

Why we need the Philippians hymn on Palm Sunday

## **Whether you're in the pulpit or the pews, give some thought to this epistle this week.**

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On Sunday as we hear the long, gruesome drama of the Passion narrative, it is difficult to keep enough space in our minds for the other lessons, but the Philippians hymn ([2:5-11](#)) is not only a beautiful, theologically rich passage of scripture, but it takes on its fullest meaning in the context of Jesus' Passion. Although it may be hard to preach on something other than the Christ's triumphal entry or the crowd's rejection of its king, this may be the best time to preach on Paul's poetic confession we ever get. In fact, the lectionary seems to be suggesting this to us, as it is the epistle lesson for Palm Sunday in all three years and only comes up at other times on the Feast of the Holy Name in Year A and on Holy Cross Day.

Likely quoting a familiar early confession, Paul wrote of Christ Jesus, "And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross." That obedience, which the author of the Letter to the Hebrews makes a big deal of, is the consequence of faithfulness. Jesus was faithful to the point of being rejected by the powers of the world. It was his obedience to God that got him in trouble. His steadfastness in the face of temptation—temptation made real because of his full humanity—was the reason for his torture. That "becoming obedient" does not suggest that Jesus needed to learn what it meant to be faithful to his Father. It means he learned what the consequences of that faithfulness are when subjected to the powers of unfaithful human beings.

Some would argue that Jesus was obedient to his Father's plan in that the Father's plan always envisioned crucifixion. In other words, God sent the Son into the world because God desired a perfect sacrifice for sin. Others would argue that the cross was humanity's rejection of God's plan and not the center of it. I would ask what the

difference is.

In the person of Jesus, we see a union of incompatible natures. Like a lump of potassium thrown into a beaker of water, the divine cannot cohabit with the human and not erupt violently. Something must change. The potential for reaction is too great not to occur. The chemical analogy breaks down, however, because the divine substance is immutable. All the change must happen on the human side. No, Jesus wasn't split internally, but the incarnation—the divine coming into the human plane of existence—required a change in all humanity. It required the cross. Obedience like that—the resolute, uncompromising establishment of the reign of God—can only result in the confrontation with and overthrow of human power. Because of Jesus' obedience to God, the cross was inevitable. Because of Jesus' obedience to God, the resurrection was, too.

"Therefore," Paul wrote, "God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend." Christ's obedience even to the point of death is the reason God has exalted him through resurrection and ascension back to his preeminent heavenly plane of existence. Only perfect obedience could result in perfect human rejection and perfect divine exaltation. Thus, our transformation is not complete with the cross but with the empty tomb and ascension of Jesus. No, we can't get to Easter before we finish Holy Week, but the seeds of that are sown in the incarnation and watered by the blood that was shed on the cross. We cannot help but glimpse the rest of the story.

This Sunday, whether you're preaching on it or listening to it, don't fail to give at least a moment's thought to the Philippians hymn. The only time it takes on its full meaning is when it is paired with the Passion of Jesus. This is incarnational atonement theology. Without it, the Passion is merely a bloodbath. With it, the Passion retains its redemptive nature.

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