

The Humble Lord
Philippians 2:5-11
John Breon

This Advent we're exploring who Jesus is, what he does, and what it means for us. Who is this One that the Creed describes this way? "For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human" (*The Nicene Creed, The United Methodist Hymnal #880*).

In the book of Hebrews we saw that God's Son is "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (1:3). Here in Philippians we see that he is in the form of God, or, in very nature God and equal with God. In this section we've read, we see three important things about Jesus: *As God he emptied himself. As human he humbled himself. God has exalted him as Lord of all* (Gordon Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians, New International Commentary on the New Testament*).

As God he emptied himself. The baby born in Bethlehem so long ago is not just another baby. He's not just another person. He came down from heaven. He's the incarnation, the embodiment, of God. He existed from eternity as a Person of the Holy Trinity. He was in the form of God or in very nature God.

But the nature of God is to love and give, to pour himself out. The Trinity is continually and eternally pouring out love to each other and receiving love from one another. There's no lack, no need in the triune God. But God desired and decided to create something that's not God and to love that creation. So God's outpouring, outgoing love spoke a universe into being. God made a variety of creatures to live in and enjoy the world God made. Some creatures God made in his own image to relate to God, to respond to God, to reflect God's glory and share God's rule. But we misuse God's gifts, rebel against God, disobey God, and cut ourselves off from life with God.

But God's outreaching, outpouring, giving love kept reaching and giving. God the Son didn't consider his equality with God something to be grasped, to cling to, to exploit, to use to his own advantage. God isn't

clinging and selfish, but loving and giving. So he made himself nothing. He emptied himself. He gave himself completely to take the form or nature of a slave.

The important thing here is that the Son didn't stop being God when he emptied himself, took the form of a slave, and came to be in human likeness. It was as God that he did all of that. So in Jesus we see what God is like. Loving, giving, pouring himself out, coming down. That's what was going on when Jesus came into the world.

One writer talks about how we use the phrase "level with me." Sometimes we mean, "Tell me the truth. Give it to me straight." But "level with me" can also mean, literally, *level with me*. On the same plane. One person's not higher than another. The Son of God didn't exploit his equality with God, but he came down to our level. He invites us to join him in descending, in being on the level with each other. And then he wants to lift us all up, to take us with him to the higher plane of life with God.

I invite you to walk closer to the manger. Look at his young mother. Her face is serene but exhausted. Look at his young father, his face firm with a determination to keep his vulnerable family safe. Look at him, the baby: so tiny, so helpless, level with you, level with me, the Son of God. What a risk he took becoming human, enduring all that you and I have to endure and more! (Alyce McKenzie, "Level with Me: Reflections on Philippians 2:1-11," <https://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/level-with-me-alyce-mckenzie-09-19-2014>, accessed 12/5/18)

There's a gospel song that goes along with what we're talking about here:

He came down to my level
When I couldn't get up to his
With a strong arm he lifted me up
To show me what livin' is
He'll come down to your level if you'll open up the door

He wants to make your life worth livin'
That's what he came down for

(Dwight Liles,

https://www.google.com/search?safe=active&source=hp&ei=tt sKXOTAI83GsAW6lpGADA&q=he+came+down+to+my+level+lyrics&oq=He+came+down+to+m&gs_l=psy-ab.1.3.0i9.1223.5519..8446...0.0..0.292.2093.13j3j2.....0....1..gws-wiz.....0..0i131.mCdNI60Nud8)

So, as God he emptied himself and came down to be human. Then, *as human he humbled himself.*

I get a daily email devotion called "The Seedbed Daily Text." A few days ago, the writer had this interesting insight:

We understand that Jesus was born for all people, but perhaps sometimes we forget that Jesus was born into a specific race of people, into a long cultural heritage and history. He carried distinct physical features (the tone of his skin, the color of his eyes, inherited family traits) that identified him with that people and he always fully embraced that identity. He was born into a race of people who had experienced hundreds of years of slavery, a trial they could never forget. He was born into a race of people who knew what it meant to be conquered by force. Repeatedly they were violently attacked and carried away from their homeland into exile.

At the time of his birth, his people were living under the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire. The very dust beneath their feet had been promised to them by God Himself. Yet Caesar, in all of his might, claimed it as his own and instituted a reign of systematic injustice. Taxes, laws, enforcement tactics—Jesus' people were at the mercy of the system. From the very first glance of his face and skin, from the very first sounds of his accent, from the things that he ate and the ways that he worshipped, it was undeniably clear that Jesus was firmly located and numbered among the oppressed. And that is exactly where he wanted to be. And that is exactly where we still find

him. (Matt LeRoy, "The Center of the Story," <https://www.seedbed.com/the-center-of-the-story-protagonist/>)

Think of how Jesus as a human was humble. We see the humility of his parents. God's purposes through history narrowed to the point of Mary, a young Jewish girl at her prayers (C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*). When the angel gave her the news that she would be the Messiah's mother, she replied, "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled" (Luke 1:38). Joseph was a young man dealing with his fiancée's impossible pregnancy. He was caught between his faithfulness to the law and his compassion for Mary. But an angel spoke to him in a dream and assured him that Mary's child was the work of God's Spirit. Then Joseph did what the angel of the Lord told him and took Mary home as his wife (Matthew 1:18-25).

