

## **“Victim and Victor”<sup>1</sup>**

Scripture: Philippians 2:5-11

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Philippians 2:5-11: ...*Let the same mind be in you that you have in Christ Jesus,<sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,<sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,<sup>8</sup> he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.<sup>9</sup> Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,<sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,<sup>11</sup> and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

There was once a man who had for some time suffered from various illnesses. He had seen a number of doctors who had performed countless tests on him and had prescribed lots of medicine. But his condition did not improve. He tried home remedies, drank herbal tea, and took mega-doses of vitamins along with his prescriptions. Still he did not feel any better. Then he heard of doctor who was said to be an outstanding diagnostician. Hundreds of people reported that she could cure diseases others could not. The man called her and made an appointment. “At last,” he said to himself, “I will be completely well again.”

The day of the appointment arrived. After the doctor had thoroughly examined the man and had reviewed his tests, she sat down with him and said, “My friend, you are not a healthy man. But you can be well again if you will follow my advice. What you need to do is lose about fifty pounds, get involved in a regular program of exercise, and eat more grains, fruits, and vegetables. You don’t need to take any more of the medicine that has been prescribed for you. And you don’t need all those vitamin pills.”

When the man heard this, he was indignant. He demanded that the doctor prescribe some new medicine for him, possibly some experimental drug not yet on the market, which would cure his illness. The doctor smiled patiently and repeated her advice. “You don’t need medicine,” she said. “You need to change your lifestyle.” At this the man cursed the doctor and stomped out of the office. For the rest of his sickly life, he hated her and told everyone that she was a quack doctor who didn’t deserve the title of doctor at all.

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Once there was a woman who was in serious trouble with the law. She had run up a lot of debts, so in desperation she embezzled some money from the company where she worked. The company

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon borrows liberally from a sermon for Palm Sunday by Edwin D. Peterman, Pastor, Christ the King Lutheran Church, Houston, TX, in the 1990s.

found out and was now pressing charges against her. Part of the issue was she also had an alcohol problem. In fact, she had been arrested several times for driving while intoxicated. Her most recent arrest occurred when she caused an accident in which a passenger in another car was severely injured. The woman was beside herself with worry. She didn't know where to turn, until a friend of hers told her of an outstanding defense attorney who seldom lost a case. She called him immediately, and he agreed to see her. She was delighted and relieved. "At last," she said to herself, "I have a lawyer who will get all the charges reduced, if not dropped. Then I'll be able to get on with my life."

But when she saw the attorney and explained her situation to him, he nodded his head and said, "What you did was wrong, and you may have to spend some time in prison. After you are released, you will need to get into an ongoing program of recovery from alcohol abuse. You will also need to get a steady job and repay the company the money you stole. If you will do this, you may be able to get your life back together again."

The woman was outraged at the attorney. "I don't need you to give me a lecture," she said. "I need you to defend me against these charges and get them dropped. Whether I drink or not is my business, not yours!" And with that she dismissed him and began a letter-writing campaign to have him disbarred for refusing to help a client. In the meantime, she resumed her search for an attorney who would do for her what she wanted.

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Once there was a small nation that was deeply troubled. For centuries the people had been oppressed by foreign armies that controlled and dominated it. Many of the citizens of this nation had become cynical about life, and as a result they cheated even their own friends and neighbors in the marketplace. It was a "dog-eat-dog" society. Reform movements arose from time to time, but they soon failed for lack of support. But then there appeared a tiny ray of hope in the midst of the darkness. Little by little, the people began to talk of the need for a messiah who would fix everything for them—a messiah who would overthrow the foreign army, establish a strong, independent government, and bring peace and prosperity to the nation.

Suddenly word came that there was a man from Nazareth, a carpenter's son, who was able to heal people, cast out demons, and even change water into wine. He drew large crowds of people when he spoke. And he could hold his own when the scribes and Pharisees confronted him. "At last," the people said among themselves. "Here is the messiah who will lead an army against Rome and reestablish Israel as a strong and prosperous nation. Here is the messiah who will fix everything for us—economically, politically, and religiously."

