

“Following Jesus”
Sixth Sunday in Lent
Philippians 3:7-4:1

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Are you concerned about AI and all of its implications? The environmental effects, how it will change the workforce, the impacts on education, the power being accumulated by a small cohort of billionaires? Maybe even the philosophical questions around consciousness and intelligence and what this means for our humanity?

One of my favorite podcasts to listen to regularly is “The Ezra Klein Show” from the *New York Times*. An episode last week was a wide-ranging discussion between Ezra Klein and the writer Naomi Klein that tried to tie together many of the social, political, economic, environmental, and technological threads of our culture. At the core of the conversation, when they were discussing developments in Artificial Intelligence, they raised the question, “What are humans for?”

So many of the issues we are currently facing tie in some way to the very fundamental questions of our humanity. What is our purpose, what is a good life, how should we live, how do we care for one another? Naomi Klein pointed out that many people in our society now don’t feel like they are being cared for, by other people, but most importantly by the major institutions that run society, including government and corporations. The AI entrepreneurs, in particular, seem to be running headlong into a future that impacts all of humanity with very little opportunity for society-wide conversation. We are all being expected to adapt to changes we’ve had no say in and can do pretty much nothing to control. And that lack of agency or attention to our concerns or even awareness of our basic humanity, does not feel good or right.

But, at the same time, Naomi Klein sees a response developing. In the communities that are fighting back against massive data centers and how much water and electricity they use. She also highlighted the “neighborism” on display here in Minnesota. The concrete and effective ways that people have cared for their neighbors. Klein also pointed out the people who are turning from the digital world to seek more embodied experiences in the natural world—“people are deciding to touch grass,” she said, “both because they like grass and also because they’re becoming afraid of these devices.”

In these positive developments, she sees a growing desire for rootedness. Of caring for a place. Of valuing and enjoying the basic things that humans ought to value and enjoy. People are beginning to wonder how they can cherish and defend what we have and what is irreplaceable and what is core to our humanity.

I listened to this episode while working out one day and was fascinated by the profound depth of the conversation and the ability to tie so much that we currently face to these fundamental concerns of the human condition.

Also, we’ve spent this Lenten season examining our humanity and what it means for us to flourish. I do believe that our society has lost touch with important aspects of our humanity, of what we value, enjoy, and care for. That many struggle with finding a sense of purpose or meaning.

Here’s the good news—we, in the church, can help!

We wrestle with these fundamental questions, and always have. We care for and support one another. We aspire to do good and to become better people. And we do it all with a sense of mission and purpose, being part of something far larger than ourselves that fills us with meaning.

Paul is writing about precisely these sorts of things here in his letter to the Philippians. He tells us that when he encountered Jesus, his life took on new meaning and purpose. He discovered another way of being that brought his life joy and peace.

Elsa Tamez in her commentary on this passage writes that “to become citizens worthy of the gospel [is] by rejecting dehumanizing practices and living life to the full, constantly oriented by a vision of the future that awaits.”

Remember, Paul is writing all of this from prison. And we know that ultimately he will be executed by the Roman Empire for his subversive behavior.

Yet, in the midst of that suffering, Paul is still filled with joy and finds the life of following Jesus to have been worth all of it. This way of being human is superior to what he had been doing before.

It's not that this life is free of struggle and adversity—clearly it isn't. But is a way of life that provides hope and the motivation to help him face the struggles ahead.

Tamez writes, "Paul invites the community to persevere, to resist adversity, to follow the call of the Divine, and to adopt a new way to live together with others as citizens of a new reign, renewed in the image of the risen Christ."

This Palm Sunday, we are also called to follow Jesus. And we know that the path ahead isn't all comfort and bliss. Before Easter, we must pass through Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, days of betrayal, pain, violence, and death. But we face those days with the confident hope of resurrection to new life.

This Lent, as we've explored our humanity, and what it means to flourish, we've been guided by the book *Abundant Lives*, written by the sociologist Amanda Udis-Kessler. She's talked about the good work that we must do in order to flourish. There is work we must do individually and work we must do collectively. Because of canceling church for the snow day two weeks ago, we haven't gotten to all the points she covers in the book. We have explored the individual work that each of us must do if we are to flourish and help other people in their flourishing—cultivating the virtues, healing our psychic wounds, and, today, growing spiritually.

She also writes about the collective work we must do as a church—to develop a resilient and caring community, to be welcoming, inclusive, and loving, and to confront the injustices of our society. She summarizes, "Whatever else progressive Christianity is, it ought to be a social change movement for human and planetary flourishing."

This afternoon we are invited to join our Christian siblings in a march to the Capitol in order to bear public witness to our faith and our vision for a more just, equitable, and caring society. Though organized locally, Christians will be marching and rallying together across the country. Marching on Palm Sunday, like Jesus and the disciples did. A stirring reminder that we are part of a movement that helps all people flourish as God desires.

