

**Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL**

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**Worship Series: A Holy Week**

**Service Theme: Palm Sunday: His Humility, Our Hope**

**Sermon Theme: The King We Need (April 10, 2022)**

**Philippians 2:5-11**

Around 200 A.D., someone scratched graffiti into the plaster of a wall near the Palatine Hill in Rome. That might not seem overly noteworthy if you've ever used a public restroom before, but this particular graffiti is interesting. Not only because it's ancient, but because of what it depicts. On the left is the original, and on the right is a tracing which makes it easier to decipher.

The image reads, "*Alexamenos worships his god*" in Latin. You see a man, presumably Alexamenos, worshipping another man...who's hanging on a cross, and has...a donkey's head. Do you get it? Whoever the artist of was, they carved this graffiti to mock Christianity, and Christians like Alexamenos. To visibly express their feelings that Christians who worship a crucified god worship a real...(ahem) "donkey."

And that's not surprising. In Rome, crucifixion was used as the ultimate weapon to intimidate, shame, and crush its enemies. In polite Roman society, the Latin word "cruX" was an obscenity not spoken in conversation—a literal and figurative 4-letter word. So, to a Roman, worshipping a man who had been crucified as God was totally asinine. Like worshipping a man hung from a noose or fried in the electric chair. Such shame. Such weakness. What fool would worship a god like that?

That 3<sup>rd</sup> century mindset about Christianity is still prevalent today! The "*Alexamenos graffiti*" is still found on the walls of the internet today, viewed with the same mocking spirit, one meme asking, "***But seriously. What kind of Messiah gets executed?***" From memes, to tweets, to cartoons like South Park or Family Guy, Jesus is presented

as the same foolish, silly, weak caricature. His opponents mocking Jesus' weakness and humility then and now, vocalizing their displeasure, "This is not what a king... a Messiah... a God should be!"

That's what many of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries thought about him too. At first, Jesus' authoritative teaching and astounding miracles skyrocketed his popularity. And people started asking, "Could Jesus be the long-awaited Messiah?"

But his popularity waned when Jesus made clear he hadn't come to be the kind of king they wanted. The Jews thought the Messiah would be a conquering earthly king who would drive away their Roman oppressors, and restore Israel to the power they longed for. But Jesus acted in weakness and humility, teaching that his kingdom wasn't of this world, and that it was necessary for him to suffer and die, rather than conquer and overthrow.

Even on Palm Sunday, while cheered by palm-waving disciples, Jesus' actions were emblematic of the humble, self-sacrificing king he was. The humble, self-sacrificing attitude we see on all the days of Holy Week, and ultimately, in all of Jesus' life and ministry. And that's why we celebrate Palm Sunday in holy week. Because the events of this day remind us that Jesus is exactly **The King We Need.**

How so? In Philippians, using what is probably a hymn from the early Christian church that even Alexamenos might have sung to praise his crucified God, the Apostle Paul explains: "***Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross.***"

Lest his humble humanity make us forget or doubt, Paul reminds us who Jesus is. Christ Jesus, "***who, being in very nature God.***" Jesus is true God. And this wasn't some new occurrence. In Greek, Paul makes it clear that Jesus didn't become God, as if he once wasn't. Jesus has

always been fully God from eternity! And that makes Jesus' humility and self-sacrifice even more shocking.

Jesus was true God. He had every right to do or not do anything he wanted. He was perfect. Eternal. All-powerful. All-knowing. Dwelling forever in the perfect joys of heaven, in a perfect triune relationship with the Father and Holy Spirit. Who would willingly give that up?

Jesus did. He let go of his grip on equality with God and all its advantages, and **"made himself nothing."** Literally, Paul says that Jesus **"emptied himself."** I picture it like going through airport security. You have to take off your shoes, jacket, belt, and hat, remove your shoes and any electronics from your bags, and set everything aside on the conveyor belt while you go through the scanner. Jesus "emptied himself" when he became true man, conceived in the womb of a sinful woman. He didn't stop being true God. He was 100% God and 100% man simultaneously. But he set aside the full use of his divine power and glory. He set aside all the advantages of being true God, and picked up all the disadvantages of being true man until he completed his mission of winning the world's salvation.

As God, there was no reason for Jesus to experience being sad, tired, hungry, or thirsty. No reason for the Son of God to experience pain, suffering, weakness, or death. So why did he do it?

He did it for you, to be the king we need! As Paul writes, Jesus emptied himself **"by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."** Jesus humbled himself so he could be a servant. Like earthly servants, Jesus willingly humbled himself so that he could care for our needs over his own!

But maybe the question is, "What do we need the king to do for us?" How you answer majorly impacts how you view Jesus' weakness and humility. Usually, we want leaders who are exalted and powerful, not humbled in weakness. You probably wouldn't vote for a president who promised to display weakness, and allow his enemies to walk all over him, right?

