

In the Form of God and in the Form of a Servant

East Ontario, St. Mary's and Holy Trinity

Palm Sunday, March 29th, 2026

(Philippians 2:5-11)

Holy God, give us eyes to see and ears to hear of your wonderful mystery and the truth of our lives in you. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of the best Anglican writers is Evelyn Underhill, from early last century. She was English and a mystic. She writes something in her book “The Spiritual Life” that takes the incredible hymn-like poem from Philippians about the Son, and she shows how our own life stories, our own paths and journeys, when lived in faith, reflect the likeness of Jesus’ journey from glory, to humility and trial, to exaltation and glory anew. Underhill counsels us: that our growth and response to God “may seem to us like a movement, a journey, in which by various unexpected and often unattractive paths, we are drawn almost in spite of ourselves...to the real end [or purpose] of our being, the place where we are ordained to be...” (1956, 27). A wonderful example of this is the very writer of Philippians, good old Paul. Paul writes to the church in Phillipi from prison. He likely wrote, knowing they were worried about him. And it seems the letter is an effort to stop being “preoccup[ied] with one’s fate,” and instead to focus on belief and “proclamation of the gospel” in

the midst of struggle.¹ So turning his mind off his own fate and focusing on life in Christ, Paul quotes what might be the earliest Christian hymn ever written:

...though he was in the form of God...emptied himself...born in human likeness... humbled himself...to the point of death – even death on a cross.

Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name...in heaven and on earth and under the earth...

To use Underhill's words, what an "unexpected" and "unattractive" path the Son takes in his incarnation! The Son belongs, uncreated, without beginning or end, in divine union with the one he calls Father and their Spirit. That's the Son's original identity, glorious in joy and love, existing just to exist as God. Then they freely choose to create Creation. But things go sideways for Creation. The creatures are led astray by evil into rebellion and despair and lostness from God. And this is where the story really gets interesting. In unfailing, tender love, the Son goes on a rescue mission. The Son counts not his status as God something to be clung to, and he empties himself of his glory with the Father and Spirit to become the human Jesus. He comes to atone for humanity's rebellion and bring them like lost and scattered sheep back home to their Creator. Jesus, as God and human, is humiliated by the powers of evil, horribly tortured and executed. From that

¹ "The Letter of Paul to the Philippians" in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 279 NT, 1994.

seeming failure, his Father and their Spirit raise him from the dead, and Jesus returns to his divine place from before Creation, carrying with him his humanity, while his Holy Spirit gathers a church to find freedom in the risen Christ from the very things that put Jesus on the cross.

Then, as Paul remembers all this to the church in Philippi, it makes some sense of the journey Paul and the Christians are on. Underhill writes this, “St. Paul did not want to be an apostle to the Gentiles. He wanted to be a clever and appreciated young Jewish scholar, and he kicked against the pricks” (1956, 29). Paul himself went from a settled life of religious prestige to a life on the road and the high seas, through stoning and beating and prison; and the amazing thing is that Paul still came out of that journey as a clever and appreciated scholar, and one of the most famous and influential writers of all time.

Here’s the take-away today. There’s a pattern to the faithful life in Christ, and it’s patterned after Christ. The pattern is that we all have, first, an original identity and, second, a Spirit-sent calling, and third a final and eternal fulfillment. For Jesus, his original identity is eternal glory with and as God; his Spirit-sent calling is his incarnation, “unexpected” and “unattractive;” his final and eternal fulfillment is being exalted above every name, returned to his place with and as God – and in eternity the Beloved of every creature. For Paul his original identity is an ambitious, gifted, zealous scholar of Torah; Paul’s Spirit-sent calling is his

conversion to Jesus as Israel's Messiah and God, to then preach Jesus to the non-Jewish peoples; Paul eternal fulfillment is resurrection with Jesus in the life of the world to come, while we the Church learn from Paul's writings almost every Sunday.

What is your original identity? How have you been sent by the Holy Spirit, perhaps on an "unexpected" and even "unattractive" path? Have you had glimpses of a final fulfillment, and do you live with the hope of resurrecting with Jesus in eternity where who we were created to be is made, at last, perfect and whole?

To sum up: 1) Original identity, 2) Spirit-sent calling, and 3) final glory: that's the pattern of a life in Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.