

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, February 1, 2026

Philippians is going to center us this day. But before we read God's word and hear it proclaimed, I invite you to get comfy in your pews or on your sofa if you're there this morning. Take a deep breath in with me. Breathe it out slowly.

Another deep breath in.

Breathe it out slowly. Breathe in God's mercies.

And breathe out God's mercies to others. Breathe in God's mercies. And breathe out God's mercies to others.

Gracious spirit, you are as close to us as our very next breath. So we pray that you would dwell within us and around us in this time. That by your power you would quiet any voice within us but your own. that we might hear your good news for us and for the world this day, and that in hearing we might be called to lead lives of response. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Philippians, chapter 2, beginning in the fifth verse going through the 11th verse.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God as a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of man. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

The grass withers and the flower fades but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So each week we are building for ourselves a deeper and more meaningful understanding of who we know Christ to be. In our tradition we do not tarry with the crucifixion all that often. We spend time reflecting upon it on Good Friday. There's a service that we hold on Good Friday evening marking the Crucifixion. There's often between 50 and 75 people in this place to remember that. Often in our tradition, we go from the joy and the celebration of Palm Sunday to the joy and the celebration of Easter. But this understanding of Christ the Crucified invites us to a different sort of reflection this morning. And I don't want us to move too quickly through it. There are some traditions that have prominently in their worship space a Cross, and on that

The Reverend David J. Powers

Sunday, February 1, 2026

Cross hangs the crucified Christ. Not ours. When we do have crosses displayed, they are empty because we trust in the triumph of God over death. We spend more time in the midst of the risen Christ, reflecting and appreciating and loving our risen Savior and less time in the Crucifixion. But I want us to spend just a bit of time this day in the midst of the...we'll call it the Easter Saturday of the Crucifixion. In the midst of the difficulty and the pain that we know in Christ the Crucified.

The author of Philippians speaks beautifully and poetically to what it is that Christ is doing in taking on flesh but also in submitting to the Cross. The author says that "Christ emptied himself taking the form of a servant being born in human likeness and being found in human form. He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross." This is the center of our text this morning. It ought to be the center of our reflection as well. Much ink has been spilled over the purpose of the Cross, why the Crucifixion seemingly necessary, what it accomplished. I want to posit to you this morning that Jesus came in solidarity, and that the Crucifixion or the Cross is an illustration of Christ entering into the pain and suffering of the world. I want to say that again. Jesus came in solidarity, and that the Cross is the illustration of Christ entering the pain and suffering of the world. Christ comes in solidarity to the world and enters its pain and suffering. When we skip from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, we miss the suffering and the pain that Jesus experiences. What we miss is more than simply his experience. But what we can often miss is that Jesus is very present in the midst of that pain and suffering, and in his pain and suffering that is thrust upon him by the world...by us. But he still submits and is present in the midst of that. He comes in solidarity so that he might experience a measure of that pain and suffering so that we might know that he is well acquainted with it, that there is not a pain or suffering in the world that Christ does not know and know fully. He comes not only in solidarity for the world but in solidarity for you and for me and for our neighbors. What is true of Christ entering into pain and suffering for the world is also true for us too. We know what it's like to navigate pain and suffering. Maybe you came this morning with a particular pain that you are navigating. Or maybe you love someone who has a deep wound this day. Part of the good news of the Gospel is that Christ is acquainted with that pain as well. There is no pain, no suffering that you can walk through that he does not know. That's critically important to us as we build a Christology together. We do not worship a God who does not understand the immense difficulties of the world, one unfamiliar with suffering. Instead, in Christ we worship the God who can fully empathize because Jesus has lived pain and suffering in every way. This gospel truth, Christ the Crucified, it's meant to comfort us and console us even in the midst of our most difficult and painful times. Because of the pain we experience, because of the suffering around us, we need a clear understanding, a clear Christology of Christ the Crucified.

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Jesus came in solidarity, and that means there is not a pain that we can navigate that Christ is not present in. There is not a pain that we cannot see in the world where Christ is not present. That consoles us and gives us hope even in the darkest times. William Sloan Coffin pastored Riverside Church for a long time. In his fifth year of ministry there, his son Alex died tragically in a car accident. His car ran off the road into Boston Harbor and he drowned. William Sloan Coffin made his way into the pulpit of Riverside Church the following Sunday. In the midst of his fifth year of ministry there at Riverside on January 23rd, he preached a sermon. I want to...I want to read a good bit of it this morning to you, because what becomes evident in the midst of his preaching so many years ago is a clear Christology of Christ the Crucified. He doesn't move past the pain and suffering that he is experiencing, the deep grief. Instead, he holds it up to the congregation and turns it a few times. I wonder if we might find a clearer understanding of the Christ in his words this day.

January 23rd of 1983.

He began the sermon by saying, "As almost all of you know, a week ago last Monday night, driving in a terrible storm, my son Alexander, who to his friends was a real day brightener, and to his family fair as a star when only one is shining in the sky. My 24 year-old Alexander, who enjoyed beating his old man at every game and in every race, beat his father to the grave. Among the healing flood of letters that followed his death, one carrying, one carried this wonderful quote from the end of Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms*. "*The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places.*" My own broken heart is mending and largely thanks to so many of you, my dear parishioners. For if in the last week I have relearned one lesson, it is that love not only begets love, it transmits strength. Love not only begets love, it transmits strength. My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die. That when the waves closed over the sinking vehicle, God's heart was the first of all of our hearts to break. The reality of grief is the solitude of pain, the feeling that our hearts are in pieces, your mind is blank, and there's not a joy the world can give like that it takes away, as Lord Byron said. That's why immediately after such tragedy like I have experienced, people must come to your rescue. People who only want to hold your hand, not to quote anyone or any scripture or even say anything at all, people who simply bring food and flowers and the basics of beauty and life. People who sign letters simply 'your brokenhearted sister.' And that's what hundreds of you understood so beautifully. You gave me what God gives all of us. Minimal protection, maximum support. I swear to you, I would not be standing here were I not upheld."