One day this man rode a donkey into the capital city of Jerusalem. The people poured into the streets and cheered his arrival. They waved palm branches and spread garments on the road and shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

That was on Sunday. By Monday things were going downhill. This man had not even begun to recruit an army. He gave no speeches to rouse the rabble and unite them against Rome. He had announced no program for economic recovery. Everyone waited. Nothing happened. People were

disappointed. Several days later, disappointment grew into angry. And on Friday when they learned that this man was facing death at the hands of the Romans for treason, they filled the streets and shouted, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Whether he had betrayed Rome or not, they did not know. But one thing they did know: he had betrayed them!

The people got their wish. This man from Nazareth in whom the hopes of the people had been invested, this man from Nazareth whom so many expected to be the one who would fix everything for them, this man from Nazareth who was supposed to be the messiah, the savior—this man was forcefully and decisively executed. And when he died, all hope for a magical, mystical, “presto-chango,” ended. The quick-fix messiah died as well.

Our world has a history of denouncing and killing messiahs who don’t deliver what it wants. Moreover, the world does not want a God who is God over against the world...over against our will. Rather, the world wants a lapdog god it can domesticate and control, a sweet god who indulges and blesses the sickness, the selfishness—in other words, the sinfulness of the world. The world does not want a messiah, or for that matter, doctors or lawyers or pastors or parents who give people what they need. The world wants a messiah (and doctors and lawyers and pastors and parents) who give people what they want.

We have a way of projecting our needs, our problems, our wants off on someone else. In an age of unprecedented luxury, we continue to feel the pressure of money—there is never enough. Our standard of living has gone up and up, and we continue to feel like we are poor. In an age of unprecedented health advance, we want more than what the medical profession can give. In an age of instant communication, we want things faster than ever.

There is a “dis – ease” of the soul that money, health, drugs—both of legal and not-so-legal variety—cannot fix. And we are all victims—victims of our upbringing, of our lack of opportunities for advancement, of the unfairness of our health, of our lack of talent. We are victims—someone is at fault for our misery and so we look for victor, one who will wipe all that misery away.

There are many sins, but there is really only one sin. And that is the sin of substituting another god for the only true God. When you devise a messiah of your own desire and imagination and then you worship that messiah rather than God, you sin. The only way you can be delivered from that sin is to have your false expectations destroyed, once and for all. And that is precisely what happened between Palm Sunday and Good Friday. Jesus drew the false, sinful expectations of the world unto himself, absorbed them, and bore them on the cross. His death was the death of all of our false expectations, and therefore his death was the death of sin itself. The false piety of Palm Sunday is crucified on Good Friday and buried that night, in order that true faith in God might be created on Easter through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Today we the company of the faithful and not not-so-faithful stand on the threshold of Holy Week. It is not for us now to rush ahead to Easter with its great gospel of message: Alleluia, Christ is risen! Rather as Fredrick Buechner once said, “The gospel is bad news before it is good news.” The gospel is tragedy before it is blessing. It is death before it is life.

On this Palm Sunday, it is necessary for us once again to be confronted by the God who does not give us what we want but does give us what we need. On this Palm and Passion Sunday, we see Jesus who did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped and held onto, but gave it up, emptying himself rather than filling or fulfilling himself. On this Passion Sunday, we hear the faint whispers of the Spirit that says “All is well; and all manner of things are well,” all the while we chafe and rub against the limits of our life.

Indeed, now is the time to undertake the surrender of all our false expectations and selfish hopes. It is necessary for us to watch as our sin burdens him, the Messiah, and bears down on his head like a crown of thorns. To sing: “O sacred head now wounded, with grief and shame weighed down.” Now, it is necessary for us to see him die as the Lamb of God who absorbs the sin of the world and bears it away. To sing: “When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died, my richest gain I count by loss and pour contempt on all my pride.” It is necessary for us to suffer patiently the dark night of sorrow and death, if we are to enter the brilliant new light of Easter and receive the eternal life offered to us in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let Holy Week begin!

Hear the gospel, the good news for today: God gives us not what we want, but we need. The bad news precedes the good news. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory in Christ Jesus our Lord!