

“Freeing Jesus: Presence”
Philippians 2:1-11; Luke 19:28-40
Palm Sunday
Message for April 10, 2022
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Throughout Lent, we have reflected on many ways to think about Jesus. We’ve also explored language that attempts to describe who Jesus was and is. You may have noticed that the reading from Philippians was read just a couple of weeks ago when we talked about “Freeing Jesus: Our Lord.” It seems that this text had more to say, and it powerfully speaks to this idea of presence.

This Bible Wisdom teaching from Paul’s letter to the people of Philippi comes up again as acknowledgement that Jesus was the Messiah – the one sent by God in order to make it possible to walk among us - to be close to us - to *know us* as well as to *be known*.

My hope in utilizing this “Freeing Jesus” text during Lent was to give us an opportunity to rediscover much of the Christian language that has been used in ways that have been exclusionary and hurtful. How can we reclaim our experiences and understandings so that we can feel the Divine presence in our lives? This approach then enables us to move toward an intentional and relational connection with God.

Diana Butler Bass, the author of “Freeing Jesus,” talks about a theological rift in Christianity, noting “The tension is between what is called ‘immanence’ - the idea that God is close by, and ‘transcendence’ - the opposite notion, that God is far off.”

She goes on to write, “Ultimately, Christian theology says that both are true - God is both immanent and transcendent - here and there, close and far, completely with us and absolutely beyond imagining...Jesus’s presence, once embodied as a human being 2,000 years ago, is now a great mystery, as intimate as our inner awareness and as far-flung as the stars.”

She reminds us that we humans struggle with paradox, and that Christianity has often pushed aside immanence and concentrated on

transcendence. This tendency causes us to lose that connection and the potential for intimacy with God.

She explains, “The very idea that God is present in and with us, known where two or three are gathered, kicking up whatever dust is in the way, well, that kind of God is wild, unpredictable, and uncontrollable. Who knows what sort of unbalanced humans might think that such a God lives in their hearts or speaks directly to them? What misery would be caused! What chaos!” When God is transcendent, in heaven, and distant from our mistakes and meddling, we then are in need of an intermediary and an organized religious structure that steps in for us and mediates our relationship with God.

The verses that spoke most insistently to me this week from Paul’s epistle were: “...be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”

The second reading was also from the New Testament, in which we heard from the Gospel of Luke. You may have noticed that we kind of started in the middle of something. It began, “After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.”

So, let’s dial it back just a bit so that we can fit all of the pieces together. Just prior to this reading, Jesus was telling the disciples the Parable of the Ten Pounds (in the Gospel of Matthew, this is the Parable of the Talents.) The Parable of the Ten Pounds is an exhortation to Jesus’s disciples to use their God-given gifts in the service of God, and to take risks for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

This parable is told just before his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It seems he was drawing a parallel between himself and the nobleman in the story - the nobleman was not accepted as ruler, and this will also be the case for Jesus. He enters the city with great celebration, but we know that later the crowds turn on him.

Later in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is questioned about whether he is king of the Jews, but we know he is a different kind of king—the kind of king who

rides a colt—comes in peace—comes to serve—comes to die. Just as a king's huge, spirited war-horse sends a message about the man who rides it, so also Jesus' young colt sends a message about him—who he is—his purpose in coming. And the crowd receives Jesus with a “red carpet” welcome.

In the final verse, we hear Jesus respond to the Pharisees who are telling Jesus to make his followers stop their joyful shouting. He answers them, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

Stones, of course, are inanimate objects that don't cry out – but it seems that every iota of their surroundings – the natural world, the hardpacked dirt road, the sky filled with the birds above them, and even the stones at their feet - are positively *vibrating* with the inevitability of Jesus's arrival. The momentum of Jesus's path seems to have set all things in motion.

What do you imagine the stones were shouting? What love, what promise, what lesson might have been conveyed if we could hear them? What might we learn if we listened carefully?

May the joy of this Palm Sunday and the promise of the resurrection carry us through the difficult days to come. Amen.