

Sermon preached at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT  
The Reverend Margie Baker  
April 5, 2020 – Palm Sunday

Sandwiched between the two Gospel readings for today is a brief passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul's letters are the earliest writings of the New Testament, written years before the gospels. This letter was most likely written in 54 or 55 to a church Paul had founded more than a decade before. This matters because, in the portion we read today, Paul quotes an existing hymn. Beginning with, "who, though he was in the form of God" and continuing to the end of our reading, this is quoted material, a hymn already written. A hymn connecting us to the earliest Christians and shedding light on how they understood Jesus.

This is called the "kenotic hymn." Kenosis means self-emptying. It's an appropriate name for the hymn, which praises Jesus for emptying himself, taking on the form of a slave, meaning a human, and then continuing to empty, to humble, himself even to death on the cross. It is this self-emptying, the hymn proclaims, which exalts Jesus, raises his name above all names, and causes our knees to bend and our tongues to confess him Lord. It is his emptying, his humility, his *falling*, which raises him.

Kenosis is a part of who Christ is. Paul traces for us the self-emptying of the Son of God, from Godhead to human to death on a cross. Jesus' entire life is a self-emptying: not just the Incarnation and crucifixion, but the life lived in between. The miracles, the teaching: Jesus gives of himself, of his entire self, his wisdom and his power. Jesus is a bodily outpouring of divine love and mercy. Everything Jesus does, *everything* Jesus does comes from a dynamic self-emptying into the world.

Theologically, Jesus is of the same substance with the Father. This means that the self-emptying we see in Jesus is also true of God the Creator. God is always self-emptying, giving of God's self, always pouring out that same divine love and mercy, and yet never diminishing, never changing in substance. God is love, and this is exactly what we know to be true of love. Love is self-emptying, a constant pouring forth to the beloved, to you and me.

This self-emptying, seen in Jesus' Incarnation, in his life and ministry, and especially in the Passion, this constant pouring forth of redemptive love, is how I understand the mystery that God is always with us. Through the Incarnation Jesus was with us in a *particular*, time-bound, fleshy way. And God is *ever* with us. The God who breathed the world into being, who took on human form and died and rose again, who fills us with the Holy Spirit, continues to create new life, to redeem us, and to animate us. God's love constantly flows, constantly fills us. God is greater that we can imagine, wildly wondrous and grand, and also very, very near. God is always with us.

We as people of faith are *never* alone, no matter how lonely we may feel, no matter how physically isolated we may be, and many of us are right now. God is with us. Always. There is nowhere we can go, nothing we can do, that separates us from God. Nothing. There is nothing that can *happen* to us that separates us from God. That doesn't make life easy. Look at the Passion

narrative we just heard. Look at the week to come. Look at the week we've lived, the *month* we've lived. The promise that God is with us doesn't make life easy, doesn't offer smooth sailing over life's waters. But it does mean that we are not alone, and that our companion on the journey knows what it means to suffer, and will not leave us there.

Fourteenth century mystic Julian of Norwich explains it thus, in her *Book of Showings*: "If there is anywhere on earth a lover of God who is always kept safe, I know nothing of it, for it was not shown to me. But this was shown: that in falling and rising again we are always kept in that same precious love." "In falling and rising again we are always kept in that same precious love." What a timely message as we enter Holy Week, as we remember and bear witness to the falling and rising of Jesus. What a timely message *this* Holy Week, as all around us we feel things falling. Old routines have fallen away. For some of us things seem to be falling apart: the loss of work, the loss of physical closeness with our friends and family, perhaps even the loss of hope that things will ever be okay. Julian speaks directly to us in our falling: we are kept in God's precious love, and we will rise again. AMEN.