

Westminster Sermon: "The Power of Choice"

Scripture Lessons: Philippians 2:5-11, Matthew 21:1-11

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Today we remember the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem, which marks the beginning of Holy Week and his journey to the cross. In the beloved hymn found in Philippians 2:5-11, Paul proclaims Jesus' choice to humble himself and God's subsequent choice to exult Jesus above all creation. Hear now God's Holy Word.

⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death even death on a cross.

⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,¹¹ and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

In Matthew's account of Christ's entry into Jerusalem we find a city confronted with a decision. What will it do with a Messiah who ushers in a reign of peace, not warfare? What will the city do with a prophet who cares deeply for it, as a mother hen cares for her brood? How will it respond? Hear now God's word in Matthew 21:1-11.

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Beth phage', at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." ⁴ This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,⁵ "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷ they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"¹⁰ When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" ¹¹ The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee." Amen.

The title of the sermon: "The Power of Choice"

The Text: "who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God as something to be grasped..." Philippians 2:6

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, today we celebrate the courage and choice of Christ. As we contemplate the meaning, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

I received a call this week from my lifelong friend and next door neighbor growing up, Bill Redman. He shared the good news of the engagement of his only daughter, who was named for me. I remember the call I received from Bill when he became engaged to Blythe's mom. A confirmed bachelor who had vowed he would not marry before the age of 40 telephoned me during his 34th year to ask if I would officiate at their wedding in Laguna Beach, California. I knew his fiancée Cathy and was delighted for both of them.

A few days before the wedding the three of us sat down for pre-marital counseling. Given my relationship with the groom, this was probably not totally fair to him. It was on this occasion that my dear friend shared why he was able to make the choice to marry at this time. "I didn't feel like I could marry," he said, "until I was in total control of my life." (pause)

For a moment there was silence. His fiancée and I looked at each other, and I said as discretely and non-directly as I know how, "I don't know how to break this to you, Bill, but you are not in total control."

We all laughed together and suddenly everything felt lighthearted because my friend's statement is really a wish; a wish that we all share as human beings. A wish, and sometimes an illusion, that does influence and affect the choices we make in life and the risks we are willing to take in those choices.

In this season of uncertainty and the spread of COVID-19, nothing would give us more relief than to learn we have this virus under control. There are choices we can make to move in that direction, among them a little self-control, self-denial, and self-sacrifice. Our ultimate freedom is dependent on the giving up some of the liberties we believe are inalienable rights in our democratic society. This paradox of personal liberties sacrificed for societal freedom and well-being is powerful and woven into the meaning of Holy Week.

In her book *Imperfect Control*, Judith Viorst, American author and journalist, explores how our sense of self and all our important relationships are colored by our struggles over control, wanting it and taking it, loving it and fearing it, and figuring out when the time has come to surrender it. Viorst encourages us to contemplate and come to understand the limits and possibilities of our control and to find our own best balance between power and surrender.

Every time we make a choice for something, we choose not to have something else. When a choice is made, there are inevitable losses. No one has everything in this life. Certainly, none of us is in total control; not even my friend two days before his wedding.

Life is full of choices. Perhaps what is more important than the choices we make is the significance of the choice we have. Recognizing and celebrating the gift of choice that is ours as human beings and then learning to live graciously with the choices we make and their consequences is the secret of contentment in our life together. When our predicament is such that it seems we are left without choices, we still have a choice. We always have the choice of how we will respond to our life circumstances. This is what distinguishes us as human beings and this is the most important choice of all.

Human beings have struggled with choice from the very beginning. When Adam and Eve chose to “take and eat” from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they were choosing to be like God. In choosing control over surrender, they exposed humanity’s inability to be obedient in the midst of ambivalence.

When Jesus Christ chose to become human, one of us, he entered our world of choice. When he gave up being God, he gave up total control. Certainly, he didn’t realize, at the time, what this choice would mean; the sacrifices and consequences that would be involved. When the time came for Jesus of Nazareth to make a choice that meant giving up all control, he struggled like he had never struggled before. Then he made one of the most difficult choices that any human being has ever been asked to make.

Today, men, women and children all over the world raise palms and their voices in cries of Hosanna to celebrate that choice; the beginning of Holy Week and to commemorate the journey of a pilgrim to Jerusalem on a certain Passover festival some two thousand years ago.

A man, who although he was among over two million people who traveled to the holy city at this time was choosing a journey that was wholly unique and uniquely holy. The Passover celebration remembered the national birth of Israel. Every adult male Jew within 20 miles was required by law to come to Jerusalem, and Jews from everywhere came to participate. This is the festival of the sacrificial lambs, which saved their firstborn sons in Egypt long ago.

To this festival Jesus chose to come with his disciples knowing full well that this would not be an ordinary Passover. He made it clear for all to behold when he entered Jerusalem riding on a colt that he came for peace and had no intention of exercising force. To do this, would be to take away “the choice” that makes us human.

No, Jesus of Nazareth had no intention of exercising force. He was not the political Messiah for which many were waiting “to gain control” over their world. Jesus Christ is about giving up control, not gaining control. God does not take power away, God empowers. The paradox is that the power Jesus gives is in the choice he made to give up his own power.

“he did not count equality with God as some thing to be exploited, but emptied himself...And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”

Death “on a cross” meant for a Jew not merely loss of citizenship but being outcast from the divine community. In his death, Jesus experienced the deepest contrast to being in the form of God, and it is in this fullest contradiction that we see anew the face of God. It is useless to ask how or why, we can only stand in awe of the sight of him, who is Almighty God, weary, in tears, abandoned on a cross...giving up the power of being God to empower us to be human.

Although we cannot fully understand the mystery of God’s great love for us, we can celebrate the fulfillment, consequence, and power of Christ’s choice in what we choose along our faith journeys this day and every day. Amen.