

March 29, 2026
Philippians 2”5-11

Sunday of the Passion/Palm Sunday
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“The Power of Hymns”

“And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

John has been a regular at worship since I began leading worship services at the long-term care facility where he lives. He uses a wheelchair and is brought into the meeting space by one of the faithful workers who make certain that every resident who wants to attend worship is provided the means to be present. John is a very quiet person who rarely talks above a whisper and usually does not actively participate in the worship services. You normally will not see John singing the hymns with the other worshippers, or praying the Lord’s Prayer, or participating in any other part of the service. While I have never seen him fall asleep during worship, he usually keeps his head down, preferring to worship in his own quiet way.

One Sunday, our worship service was going as usual, and as usual John was in his place and participating in his way. But then something happened that I will never forget: our final hymn was the familiar and beloved “Amazing Grace,” one of the most popular of all the hymns of the Christian faith. As soon as the pianist began playing the tune, John’s entire demeanor changed; suddenly he lifted his head and looked directly at me, with a smile on his face. While he did not join in the singing, it was obvious that this hymn meant a lot to him, and his bright eyes communicated to me how special this song was to him. When the hymn ended and worship concluded shortly thereafter, John asked the aide to wheel him to the front of the meeting area where I was packing up my worship materials. For the first time, John reached out to me and shook my hand; and for the first time, I heard John speak: “Thank you; I love that hymn!” The next month, I decided to include “Amazing Grace” in worship again; and again, John’s reaction was one of joy and thanksgiving. That hymn brought joy to John in a way that only beloved hymns can offer us.

Music has been a central part of the worship life of God’s people for thousands of years. The psalms are the hymns of the people of Israel, calling upon God’s people to “*make a joyful noise unto the Lord*” (Psalm 100) and to “*praise him with the trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe!*” (Psalm 150). The Apostle urged the people of Ephesus to “*be filled with the Holy Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns*

and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts” (Ephesians 5:18-19); and today’s account of the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew includes mention of the fact that when Jesus and his disciples “*had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.*” (Matthew 26:30). St Augustine famously stated that “*he who sings prays twice,*” and hymns were so important to Martin Luther that he revolutionized worship in 16th Century Germany by introducing congregational hymns in German, aiming to make Christian teachings accessible and participatory. Luther believed that music was a gift from God, second only to theology; music was designed to praise God, teach the faith, and move hearts. Luther wrote some thirty-five hymns in German so that the “common multitude” could understand and participate. Hymns remain a vital part of worship today, touching the hearts of many worshippers and often evoking memories of teachings that have brought us hope and strength for many years.

- “Hymns are vital for worship as they foster corporate unity, facilitate theological education, and deepen spiritual devotion by engaging both the intellect and emotions. They serve to praise God, encourage the congregation, and connect worshippers to a rich historical heritage, embedding biblical truths in hearts and minds through song.” – Ligon Duncan.

Today’s second lesson from Paul’s letter to the Philippians contain what many believe was a hymn of the early church that would have been familiar to the Christians at Philippi, a major Roman city in Macedonia. Paul quotes this familiar hymn as part of his exhortation to the Philippians to “*let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*” (2:5); Jesus is the primary model for the behavior Paul has been advocating among his readers in which they are to “*do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves*” (2:3). Christians are not only to imitate but also assimilate into themselves Jesus’ way of thinking and living. In order for these readers to better understand his teaching, Paul uses a technique that preachers (including myself) have used for generations: quoting the words of a familiar hymn to amplify an important lesson. The Philippians’ behaviour depends on the fact that they are in Christ, and the fact that they are in Christ depends on the saving event of the gospel which is summarized in the “Christ hymn,” in which Jesus’ equality with God is something that Christ already possessed but which he chose not to use for his own advantage: “*who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited*” (2:6). In Christ’s incarnation the eternal Son, who eternally possesses equality with God the Father, empties himself by becoming human. By becoming human, the Son emptied himself of the glory, majesty, and privilege that belong to him as divine. This emptying is tested at Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness, where

the devil seeks to entice Jesus to use his divine powers for his own selfish gain rather than in the way God intends. This may also be seen as being a deliberate contrast with Adam, who desired to be like God (*“Then the LORD God said, ‘See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”* – Genesis 3:22). *“What Adam desired, Christ was content to forgo”* (Morna D. Hooker).

Rather than using his divine privilege and power for his own wants and desires, Christ instead *“emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness”* (2:7). “Emptied” (*kenoo*) stresses the contrast between the possibility that Christ rejected, of choosing what was rightly his, and his abandonment of that privilege; *“it is in his self-emptying and his humiliation that he reveals what God is like, and it is through his taking the form of a slave that we see the form of God”* (Hooker). To adopt the form of a slave (*doulos*), with all the dishonour and lack of privileges that it implies, is the opposite of claiming status and equality with God. It would have been unthinkable in Philippian society in which being “in the form of God” was a status Roman citizens ascribed to the emperor and being “in the form of a slave” which was at the very bottom of the social status ladder. His being in “human likeness” recalls Paul’s teaching in Romans:

- “For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” – Romans 8:3-4.

While Jesus emptied himself of his divine power and privileges in order to be found in “human likeness,” Paul also clearly states that Jesus’ incarnation did not include sharing in human sinfulness: *“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”* (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus lived a human life in the manner of all humans because *“he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people”* (Hebrews 2:17). The Son, who had already emptied himself of divinity, *“humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross”* (2:8). Having taught his disciples that *“the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many”* (Mark 10:45), Jesus dies by crucifixion, the punishment reserved in the Roman world for rebels and disobedient slaves, thus marking the reality of Christ’s self-identification with those who are slaves. Death on the cross was seen as the ultimate extreme of both pain and

humiliation, the manner in which *“Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith ... for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God”* (Hebrews 12:2).