The preacher that day went on to talk about some letters that weren't so comforting to him, filled with platitudes that did not suffice, in fact made him angry. But then he moved back into speaking of his grief. He said, "When parents die, as did my mother last month, they take with

The Reverend David J. Powers

Sunday, February 1, 2026

them a large portion of the past. When children die, they take away the future as well. That is what makes the valley of the shadow of death seem so incredibly dark and unending. In a prideful way, it would be easier to walk the valley alone, nobly, head high, instead of, as we must, marching as the latest recruit in the world's army of the bereaved. Still, there is much by way of consolation because there are no wrinkling unanswered questions, and because Alex and I simply adored each other. The wound for me is deep but clean. I know how lucky I am. I also know that this day brightener of a son wouldn't wish to be held close by grief, and that interestingly enough when I mourn Alex least, I see him best. Another consolation from the suffering of course will be the learning which better be good given the price. But it's a fact. Few of us are naturally profound. We have to be forced down. So whilst trite, it is true. "I walked a mile with pleasure. She chattered all the way, but left me none the wiser for all she had to say. I walked a mile with sorrow and nary words she said. But oh the things I learned from her when sorrow walked with me."

And of course I know even when pain is deep that God is good. My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

Yes, but at least my God, my God. And the psalm only begins that way. It doesn't end that way. Jesus only begins with those words. That is not the ending on the cross. As the grief that once seemed unbearable begins to turn now to bearable sorrow, the truths in the right biblical passages are beginning once again to take hold. "Cast thy burdens upon the Lord, and he shall strengthen thee. Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning. Lord, by thy favor thou hast made a mountain on which I stand. For thou hast delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, my feet from falling. In this world ye shall find tribulation, but be of good cheer. I have overcome the world. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." And finally, I know that when Alex beat me to the grave, the finish line was not Boston Harbor in the middle of the night. If a week ago, last Monday, a lamp went out, it was because for him at least, the dawn had come. So I shall, so let us all, seek consolation in a love that not only conveys love, but transmits strength. May we seek consolation and love which never dies and find peace in the dazzling grace that always is."

What I found powerful this week as I reflected back on this sermon was the way in which that wonderful preacher from so many years ago in the midst of his deepest grief knew that the one that he knew in Christ was present with him there, that when he wept, so Christ did. When he struggled and he was angry and he was frustrated and he was hurt, so Christ was. We need to have a real clear picture of Christ the Crucified because pain and suffering befall us all. Pain and

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, February 1, 2026

suffering befall the world. And we need to know, we need to trust, that the God that we know in Christ is present there with us.

I'm not sure what it is that you carry with you into this place, right? Maybe you bring with you great joy, maybe of being out of the house for the first time in a week or more, right? Maybe you have been surrounded by people new to you or very familiar to you, right? But I imagine that there are others that come into this place this day very close to the anniversary of a death that has impacted their lives. Someone maybe close to them, maybe a partner or a parent, right? Or, God forbid, a child. And maybe the pain and the suffering isn't grief. Maybe it's something else. Maybe it's a pain and the suffering that is coming emotionally or spiritually from another place. I don't know exactly what it is for you. But what I want you to know this morning is that in Christ the Crucified you come to this place and worship one who knows your pain, is acquainted with it, sits in the midst of it with you, not ready to quote scripture back to you, but simply to hold your hand in the midst of it. We need that Christ, too. We don't just need it for ourselves. We also need it for the world. As we move from this place and we go out, we need to know that where we see suffering in the world, where we see pain in the world, there Christ is as well. In humility, but also in power. We're going to just sit with the Crucifixion for a while this week. But it's important for us to know that Christ the Crucified is simply a marker of our Christology. It is not the defining characteristic. It is not the final word. Next week we'll move to a deeper understanding of how God deals and works through pain. But for now, if you find yourself in the midst of some pain this day, know that you are not alone in that place. Know that we worship one who is very present with you. That the good news to William Sloan Coffin, the good news to Alex, is good news to each of us this day as well. The good news is that crucified is simply a marker of Christ's identity, not his sole defining characteristic. Crucified is the dimension of our Christology not its totality. So for now may we find comfort in our deep belief that Jesus came in solidarity to enter the pain and suffering in the world. He came in solidarity to the world to enter its pain and suffering. But he also came in solidarity to you and to me to enter our pain and suffering as well. May we know it to be true this day and always.

Let us pray together.

Gracious and loving one, you are acquainted with our pain because you have experienced it. There is not a suffering that this world can bring that you do not know. Comfort us and console us in our worship this day with your very presence. Meet us in our pain and in our need. Walk alongside us in the darkest of valleys.

Greet us in the pain and suffering that we witness in the world.

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May our clear image of you crucified bring us comfort that indeed the pain and suffering of this world does not have ultimate authority but that you continue to be at work. Meet us this morning for we trust that you are always present with us. And we lift these prayers in the name of Christ the Crucified. Amen.