

Pastor Lara Bhasin  
The Name of Jesus, January 1, 2024  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
Philippians 2:5-11

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Merry Christmas! (It's still Christmas.) And Happy New Year. Today is a special day in the church calendar. It commemorates the Holy Name of Jesus, and what a great way to launch the new year.

I want to begin this sermon by asking you to imagine a scene. It is two thousand years ago, give or take, and a baby is born. This birth has been greatly anticipated. The wee little thing is barely just a week old, and already there are titles and honorifics and enormous expectations being thrown around.

There he is sucking his thumb and cooing away in his crib like any normal baby. But he is surrounded by admirers. They whisper excitedly. So, this is what he looks like, the child who will someday be called King, Lord, Savior of his people, Son of God!

What a king he will be! He will be dressed like royalty; he will wear a purple robe and a crown upon his head. His place of residence will draw people from all around the earth who will seek him out for the favors they hope will be bestowed on them. The poor will look upon him as their protector.

Now, I'm betting that you think you know who I am talking about so far but let me continue a little further.

This baby will be called Lord because of the great power he will wield and the great armies he will command. He will be called Savior of the people because he will protect them from their enemies. He will be worshiped as a son of God and statues of his likeness will appear all through the empire and command veneration.

He will live in a sumptuous palace. Because of his power, he will be surrounded by flatterers and sycophants who hope to benefit from their allegiance to him. It will be his role to ensure that justice is done in his land, and when the condemned cry out for mercy they will appeal to him. Sometimes he will grant it, and sometimes he will point his thumb down and say no, no mercy.

But he himself will be above the law. He might be a wise and honorable ruler and never use this to his advantage. Or he might murder, seize from others, take any woman he wants, with impunity. He may even gain his throne by such actions.

He will be a man of great power, and he will exercise that power to its full extent. He will dominate over his friends and strive to dominate over his enemies, and it will be this power to dominate that will win him his titles and draw people to him. It will be because of his power that people will call him King, Lord, Savior, and Son of God.

I assume you have figured out by now that I am **not** talking about Jesus! I have in mind a Roman emperor, but any ancient Near Eastern potentate would probably fit the bill. The Caesars of Rome were addressed as king and lord, of course, but it was not uncommon for them to also be called, rather grandiosely, saviors of the people, and according to ancient practice, regarded as divine.

So great became the power and prestige of the Caesars that they came to be worshiped, in a fashion. To prove his loyalty to the state, a Roman citizen had to burn incense in front of a statue of the emperor in order to show his veneration, even if he privately felt that the whole ceremony was nonsense. Many probably did think it was nonsense, to worship a mere mortal and pretend he was a son of God, but they had their own advantages and privileges to protect, so they played along.

This is the context in which Saint Paul is writing his letter to the Philippians. You might find it helpful to turn now to the second lesson in today's bulletin.

The passage from Philippians is one of the most magnificent hymns of praise in the whole Bible. It is always read for the Holy Name of Jesus, and this makes sense, because Paul specifies that it is Jesus at Whose name every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth, and it is Jesus Whom every tongue will confess as Lord. Jesus, **not** Caesar.

What Paul is saying here is not just good news for those of us who love Jesus; it is also theologically important. Paul knows his Scriptures, and there is no mistaking the echoes here in Philippians of a passage from the book of the prophet Isaiah. In this passage of Isaiah, it is God Himself Who declares:

Turn to me and be saved,  
All the ends of the earth!  
For I am God and there is no other...

To me every knee shall bow,  
Every tongue shall swear allegiance. (Isa: 45:22-23)

Paul is saying things about Jesus that can only apply to God, and that is no accident! This passage that we have here before us is important scriptural proof of the divinity of Christ!

But look again at the astonishing way that Paul describes this divine Man. He was in the form of God, i.e., He had the power and majesty and authority of God from the very beginning. Jesus performed miracles, and that points to a kind of divine power, but that is not what interests Paul here. Though Jesus was in the form of God, He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. He emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

Can you imagine Caesar doing such a thing? In the ancient mind, the essence of divinity was power. I am not so sure that we today are much different. If you voluntarily give up your power, your ability to dominate over other people... If you repudiate your high status and take on the status of the lowest man or woman on earth, that of a servant or slave... Where does that leave you? You don't have to be the emperor of Rome to imagine how reluctant you would be to give away every single advantage that you had, every form of power to control your own fate and the fate of other people. And then what do you get out of it? Death. Death by crucifixion, the worst, most painful, most humiliating form of execution reserved for those whom the Romans regarded as the scum of the earth.

But it is this self-emptying that Paul is lifting up here. It is this self-emptying that Paul is saying is what makes Jesus worthy of emulation and which leads God the Father to exalt Him and bestow on Him the name of Lord.

Jesus is worthy of our worship and love not because He is powerful and holds our fate in His hands. He is worthy of love because He gave up everything for love of us.

There is a parable that the Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, tells to try to describe the Incarnation. It goes something like this.

