

Sermon: [Wrap Your Arms Around Jesus]
Sunday of the Passion (Palm Sunday)
Text: Philippians 2:5–11

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There are some things in life it is hard to wrap our arms around—to make sense of. Personal tragedies, for example. Or random violence. Or why Microsoft can't make anything really well. Or why Congress ... well, *never mind that*. Never in a million years will I comprehend politicians.

But even more, we have trouble wrapping our minds around social trends. Think: global terrorism, global warming, same-sex marriage, piercings and tattoos, gang violence, or the balkanization of American values.

Imagine with me, a moment, what it was like for the people who met Jesus. To comprehend, to wrap their minds around his life, his ministry, his significance. They had no internet, no Facebook to check out his page, or his friends, no Wikipedia entry—not even a radio or newspaper to keep up on news about him.

Those who wrote his life story, these Gospels, tried to comprehend Jesus by telling a blow-by-blow, day by day account of what he did and said. They tell us of miraculous healings and acts of compassion, cryptic teachings or fascinating parables. They tell how many believed the message of Jesus, but some doubted, while others resisted his teaching and rejected him.

Other writers tried to make sense of Jesus by finding every little parallel or connection or link with the Hebrew scriptures, the “Old Testament.” They quoted Law and Prophets and Psalms, trying to find in those ancient writings some of the “Big Picture” of Jesus as Messiah or Christ, meaning “Anointed One”; as the ultimate prophet, or as Savior of his people. They found relationships in the story of Moses, of Noah, of Joseph, of Abraham, Elijah and King David—some of the heroes of ancient Israel.

Yet other believers tried other ways to comprehend all this—to see the Big Picture about Jesus Christ. They became almost philosophical—and said that Jesus was God's Word to humanity—and that he was God's ultimate word, which God intended to speak from the beginning of time. So they believed that Jesus was with God from the very beginning—that he existed before anything else, and that God sent Jesus, when the time was right, into the world to embody God's message for all people, to “give life” to the truth that love redeems the world from the darkness we have made.

And then there is this passage, from Paul's letter to the Philippian church,—our second Reading. Now remember, Paul is the man who at first *persecuted* the Christians, and thought that the story of Jesus was *hogwash*—that the significance of Jesus' life and ministry was *zero* to—that Jesus was hurting the true faith of Israel, and that his followers should be rounded up, busted, stopped from destroying the nation with their lies.

And then suddenly this Paul had his own tale to tell, after he was knocked to the ground by what he described as a blinding light and a mysterious and powerful voice. His revelation of Jesus changed his life immediately, and it changed the course of the little Christian community from being one sect of Jews among others to becoming a world religion. And it changed the world in ways that we still see unfolding in this 21st century.

Many scholars today do not think that Paul actually wrote these words in the second chapter,

but that he was quoting something older, perhaps a very early hymn about Jesus, based on the prophet Isaiah. But Paul makes use of this carefully-metered hymn verse to make a point about Christian life.

Each week, when I plan the details of worship services and liturgies, I pay especially close attention to our choice of hymns. There are literally thousands of them available for us to sing, if we are so fortunate to know the tune, of course or can learn one quickly and enjoyably. When you think of it, Christian hymns are the expression of hundreds of thousands of believers over generations and centuries, who, like Gospel writers or teachers or apostles, were also trying to wrap their arms around matters of faith—to make sense of the story of Jesus. No one has ever matched these eloquent words, that lead us from equality to surrender to exaltation. Not even the Gospels tell us “the truth” in such a direct and clear fashion.

As we have heard, his is a remarkable story of love and compassion. Yes, it proceeds with difficulty. Not all people were enamored with Jesus. Many were indifferent, and in the end some conspired against him. His story left a lot of questions that no newscaster or biographer can settle—questions that can only be answered from within the life of faith.

Was he really from God? Why did he have to die? How does his blood and death on the cross erase the sins of anybody else? Who was to blame for his death?

What are the real answers to these? For it is not just what we think of Jesus, objectively, and whether we can wrap our minds around his meaning and significance, but whether we can trust and follow the way of life that he gave us.

