

# Engaged

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**Third Presbyterian Church**

**March 29, 2015 (Palm Sunday)**

**Philippians 2:5-11 and Mark 11:1-11**

Definition 1 – busy, occupied. “I told him I was otherwise engaged.”

Definition 2 – having formally agreed to marry. “We were engaged on Valentine’s Day.”

Definition 3 – attract, involve. “She sought to engage her mother’s attention.”

Definition 4 – employ, hire, recruit. “He engaged a landscaper to do the job.”

Definition 5 – establish a meaningful contact or connection with. “The teams needed to engage with local communities.”

Definition 6 – move into position so as to come into operation. “The clutch will not engage.”

That is no doubt enough. Last fall, we identified six words to help us think about who we are, or who we aspire to be. It took several months to get all the pieces into place, and here we are, the sixth of our six words. Words one through five are *spiritual, thoughtful, compassionate, inclusive, artistic*. They have evoked good conversations, and I do hope that as you gather up the gumption to tell others about us, to invite them to church, they might give you a descriptive handle.

Now the sixth of our six words, and I am grateful that the timing connected that word with *this* day, and the week that *follows* this day.

Engaged. You’ve heard a variety of definitions. Whatever the permutation, it suggests a relationship, a connection, an engagement. In this case, it suggests that we are called to be engaged with one another, in connection, in a community of faith. And it also suggests that we are called to be engaged with the community beyond these walls, whether it be down the street or around the world.

Churches can be engaged internally, or they can be engaged externally. I would suggest that we aspire to be both, and that as we grow into that vision – by being spiritual and thoughtful and inclusive and compassionate and artistic – as we aspire to be both, we will grow into the church God is calling us to be.

That’s why we used a photo from the East Avenue Grocery Run to connect image and word. The Grocery Run has built an extraordinary sense of community within Third Church. And it has engaged the broader community wonderfully, more than 1000 runners and walkers in what is inevitably a lousy November

morning, all the while raising funds for our hunger ministry which in turn builds community among volunteers while meeting the needs of our hungry neighbors. That's engagement.

But there is one more aspect of engagement that punctuates everything else. As I said, the first five words describe us, or how we aspire to be. So does the sixth. But all of those matter, including our call to engage one another and the world, only because God engaged us first. God initiates connection, covenant, engagement, and any engagement that we engage is a grateful, joyful, hopeful response to God.

And when we wonder what that looks like, or whether it's real, or how we can understand it, we need look no further than the events of this morning, and this week.

We are engaged with each other and the world because God is engaged with us. That engagement is not theoretical. It is physical – flesh and blood. Today it comes into town riding on a donkey, and we welcome it jubilantly. On Thursday it will be betrayed shamefully, and on Friday it will be killed tragically, and on Saturday it will lay in a tomb. That is true engagement, and it empowers us to do all the things we are called to do.

It is made real and clear this day; God engages with the world, through the world, in the world, as Jesus enters triumphantly to what he knows will be his death.

We know the broad outlines of the story. Each gospel writer tells it just a bit differently, emphasizing one aspect or another, speaking to different audiences. Mark's version is the leanest. Most of the story is spent elaborately establishing how Jesus' mode of transportation – a donkey, a colt – will be procured.

Every aspect of this merits its own career of sermons, focused in one way or another on what the disciples were thinking, what the onlookers were thinking, what the religious and political authorities were thinking, what Jesus was thinking. All are important, but a bottom line, if not *the* bottom line is that all of this unfolds so that Jesus can fulfill his destiny, can live out his calling. Everything flows *to* that. Everything flows *from* that. If nobody else knows what is coming, he does.

So the colt, or the donkey, is procured, and the procession proceeds; Jesus, riding on a beast of burden, enters the city, both triumphantly, as we understand it, and humbly, as we will come to understand it. The crowd – and we don't know exactly who they were – spread their garments on the ground and waved branches and shouted "hosanna," which means "praise" but also means "deliver us, save us," acknowledging their hopes and expectations for the one they were adoring and their own needs and desires.

Matthew, Luke and John offer different details; here the parade ends without description, Jesus enters the temple and looks around as a kind of foreshadowing, and then returns to the outskirts of town with his followers. He knows what will happen. We know what will happen. Others don't, yet, though they have been told repeatedly.

