as so many were hoping he would do. At least not in the way they expected.

This God will bring peace not through the sword, but, only a week later, through laying down his life for his friends and for his enemies.

This God will defeat evil, but, at least initially, by subjecting himself to its worst.

This is not the sort of king the people want.

It is easy—too easy—to look back at those back in the first century who misunderstood the nature of Jesus’ kingdom and kingship, and think, “How could their expectations have been so off the mark?”

But one of my deepest convictions is that the story of Scripture is our story, too. It is a mirror that shows us ourselves.

And one of the lessons we ought to learn from our story today is that we are not so very different from those eager throngs of expectant worshipers on that first Palm Sunday.

As 21st century Christians, we, too, have our expectations.

We, too, have our clear ideas about what God is supposed to do, how God is supposed to work.

Here, on this Palm Sunday, it is appropriate to ask the questions: What are we expecting of God? Do our expectations of God reflect our preferences or God’s purposes for the world?

We tend to want God on our terms. We want God to validate our assumptions, our preferences, our view of how the world works.

What Palm Sunday does is give us God on God’s terms. Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on a donkey and all that will follow in the week ahead is an enacting of Philippians 2.

It is God going down. All the way to the bottom. For us.

This is a long way from “live on your feet before you die on your knees.”

I want to end by reflecting on a line from a song we’re going to sing shortly. The second verse of What Wondrous Love is this has these words:

When I was sinking down, sinking down, sinking down,
when I was sinking down, sinking down,
when I was sinking down beneath God’s righteous frown,

Christ laid aside his crown for my soul, for my soul,
Christ laid aside his crown for my soul.

“Live on your feet before you die on your knees,” expresses a sentiment that many of us want, in some conflicted, often unarticulated way or another.

Even if we would never say it that way, something in all of us wants to be associated with the winners.

But in our more honest moments, I think that we all know what it feels like to be sinking down.

Maybe we feel like we’re sinking down under the weight of others’ expectations. Maybe it’s depression or anxiety. Maybe it’s a destructive habit or addiction.

Maybe it’s things that we have endured, people who we have loved and lost. Maybe it’s a sense of inadequacy or doubt or fear about the future.

Maybe it’s this sense that we’re not good enough, that we’re failures, that we’ll never get it right. I was talking with a clergy friend recently who confided in me that there hasn’t been a single day in the last three years where he hasn’t thought, “I’m not measuring up, my church is struggling, I’m the wrong person for this position.”

Maybe it’s the guilt and shame of our own sin, however unpopular it might be to say this.

There are all kinds of things in this life that weigh upon us, that cause us to have this sinking feeling that we’re going down, down, down.

And what the hymn we are going to sing says, what the Christ hymn of Philippians 2 proclaims, what the downward trajectory of Palm Sunday through Holy week reminds us is that God’s response to our sinking down is to go down with us.

When I was sinking down, Christ laid aside his crown for my soul.

- set aside divinity
- made himself nothing
- took the nature of a servant
- humbled himself

- became obedient to death

But God doesn't just join us at the bottom, powerful as this is.

In the Christian story, down is the way up. Suffering is the way to glory. Death is the way to life.

Jesus does not, in fact die on his knees. He is, as he said he would be, "lifted up" so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life (John 3:14-15).

The hymn in Philippians does not end with Christ laying aside his crown for all the souls who were sinking down. It ends with a note of victory.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

So, this week we will enact this truth. Down is the way up.

We are all invited back here on Maundy Thursday to go down into suffering and death with Jesus. We will walk with him through his trial and execution. We will sink down with Jesus as he sets aside his divinity, takes on the nature of a servant, and becomes obedient to death.

And then we will return on Sunday to be raised up with Christ on Easter Sunday.

Down is the way up. This is the trajectory of Jesus' story. It is the proclamation of the Christian faith.

Live on your feet before you die on your knees?

No. Live on your knees. Live in submission and worship to the risen Christ. Go down with Jesus, that you might be raised up to the life that is truly life.

Amen.