This passage from Philippians 2 has *one answer* to all our faith questions. *Humility*. Jesus, although he was in the form and likeness of God, humbled himself. Though he was God’s Son—equal to God—or as the church would say later, “of the same substance or stuff as God”—he did not seize or exploit his status, but humbled himself completely. Though he might have avoided human pain, as people of privilege and wealth always try to do—and though he might have escaped from human suffering as all people hope to do, Jesus humbled himself.

Our own culture today is totally obsessed with success. Not just of popular Hollywood stars, or of the success of companies our retirement plans hold stock in, but of *everything*. And skepticism is as much a part of the “American Way” as our preoccupation with success. We watch closely to see if the next big thing will be topped by the next. We watch to see if the most expensive movie ever filmed will also bring the biggest gross at the box office. Now the American people are watching to see if the new health bill will succeed or fail miserably.

This is a common human trait, only magnified in our times. So it is no wonder that people who met Jesus were skeptical that he was really from God, and deeply skeptical that he could have shared equality with God. But, on top of that, crucifixion and death are not scripted in any success story. It would have been a constant question on people’s minds, then and always: if this is really God’s Son, God’s *messenger*, God’s *message* to the human race, why did he wind up *dead*? Why would anyone from heaven above, with “Almighty” attached to his name, *allow himself* to be rejected, or walk away from success, or give in to petty human authority, sabotage, betrayal and violence? In the Good Friday story, one of the common criminals who were put to death next to him, calls out: “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

And although it was wrong—dreadfully wrong—for human beings to reject his message or assault him and kill him, the first believers who put their trust and faith in Jesus found God’s righteous hand *in this script of failure*. This was *not* defeat! This was not a colossal mistake, not

a clever plot “gone awry,” not the tale of a good guy who was “done in” by human evil. Jesus *became obedient* “to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

And here is where Paul, and the song he quotes, wraps his arms around the Jesus of the Cross. Paul and all those who put their faith in Jesus *came to* understand—*they came to believe*—that when Jesus humbled himself, emptied himself, God above exalted him, and gave him a name above all other names. Because of his obedience, the Cross is the emblem of salvation, not death. The Cross is the universal sign of hope, not despair.

In Southern California, especially, we live in a secular society—in times when more and more people tell the poll-takers that they practice no religion at all. (Again, it was in the *Lutheran* magazine in the April issue that just landed in our mailboxes.) And yet even here and now in such times, the name of Jesus is still more important in the world than *all* the philosophers, all the kings and presidents and politicians and generals and armies, all the atheists, and all the cynics *combined*. More knees are bent to the name of Jesus than to any other name *ever spoken*. Even those who have no respect for religion whatever seem to have respect for Jesus. As the bumper stickers say—or should we call them “bumper snickers”?—“Jesus, save me from your followers.” It is *not* Jesus whom the world rejects today, it is the puffed-up and noisy people who praise him but so often fail to live as he lived.

Which brings us back to humility. “Let this same mind be in you,” says Paul, “that was in Jesus Christ.” If we are true followers, our calling, our mission is *not* to be the kind of followers that others cannot stand, but the kind who imitate Christ—who show mercy, and compassion, and are really to empty themselves for others.

Do you have this kind of faith? This song to sing? This story to tell? If you can wrap your minds around the story of Jesus, are you ready to re-think your own priorities and values in light of your faith?

In philosophy, by the way, these are called “rhetorical questions.” They are mostly used for effect, where no answer is really expected. Yet when the story of Jesus draws us into it, and when St. Paul says to us, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,” we really cannot answer those questions *with words*. Do you have this kind of faith in Christ, in mercy, in compassion, in humility and sacrifice which turns even the apparent failure of the Cross and death itself upside down? *Of course* you want to say “Yes,” but the answer that will change the world cannot be given with mere words. The answer must be come from within each one of us — in who we are, how we behave, where we put our loyalties. The answer is to be found where, in our lives, we practice humility and generosity—and how Christ’s story shapes our story, so that our lives tell others that Christ is in us and lives in our world today. Amen?