Beverly Gaventa points out the irony, the "conflict between the apparent triumph and the impending arrest and crucifixion." The irony of Jerusalem as the city which welcomes him joyfully becomes the

locus of his betrayal, his prosecution and his death. The irony of the crowd adoring him then turning its back on him. Expectations are turned inside out all along the way. (*Texts for Preaching, Year B*, pages 247-249)

The Messiah we want, politically and religiously, is not the Messiah we get. The Messiah we get, on every count, is the Messiah we need. And the Messiah we need is engaged with those very expectations to transform them.

To understand that transformation, and what this engagement means, we turn to the Apostle Paul. In his letter to the Philippian church, Paul captures the essence of who this Jesus is, a complex, mysterious description to be sure but also a portrait that invites us, and those who have gone before us for generations, to ponder Jesus.

As you listened to the words just sung and read, and as you encounter them again, you discern a pattern. Jesus, born of God, acted not as we would expect. He was human, not *pretending* to be human, not somehow *partly* human, but human, fully human. He grew to be one with a different power, not political, not military, not even religious. A different power. And he emptied himself. Then he humbled himself. Then he died. And not just death, but death on a cross, a shameful, painful, humiliating, public death.

And just when the description hits its lowest point, Paul transforms it all with a word, “therefore.” “Therefore.” *Because* he emptied and humbled and offered himself, God exalted him, lifted him up. The downward trajectory becomes an upward arc. *Because* he engaged the world, in all its misery and heartache and brokenness, God exalted him. God did not abandon him, but lifted him up. We should too.

And because he engaged the world, and therefore because he engaged us, we are called to a similar life of engagement. And because he did, we can do the same with the expectation and hope that God through Jesus continues to be engaged with us, leaving us not to our own devices, but empowering us, so that the work of transformation and the practice of expectation-defiance can continue, on his behalf.

The scholar Stan Mast writes that “... (the Philippians passage) is an alternative Palm Sunday song that reveals the deepest meaning of what happened in the life and death, resurrection and ascension, and, yes, triumphal entry of Jesus.” He humbled himself. Mast writes: “He could have become human as a kind of superman, or as a military leader, or as a business tycoon, or as royalty. He could have entered Jerusalem on this Palm Sunday astride a prancing white charger; instead he clip clopped into town as the donkey king. He could have become anything he chose to be. What he chose was humility.” And that humility led to his death.

It is not inappropriate that we wave palms and shout hosannas this morning. It echoes the story in very real and dramatic ways. But we cannot miss the clues of what is coming, and we certainly can’t leap over the unfolding elements of the story and proceed right to the empty tomb. We can’t get to the stunning “therefore” of the story without the full ramifications of humility and emptiness. And we don’t. That’s

what “engagement” means. It means movement from triumph to cross to empty tomb, and we are witnesses and participants all along the way.

Scott Hoetzee writes that “it’s easy...to make the whole story look like a clear-eyed, straightforward set of events.” What if we, Hoetzee writes, ponder the “many conflicting angles,” the mystery? Like life itself, this will not unfold cleanly. It is not meant to.

Paul describes Jesus’ life, Christian Eberhart writes, as moving from the “summit of divine glory to the nadir of human suffering and death.”

Elizabeth Shivley writes that in these brief, iconic words, “emptied” and humbled,” “Paul *shows* rather than *tells* what it is to imitate Christ.”

Who God is is humble, self-sacrificial service. Who God is is engagement, about which we can share many definitions, but which, at heart, we understand in flesh-and-blood, real life, God incarnate, in love and laughter and suffering and brokenness.

God could have engaged the world in any way God chose. God could have chosen to dis-engage. God chose this way.

“God so loved the world,” we heard a Sunday or two ago. Love that does not flinch, love that is meek but not weak, love that walks through and not around the realities of life. It is present as planes fall from the sky and crash into mountains, as politicians make unjust decisions, as people we love wrestle with cancer. It humbles and empties itself so that we know, and can feel it in our bones and to the depths of our souls, that this Jesus is fully engaged with us, and not just pretending.

Whatever else we experience this day, the triumph foreshadowing tragedy, the expectations we carry, the hopes and dreams of our lives, we focus on this one whose praises we sing and whose betrayal we will support, whose same mind we are encouraged to have. He is fully engaged, flesh-and-blood engaged, not only with his destiny, but with all of us, and with all of *this*, and with all of *that* – the whole, wide world. And he calls us to do the same, to be the same, in love and in hope.

“Blessed in the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.” Amen.