When Udis-Kessler writes about spiritual growth, she specifically draws upon the Palm Sunday story to make her point. Some scholars believe that there were two processions in Jerusalem that day. On the western side of the city, the Roman governor Pontius Pilate arrived with his soldiers and court, to be in Jerusalem during the Feast of Passover, because that was a time when people could become unruly and the extra military presence was required.

While Jesus and his disciples entered from the eastern side of the city, in a way that mocked the imperial parade. With Jesus riding on a donkey instead of a war horse or in a chariot.

Udis-Kessler draws attention to this possibility as revealing that in life we have a choice between two very different ways of being—violence and non-violence, domination and servanthood, greed and generosity, arrogance and humility, cruelty and kindness. You get the point. To follow Jesus, of course, is to make a choice of what it means to be human and how we are going to live, what we are going to value, and what to enjoy.

As society wrestles with fundamental questions of the human condition, including "what are humans for?" we bear witness to the way of Jesus, an alternative to what is currently on offer by the dominant powers of our time.

Lest we get triumphant about ourselves, that we have chosen the right path, we also need to be reminded that each of us is actually capable of acting both ways. We can be both cruel and kind. We can be both violent and non-violent. We can be greedy and generous. We can hate, and we can love.

Despite all our best efforts, there is still a part of our human condition that misses the mark. That's what we, in the church, call sin.

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote an excellent book 25 years ago entitled *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation*, in which she described eloquently this aspect of our humanity:

Deep down in human existence, there is an experience of being cut off from life. There is some memory of having been treated cruelly, and—a little deeper, perhaps—the memory of having treated someone else cruelly as well. Deep down in human existence there is an experience of seeing the light and turning away from it, either because it is too beautiful to behold or because it spoils the dank but familiar darkness. Deep down in human existence there is an experience of reaching for forbidden fruit, or pushing away loving arms, of breaking something on purpose just to prove that you can. Deep down in human existence there is an experience of doing whatever is necessary to feed and comfort the self, because there is no one else to trust, no other purpose to serve, no other god to follow.

This is what we call sin. And all of us struggle with it. The enticement and temptation away from what we know is best and right. Which means that sin is another thing that gets in the way of our flourishing, both in our individual behaviors and in the way sin has larger, social, systemic effects built into the structures of domination in our economics, politics, technology, and culture.

Because of the reality of sin in our lives, we are called to repent. To turn away from that which harms our life and the lives of others, and turn toward what God intends for us. To make the decision to follow Jesus.

Here's how Barbara Brown Taylor describes repentance—"Repentance begins with the decision to return to relationship: to accept our God-given place in community, and to choose a way of life that increases life for all members of that community."

Key to facing sin is our acknowledgement that we do not face it alone, but in a community, and, ultimately, empowered by the grace of God. Central to our Reformed understanding, we do not and cannot save ourselves. Only God can do that. But that salvation is offered to us as a free gift. The good news is that we do not have to do anything to earn it, but can freely embrace it.

And once we turn to God, then the power of the Holy Spirit working within us, helps us to face temptation, to overcome our worst impulses, to daily choose to follow the way of Jesus instead of the way of the Empire.

So our spiritual practices and spiritual growth become helpful tools in moving forward towards the life that God desires for us, a life of joy and love and flourishing. As Amanda Udis-Kessler writes, "Ultimately, spiritual practices orient us to the flourishing of all people and help us reject the temptation of ease . . . ; they also help us develop self-control in the face of those desires that it would be better for us not to pursue."

Prayer, meditation, reading and studying the Bible, singing, worship, creativity, service, justice work—these and other spiritual practices are intended to shape us, developing good habits that strengthen our character and open us to new possibilities. Lent is, of course, a season in which we are invited to make new resolves in our spiritual practices. Maybe you did so this year. But we can make and renew those commitments at any time of the year—to engage more deeply in the life of the Spirit.

And when we engage more deeply in the Spirit, we encounter the rich life of meaning, purpose, and joy that Paul wrote about, even as he was sitting in prison, awaiting his own death.

As our age wrestles with fundamental questions, including "what it means to be human," this ancient letter of Paul's is a witness to the new life he discovered when he encountered Jesus. Paul's life took on new meaning and purpose, as he discovered another way of being human that brought joy and peace. Humanity is hungry for those things even now.

Let me repeat what Elsa Tamez wrote in her commentary on this passage “to become citizens worthy of the gospel by rejecting dehumanizing practices and living life to the full, constantly oriented by a vision of the future that awaits.”

That is our goal as followers of Jesus.

And when we choose to follow Jesus, we can become not only our best, flourishing selves, but also the very people that the world needs. This is our higher calling, to bear witness to all that is good and right in humanity—what does bring us meaning and purpose and fills us with joy and peace.

This Holy Week, let us be imitators of Christ, meeting humanity in places of sorrow and suffering, so that together, through love and grace, we might rise again to new life, a new creation, a life of fullness, beauty, and joy.