- “Jesus, the crucified one, is able to empathize with us as members of a society that has lost its way, as persons who wonder whether there is any ‘way’ – any road that leads anywhere. That Jesus is no stranger to our own kind of alienation and anxiety ... No, Jesus [is the] one who truly participates in life, life as we know it. All the others are false shepherds, ‘thieves,’ as John says, who in offering us easy access to life’s abundance are really robbing us of any salvation worthy of the name.” – Douglas John Hall.

The tone of the hymn transforms with the triumphant “therefore” that introduces the action of God, who now responds to Christ’s self-emptying and humiliation: *“Therefore God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name”* (2:9). The verb “highly exalted” emphasizes the magnitude of the honour bestowed on Christ; to give someone a name is to give them status and power. The name bestowed on Jesus is the name “that is above every name,” the Father’s public vindication of the supremely honourable human life of the Son. Christ is now, in his human nature, exalted to divine glory and enthroned as Lord of the universe: *“so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”* (2:10-11). When the name of Jesus is mentioned, then all creation should acknowledge that “Jesus Christ is Lord” (*“... because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved”* – Romans 10:9). The words “every knee shall bow” and “every tongue confess” are taken from Isaiah where they refer to the worship of God (*“By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: ‘To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.’”* – Isaiah 45:23). The result of offering to Jesus is the glory of God: *“whoever honours Jesus must also glorify God, because in Jesus we see the one who is ‘in the form of God’ and who mirrors God’s glory.”* (Hooker). The sovereignty of Jesus embraces the full extent of creation, over which the Lord God is sovereign. The name given to Jesus as “Lord” (*kyrios*) proclaims nothing less that the divinity of Jesus as he bears the very name of God (*“yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist”* – 1 Corinthians 8:6).

- “Paul describes Christ as a **kenotic** figure, meaning that Christ derives strength through humility. By emptying himself, he is exalted; by obeying, he becomes Lord; and by becoming a servant, he is glorified. This hymn captures what may be the most significant contribution of Christian doctrine and practice to ideas of power and leadership. It is only through the humiliation of the crucifixion that Christ is glorified in the resurrection.” – Luis Menendez-Antuna.

As we enter into Holy Week and follow our Lord from his triumphal entry into Jerusalem to the Upper Room where he will share his Last Supper and institute the Sacrament of Holy Communion, to the Garden of Gethsemane where he will be betrayed and arrested, to the palace of Pontius Pilate where he will be condemned to death, to the horrific “place of the skull” known as Golgotha where our Lord and Saviour will be crucified, to the empty tomb and the angelic announcement that *“he is not here, for he has been raised”* (Matthew 28:6) – through the range of emotions that we will experience in a matter of a few short days, our hymns will give us the words and voices to share our joy, our sorrow, and ultimately the blessed hope of our faith in our crucified and risen Lord. This Sunday which began with the joy of waving palms while joyfully singing *“all glory, laud, and honour to you, Redeemer King”* will soon be transformed into the solemn declaration that *“my song is love unknown, my Saviour’s love to me ... Oh, who am I that for my sake my Lord should take frail flesh and die?”* Our gathering at the Lord’s Table on Maundy Thursday, *“the night in which he was betrayed”* that we remember every time we gather to receive the Lord’s Supper, will begin with the invitation that *“all are welcome in this place”* as we give thanks for our Saviour’s giving of himself so that *“through your suffering, death and merit life eternal I inherit; thousand, thousand thanks are due, dearest Jesus, unto you.”* We gather on the day of our Saviour death as we ask ourselves *“were you there when they crucified my Lord?”* as we look to the Cross where *“thy grief and bitter passion were all for sinner’s gain; mine, mine was the transgression, but thine the deadly pain.”* But when all seems lost, when the hope we once had in Christ appears to have been buried with him in the tomb, we gather on Easter Sunday to celebrate the good news at the heart of our Christian faith that *“Jesus Christ is risen today! Alleluia!”* Our hymns give us the language and the melodies through which we can share our joys, our sorrows, and the blessed hope that is ours in all that our Lord and Saviour has accomplished for us in this holiest of weeks.

- “Such is the power of hymns – the spiritual meat of the sung Christian tradition. Such is the potential of true Christian fellowship when the hymns inspire us to be authentic with one another, and vulnerable to one another in

our shared journey of faith. There's a lesson here. The authenticity that is returning to the worship and witness of many living congregations who are rediscovering the power of hymns can't come fast enough. Watching younger followers of Jesus eagerly engage with biblical and theological realities that shaped and strengthened their ancestors is both thrilling and heartwarming.”
– Paul E. Detterman

My experience with John reminded me of the power of hymns and how the words of those beloved hymns awakened his joy and faith. I have seen the words and music of beloved hymns bring smiles to faces and tears to eyes as they tap into memories of when we first experienced the love of God in our lives. I have felt the power of hymns bring hope into my life and transform the darkness in which I was dwelling into the brilliant light of the love of God in Jesus Christ. As we walk with our Lord through this Holy Week, may we experience the power of the hymns that we will sing with one voice as we follow our Saviour through a week in which for our sake he will destroy the power of death and by his resurrection assure us of the hope of resurrection and new life for all who are in Christ Jesus. May our hymns be our source of faith and hope as we heed the call to *“let every instrument be tuned for praise; let all rejoice who have a voice to raise; and may God give us faith to sing always: Alleluia!”*

Amen.