

I Wonder as I Wander—Palm/Passion Sunday

[Luke 19:28-40](#)

[Philippians 2:5-11](#)

[Luke 22:14-23:56](#)

This reflection was delivered by the council president of Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Hamden, CT, in my absence.

Hello everyone, and good morning! It's unfortunate that these are the days we are in, of pastors isolating because of Covid... but I thank you all for your prayers and patience.

At least now I get to greet you like St. Paul would do in his letters—"Pastor Josh, a servant of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are gathered in Hamden at Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church on this Palm/Passion Sunday: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!"

So, thanks to Ken's bravery to stand up and read for you, I would like to reflect on a few things as we enter Holy Week. I, of course, am so thankful for his and all of your leadership in what continues to be a wonky and difficult time, not only because of COVID, but war in Europe, and trouble it would seem at every turn.

In the very first Gospel lesson this morning you heard that Jesus... "went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem" and "had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives..." The Mount of Olives, people tell me, is not a mountain so much as a tall hill, it would take 45 minutes or so to climb up. But it does overlook Jerusalem. I imagine Jesus and his disciples looking out over this city that they had been journeying toward for several weeks. This is the city where Jesus knew he would meet his painful death, the place where his inevitable abandonment and betrayal by nearly all his disciples would take place. As I was imagining Jesus up on that high place, looking down at a city, it reminded me of his temptation story. A Gospel lesson we heard on the First Sunday in Lent.

It went like this: "Then the devil led [Jesus] up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.'"

Here, I suppose, at the Mount of Olives, the temptation to avoid his hard and humble path of abandonment and crucifixion was renewed. But Jesus of course rides the path to its end.

It is the path of *divine* humility. The path of letting go. The path of giving away. St. Paul says it so eloquently today: "Jesus, 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 became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross."

It is always important to remember that Jesus' path of humility, that God's becoming flesh in him, was not a cosmic emergency break. Sin was not a pesky problem that God could not otherwise solve. This is all exactly as it was meant to be. This is God's image for us of what God is truly like. Jesus is not so much a sacrifice, but Christ is an image of God's self: God gives and gives and gives, God is misunderstood and rejected, and even when there is nothing left to give, God gives more. Day after day for us, eon after eon, breath after breath.

The mystery, grief and beauty of Holy Week, in so many ways, is our destination—the port at which we dock—each year, and for all eternity. But never forget our port of call, where we set out from, is the mystery, grief and beauty of Christmas. We took flesh, just as Jesus did. And from start to finish Christ's life was a portrait of giving—reckless, extravagant giving, and exhorting others to give in the same way. (Those who gathered for our Thursday Lenten Devotions this year will know the kind of giving that Jesus exhorts his listeners to in the Gospel of Luke.)

Jesus' humble birth is sad and beautiful. And Jesus' humble death is mournful, and beautiful, too. It is the portrait of pure gift, pure humility.

Which takes me to the somewhat strange song I chose for our Hymn of the Day. When I was in college, I was a big, big fan of folk music. Real old-time, obscure stuff—not just Simon & Garfunkel and Bob Dylan. And on my travels of folk music, I encountered John Jacob Niles. Born in 1892, he was a real character, trained as an opera singer he sang in a falsetto and played a gigantic dulcimer. Niles was both a song collector and a song writer. He collected songs and fragments in the 1910s all around Appalachia. And one such fragment he heard and formed into his own song was "I wonder as I wander." Some of you might remember it from our Lessons and Carols celebration back on the First Sunday of Christmas.

And this song, I believe, captures perfectly the mystery, grief and beauty that is both Christmas and Holy Week. It captures also our life-long experience of God. As we "wander" in this life, we continually "wonder" at the mystery of Jesus becoming flesh and we grieve for Christ's cruel death. But today, let us especially "wonder" at God's love and humility. If Jesus had "wanted for any wee thing," or for any great thing—power, glory, dominion—he surely could have had it... but, we know, that this is not God's way. And when the hymn sings that "Jesus the Savior did come for to die"—it is a truly gripping and poetic way of saying: God did come for... to *give*.

Amen.