

Celebrated King, Crucified Messiah
Matthew 21:1-11, Matthew 27:11-54
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Rev. Stephanie Ryder

Matthew 21:1-11:

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.' This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, 'Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'*
The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!' When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'

Matthew 27:11-54:

Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You say so." But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?" But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed. Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him." Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" All of them said, "Let him be crucified!" Then he asked, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!" So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!"

So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified. Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him. As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross.

And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; then they sat down there and kept watch over him. Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son.'" The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way. From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him."

Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

I did something I haven't done in a long time this week – I went to the gym on Thursday night and it was there that I glanced up at the TV and saw that the US had just attacked Syria as a response to the chemical weapons launch there two days before. The newscaster showed the map where the attack took place, and told how the ships had come in from the west to launch the missiles.

As I'm staring at the screen, I see Israel to the southwest, and am haunted by the similarities with today's Palm Sunday passage: Jesus' procession to Jerusalem comes from the east, from the Mt. of Olives, perhaps as a counter-procession to the military that marched in from the coast on the west. I'm looking at the screen, just shaking my head. It's right there in front of me – the same exact region, the same coast of the Mediterranean Sea on the map.

That is where the similarities end, though. Israel at the time of the Scripture reading was not in a civil war, as Syria is today. The Roman military troops were coming from the west for preventative measures, not to attack, as the US military did on Thursday. It was the photos of the “innocent and beautiful babies” dying that were highlighted as triggering the attack. I grieve also for the elderly, those who have lived their full lives and die in this atrocious manner. It's a horrible and complex situation in Syria. I can understand the need to draw the line on chemical warfare, and yet I'm left wondering what the attack solves – what is the strategy behind it, how will it help?

I'm going to shift perhaps rather abruptly, to a local program, one with a strategy and a plan to help, in hopes that it can somehow provide insight into the Gospel readings and to our international situation we face today.

Sarah Oliver, a young mom in Mill Valley, had a hobby of designing knitted handbags as gifts for friends and family, and they became very popular, with stores suddenly asking to carry them. Sarah was ready to start a business, but she didn't want to manufacture overseas and she wanted to grow the business slowly. Sarah reflected on her fond memories of knitting with her mom and grandmother, and decided to approach the activities director at The Redwoods Senior Retirement Community in Mill Valley to see if they would post a sign-up for interested knitters.

The response was overwhelmingly positive and Sarah found herself with a whole team of knitters who named themselves the Purlettes + 1 (the +1 for the one male knitter). The Purlettes hand-knit every one of the bags, and were the backbone of her company. (Here is an example of one of the bags.) They were paid per piece and loved the work. Kay, age 98 said, “I never dreamed I could be part of something so fun at this stage of my life.”

Having seen the difference that being part of her company made in their lives, Sarah committed herself to empowering seniors by re-engaging them in the American economy. She became excited with the possibility of creating opportunity for seniors across the country, leading a revolution that gives seniors a new-found sense of passion and purpose and income. Every bag tells a story worth telling.

I thought about these seniors this week, the seniors who sit or stand at the corner of Camino Alto and Miller Ave. each Friday with signs, “Seniors for Peace.” According to a video created about the Purlettes +1, the current population of seniors in the US

is 50 million, or 15% of the US population. It is estimated that by 2060, there will be 98 million senior citizens in the US.

Senior citizens are living longer and working longer and want to be useful. As people age, they need connection, a social environment and an experience of contribution. At the Redwoods retirement community in Mill Valley, 40 people have official employment, and 40 – 50 others would like to be working. Sarah Oliver Handbags provided this opportunity for seniors.

The story of Sarah Oliver Handbags reminded me of the hope felt by the disenfranchised crowds on Palm Sunday. They were going to be part of something important, something new and exciting, something empowering. The crowd that gathered on what we celebrate as Palm Sunday gathered in parade formation to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem -- a king who would bring new hope in an otherwise oppressive system where the certain groups of people were being marginalized.

“Hosanna!” they shouted. “God saves!” “Save us!” They saw a way out of their dire situation in Jesus. They stood together with “the one who comes in the name of the Lord,” waving their palm fronds in excitement and hope.

There were diverse and conflicting expectations of the coming Messiah promised in the ancient Scriptures. Some people wanted a leader who would bring about a violent overthrow of Rome’s oppressive forces, and others wanted a humble, gentle Savior. That Jesus came more like the latter, reflecting the King described in Zechariah 9, “humble, gentle, riding on a donkey and a colt,” challenged the world’s powers which rode in with pomp and splendor riding on a horse. The donkey was an animal of peace and the horse was an animal of war. Jesus symbolized the Prince of Peace.