We want powerful, exalted leaders because we assume they'll also make us powerful and exalted! But if our leaders are weak and humbled, we doubt they can give us what we think we need-- success, providence, and protection from enemies.

People also think that way about Jesus; that he should be powerful so he can make us successful, fulfill our desires, and free our lives from pain, weakness, or struggle. And we need him to be a powerful king to do that for us, not a humble servant, right?

But if we think a humble, self-sacrificing, servant Jesus can't give us what we need, it's because we misunderstand what we primarily need the king to do for us. Whether they realized it or not, the crowds on Palm Sunday shouting, **"Hosanna!"** which means, **"Please, save us!"** to Jesus had it right. Because that's exactly what we need the king to do for us. Not a king who will give us worldly power and exaltation. But a king who can save us from sin, death, and hell! And to do and be that for us, Jesus needed to **"make himself nothing."** To provide for our spiritual needs, king Jesus had to be able to be our substitute and take our place--in two areas. First, in keeping the law.

The holy God requires all people to be holy. As Jesus said, **"Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."** That's what we need. But if we're honest, we're far from it! Even one sin shatters perfection. And with each passing moment, our mounting sins just make us more broken.

But our humble king comes to meet our needs! As Paul writes, **"God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law."** As the holy God who created the law, God is above the law. So, if Jesus needed to be our perfect substitute, he had to become true man, so that the law could apply to him. And as true man, he kept it perfectly in our place.

Secondly, we needed Jesus to be our substitute in fulfilling the Gospel. Because we aren't perfect, the punishment is both physical and spiritual death. As Paul writes in Romans, **"The wages of sin is death."** So in order to set us free from sin and death, Jesus had to be

able to suffer the wages of sin in our place. As Hebrews says, ***“Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness.”*** Jesus needed to have a body capable of dying, and suffering the spiritual death of hell. He needed a human body with blood coursing through his veins so he could shed that blood to win forgiveness for the world. As Philippians says, ***“Being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross.”***

That’s what humble King Jesus was riding towards on that first Palm Sunday. That’s why the king rode not on a charging war horse, but on a humble, lowly donkey. He wasn’t bent on earthly conquest and power. He was bent on weakness, suffering, and death in order to bring us peace.

As we’ll see in 5 days, Jesus became obedient to death—even the most shocking type of death. In Jewish law, anyone who was crucified was said to have died under God’s curse. Such shame. Such weakness. Who would worship a god like that?

We do. We worship the God who set aside everything to willingly humble himself. We worship the immortal God who became obedient to death. Not because he was weak or powerless to stop it. But because his love for you was so great that he would stop at nothing to save you. As we see the weakness, humility, and death of Jesus again this Holy Week, don’t turn up your nose in scorn at a humble, weak, foolish God. Instead, lift up your hearts and voices in praise to the all-powerful God who became the object of mockery and scorn, because that’s the kind of king we needed. A king who conquered his enemies by surrendering to them. A king who crushes his opposition by allowing himself to be crushed. A king whose path to exaltation begins with humiliation. What kind of Messiah gets executed? One who loves you more than anything.

But friends, while we thank God for the weakness, humility, and self-sacrifice he takes on during this Holy Week, don’t forget what happens at the end of the week. Sunday is coming! Our humble king doesn’t stay in that humiliation forever. As Paul writes, ***“God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow...and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord.”***

His work of salvation completed, the one who emptied himself was filled again with his divine power and glory. So while it might look asinine to worship a humbled, crucified God, we really worship the all-powerful exalted God! And one day, whether at their physical death, or on Judgment Day when our exalted king will return, all who mocked him will confess what they denied on earth...that this crucified donkey of a god is King of kings, and Lord of lords. That this king wasn’t weak and powerless, but that his love is just that perfect.

I heard a beautiful reminder of that this week from our 3-year old preschool. Miss Anne was teaching them the Bible story of Jesus before Pilate. The kids heard about Jesus, standing there beaten and bloodied, looking weak, powerless, defeated. Preparing to die and suffer hell on the cross. And one of the little girls started to cry. When Miss Anne asked her what was wrong, the little girl sobbed, ***“Jesus just loves me so much! And I love him so much! I just can’t believe it!”***

I don’t think I can say it any better than that. When God willingly gave up everything to become nothing to give us what we need—salvation—that’s not weakness or foolishness. That’s love. Love from a king who knows what we need. A king who motivates us to ***“have the same mindset as Christ Jesus,”*** an attitude of humble, self-sacrifice that cares for the needs of others over our own. We don’t need earthly exaltation. We need eternal exaltation. And because the king we need was humbled, you have it. Because Jesus just loves you so much!