There was once a great king who was extremely rich and who ruled over a huge territory. It came time for him to marry, and he could have had any woman in the realm, but he fell in love with a poor maiden in the poorest corner of his kingdom. He could have forced her to come to the palace. He

could have won her over with a display of his pomp, his wealth, and his might. But he wanted her love, not her cringing acquiescence.

So he set aside his crown and his throne and went out as a lowly servant to woo this maiden. He not only did not abuse his power, he laid it all aside for love of her, so he could try to win her with love. He came to her empty-handed so that he could give her everything. Being king meant nothing to him if he could not have her.

No Caesar worth his salt would ever make such a sacrifice. But which sort of king would you rather have?

The Bible is filled with all sorts of proofs of Jesus's divinity, and it testifies in many and various ways to His Kingly majesty and His cosmic Lordship. But Paul seems most impressed by His voluntary descent from glory down into our poor corner of the kingdom.

Jesus was the only Human Being who ever lived who did not use His power to further His own interests. He was, in the words of our great Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the "Man for others." The Man who emptied Himself of every self-advantage out of love for the rest of us.

This is the essence of the Incarnation which we celebrate this Christmastide.

We human beings are characterized by our urge to dominate over other people and use other people for our own advantage and gratification. Some do it more than others, of course, or are more brazen about it, but the instinct is present in all of us and has been since the days of Adam and Eve. They yearned for the advantage they thought they could gain by eating from the forbidden tree, and we travel through this life little different from our first parents, seeking our own good at every turn.

Saint Augustine, in his autobiography *The Confessions*, accuses even infants of incorrigible selfishness. Many people are horrified that Saint Augustine does not find babies sweet and innocent. Instead, he says that the infant cries to manipulate his mother and force her to do his will, and the toddler throws tantrums only because he is not strong enough to gain his will by brute force. That's harsh, I know!

So let's pick on adults instead. Some people grow up to be monsters, like Nero, who was the emperor at the time that Paul was writing. He used his power for evil, allegedly even going so far as to burn Rome and blame it on the

Christians for his own political ends. He also murdered his own wife and his own mother.

Saint Paul might very well have been thinking about Nero when he wrote to the Philippians. He might have been saying, don't worry about cowering before the name of that wicked devil because Jesus is the true King.

But Paul would not have written to the Philippians urging them to imitate Christ if he did not understand that all of us, even the best of us, need to learn from Jesus's humility.

Look at all the things we do to gain our own advantage and use our little power to dominate over others, even unwittingly. Jesus endured pain for us, but we shirk it ourselves and prefer others to suffer instead. Jesus gave up wealth and status for us, but we seek it. We are preoccupied with what is ours and what is our right, even while Jesus, who had the right to call upon twelve legions of angels to protect Him, gave up all His rights and went to death in our place.

Even when we are trying very hard to be good and noble, there are probably ulterior motives at work. Perhaps we donate to charity because we secretly hope to be seen as generous. Perhaps we lavish gifts on loved ones, but they have strings attached. Perhaps our desire to be virtuous has more to do with our love for our own reputation than a desire to please God. Perhaps we willingly give up the things we want, but what we really want most of all is to be regarded as a martyr and admired for it.

I know this sounds pessimistic! It sounds like I am suspicious that nobody is actually as good as they appear to be. Well, that is true. I do think that everybody tries to use power, in whatever form they possess it, to advance their own interests. Myself first and foremost.

But I am *not* pessimistic! On the contrary, I can joyfully acknowledge my sinfulness and the sinfulness of others because I know there is a cure. The cure takes a peculiar form, yes. It takes the form of a Little Baby born to be the King of this world and the next. A Little Baby Who is the true Savior, the true Lord, and the true Son of God.

But Paul does not write to the Philippians simply to remind them that their sins are forgiven because of the Incarnation. He wants them to be inspired by the Incarnation to become better! Jesus took on mortal flesh so that mortals could grow more like Him!

Paul wants us to be renewed at every level. “Have this mind among yourselves,” he says. In all of his various letters, he urges Christians to try their best to imitate Christ, and that is especially clear here in his letter to the Philippians. Be like Jesus in His humility and obedience. Be like Him in His self-emptying. Put others’ interests first. Endure suffering patiently. Don’t insist on your own way all the time. Do things out of love for others instead of love for self. Be mindful about not being a stumbling block for other people. Don’t hoard wealth and other goods that could be used to help others. Use your gifts and talents to enrich others before you enrich yourself.

These things sound hard. They *are* hard! And they are even harder to do with pure and unselfish motives. After all, God does not want empty gestures; He wants the real thing! Like the king in Kierkegaard’s parable, He does not want to compel us with threats or lure us with rewards; He wants us to come to love Him the way He loves us.

What are we to do?!

Let me offer a bit of encouragement. We should not be preoccupied with getting our motives right. We should try as much as possible not to be preoccupied with ourselves at all. Instead, we should fix our eyes on Jesus. We should go forth through this year, and all the years to come, bearing the Name of Jesus and trying to do good for His sake.

The Incarnation means that we are not doomed to be corrupt and selfish forever. Jesus emptied Himself of His power and came and got down into the trenches with us so He could lead the way out.

To this Jesus be the glory, together with the Father, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.