We see the humility of where Jesus was born—in a stable. It was probably the downstairs part of a house, perhaps the home of some of Joseph's relatives. They didn't have a cradle for Jesus so they laid him in a feed trough.

The shepherds are an example of humility. The good news of the Savior's birth came to these scruffy laborers who were looked down on in that society.

Jesus' family became refugees. They fled to Africa to escape the jealous, paranoid rage of King Herod.

As Jesus got older, he was obedient to his parents (Lk 2:51). That had to require humbling himself.

The so-called silent years of Jesus' life are an example of humility. He lived and worked in obscurity until he was around thirty years old.

And he lived and worked in Nazareth, a small back-water town that didn't have a good reputation. Later, one of Jesus' soon-to-be disciples will hear that the Messiah is Jesus of Nazareth and he'll exclaim, "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" (Jn 1:46).

Jesus will give this invitation and describe himself this way:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and

humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Mt 11:28-30)

But when Paul talks about how Jesus humbled himself, he says Jesus obeyed God. He was obedient unto death, even death on a cross! Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Mt 26:39). He accepted the cup of suffering. He went to the cross.

Jesus came down and went as low as he could for us. In the Roman world, crucifixion was the most shameful death. In polite Roman society, it was almost an obscenity to talk about crucifixion. It was a method of execution for slaves, the lowest criminal, and rebels—not for Roman citizens. Even in Jewish thinking, a person who was hanged on a tree was particularly cursed (Deuteronomy 21:23; Galatians 3:13). This is why Paul says elsewhere:

Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Corinthians 1:22-24)

A crucified Messiah didn't make sense. There couldn't be a greater contrast than between God and the cross. And yet, it's on the cross that the one who was equal with God most fully shows us the truth about God. God is love and expresses his love in self-giving, in self-sacrifice. He's willing to humble himself to such depths to reach us, to save us, to bring us home.

Jesus never stopped being God, being equal to God.

The decision to become human, and to go all the way along the road of obedience ... to the divine plan of salvation, yes, all the way to the cross ... was not a decision to stop being divine. It was a decision about *what it really meant to be divine*. (N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters*)

In humbling himself, in the shame and weakness of the cross, Jesus shows us who God is and what God is like. The love of God that was always pouring out and giving was poured out on a Roman cross outside Jerusalem.

Now, because God's Son emptied himself, became human, and humbled himself even to death on a cross, therefore, *God has exalted him as Lord of all*. God has highly exalted him and given him a name that's above every name. Someday, at the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Picture the movement of this story of the Son of God. He's in glory, he's equal with God. He makes himself nothing and comes down to be human. He continues downward in humility, dies on a cross, and is buried. But then God raises him from the dead and exalts him to the place of highest honor and glory. God gives Jesus his own name of Lord. All creation will bow to him and acknowledge him at some point. In all of this, God is glorified.

Go back to the story of Jesus' birth and see how he's already seen as exalted. The angel tells Mary,

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end. (Lk 1:32-33)

Elizabeth calls Mary "the mother of my Lord" (1:43). The angel tells the shepherds that "a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord" (2:11). A great company of angels declare, "Glory to God in the highest" (2:14). The Magi traveled from a foreign land to find the one born to be king of the Jews and they bowed down and worshiped him (Mt 2:11).

After Jesus' death and resurrection, Thomas, one of his disciples, calls him "My Lord and my God!" (Jn 20:28).

The Bible concludes with the affirmation that the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will

reign forever and ever. King of kings and Lord of lords, hallelujah!
(Revelation 11:15; 19:16).

Who would [have] tho't that long ago
So very far away
A little child would be born
And in a manger laid
And who would have tho't this little child
Was born the King of kings
The Son of just a carpenter
But for whom the angels sing
And who would have tho't that as He grew
And with other children played
This child with whom they laughed and sang
Would die for them some day
And who would have tho't this little child
Could make a blind man see
Feed the hungry make rich the poor
And set the sinner free
Oh who would have tho't this little child
Was who the prophets said
Would take away the sins of man
And rise up from the dead

O I believe and I will always sing
This little child is the King
O I believe and I will always sing
This little child
He is the King of kings

(Scott Wesley Brown

http://lyrics.wikia.com/wiki/Scott_Wesley_Brown:This_Little_Child)

What does all this mean for us? First, Jesus came down to save us, to rescue us from sin and death, to forgive us and restore God's image in us.

He came down to our level to raise us up. As he is lifted up, he takes us with him. God comes down and enters in to our life to transform us and lift us up to share his life. This is summed up in a saying that the Son of God became human so that humans could become children of God.

But there's another application of all this good teaching about Jesus. Paul tells this story and lifts up Jesus as the example for the Philippian Christians to follow. Jesus is the model for the kind of life, the kind of relationships Paul wants them to have—or, God wants them to have—with each other in their church. Paul began this section urging these people to be united in love and in having a single mindset. He says, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit"—that's exactly what Jesus refused to do. "Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests, but each of you to the interests of others"—that's exactly what Jesus did. "In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus"—who was equal with God, but didn't cling and exploit. Instead, he made himself nothing. Then he humbled himself and went to the cross. Therefore, God exalted him.

We can make that our story too when we are in Christ by God's grace through our faith and trust. There's another "therefore" following this telling of Jesus' story: "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed ... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose" (2:12-13).

Will we believe the story of Jesus? Will we enter into it and become part of it? Will we live out his story in how we treat each other and in working with God who works in us?