In their book, *The Last Week*, theologians Marcus Borg and John Crossan describe the idea of two processions that occurred on what we celebrate as Palm Sunday: one peasant and the other imperial. Jesus comes in a processional of peasants on a donkey to bring peace. Pilate comes as the Roman governor on a war-horse to bring law and order during the potentially tumultuous Jewish Passover festival. Jerusalem’s population was around 40,000 people and there were 200,000 pilgrims expected in the city for Passover. We see in the two processions the Kingdom of God verses the Power of Empire.

The Jewish Passover liturgy of the Haggadah reads: “It is our duty to thank, praise, pay tribute, glorify, exalt, honor, bless, extol and acclaim Him who performed all these miracles for our fathers and us.” The Passover celebrants are thus *re-membered* into God’s ongoing liberating action. Being re-membered, they become members again into a long tradition of liberation.

The Purlettes +1 are, in a way, also re-membered into society. Their membership into society as functional, effective and contributing members is reactivated. It was

announced this week, though, that Sarah Oliver Handbags is closing. Sarah paid each knitter on a piece-rate basis, or “by the bag,” in order to meet their physical needs. The Labor Department investigated the business and said that under the Federal Fair Labor Standard Act, employees are required to be paid by the hour. So the business must close.

The Purlettes +1 are discouraged and disheartened. “We’re in our eighties and nineties!” said one knitter, “We can’t work by the hour! We need a different law than the rest of society!” Another knitter said, “The law shouldn’t apply to seniors. The law is meant to protect worker’s rights, but in this case, it is not protection, it is damaging and an injustice to us. Our income is being taken away to follow a narrow law that doesn’t apply.” Though age discrimination in employment is illegal, 2/3 of older job seekers report encountering it.

This is where we go from Palms to Passion in our readings. What is celebrated and hailed as liberation goes somehow awry through the legal codes. An enemy, disguised as the authoritative protector, surfaces. I was somewhat taken down by this second gospel reading this week. It is so heavy, so graphic, so horrifying, the mistreatment, the betrayal, the abandonment of Jesus.

I remember reading an article in Seminary called “One Day in Jozefow” by Christopher Browning. The article described a certain Nazi police officer unit who were propositioned by their commander the task to round up Jews and methodically shoot. They were not ordered to do so, or threatened by what would happen if they did not. They were given a choice.

The majority of the officers chose to undertake the assignment of murdering innocent people, even with the option to decline. When interviewed later, they said they did so because they didn’t want to appear cowardly, and so to advance their careers. They thought it would look good in the eyes of their direct supervisors.

They saw their military supervisor as the authority in their lives, as the holder of their livelihood. Maybe this is why Judas made the choice to turn Jesus in. He saw he could better progress his career with the political and military authorities than with than God’s authority. He gave up Jesus for 30 pieces of silver and perhaps the expectation of professional advancement.

We retell the story of Passion Sunday, the heartbreaking and devastating account of Jesus’ fate, to remember the suffering. The word passion is from the Latin *passio* meaning suffering. Remembering the suffering helps us resist preoccupation with money, position and power. The earthly powers appear to be the victors who defeat God’s anointed one. Jesus bears the worst that people can inflict on one another – betrayal, cruelty and suffering. Remembering the suffering helps us to attend to those suffering among us, including our very own selves.

So where does this leave us today? Where is the good news in Passion Sunday, Suffering Sunday? The good news is in the exclamation of the centurion in the last line of the passage, "Truly, this man was God's Son!" God is not asleep, God does not abandon, God suffers with us and God prepares for the resurrection. This is always God's strategy, and this is how we are helped.

Though I don't know the military strategy of the US attack on Syria, I have faith in a God that does not fall asleep or abandon, a God who suffers with us and prepares for the resurrection. I have faith in a God who is able to resurrect life out of death. With no exceptions.

Sarah Oliver says her vision of engaging seniors in the workforce will not die. She intends to look beyond existing legislation to create equality for seniors. Though this chapter is closed, she thanks all those who have supported and helped so that she can begin her work again, anew, changing the way older adults are engaged in the workforce. Our God is a God of resurrection, and Jesus' message of peace will never die.

'Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!'