

## Only a Suffering God Can Help

### *Matthew 21:1-11*

21 When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.”  
<sup>4</sup> This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

<sup>5</sup> “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.”

<sup>6</sup> The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; <sup>7</sup> they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. <sup>8</sup> A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup> 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!”

<sup>10</sup> When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” <sup>11</sup> The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

### *Matthew 27: 11-17*

<sup>11</sup> Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus said, “You say so.” <sup>12</sup> But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. <sup>13</sup> Then Pilate said to him, “Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?” <sup>14</sup> But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

<sup>15</sup> Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. <sup>16</sup> At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. <sup>17</sup> 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?”

-----

We have witnessed these kind of Palm Sunday processions many times in our world—especially in communities who know oppression. They are demonstrations organized to awaken our social consciousness to what is right and good and true. Maybe some of us have participated in a few ourselves:

“Stop separating families!”  
“Health care is a human right!”  
“Water is Life!”  
“Black Lives Matter!”  
“Real Change for Climate Change!”

There are moments when we can no longer afford to be silent about what matters. Moments when our conscience can no longer allow things to operate as they are, and we just have to do something about it. It is why when we hear people talk about taking a pilgrimage to walk over the Edmond Pettis Bridge, in Selma, they say it is one of the most powerful experiences of their lives. Because it is a moment in our collective history when a group of people could no longer allow things to remain the way they were; when hope and possibility outweighed the reality of fear and cost.

Jesus takes a group of followers and organizes a march into the center of power in Jerusalem to challenge it. His crowd of protestors waves their palms—a symbol of military victory, and they lay down their cloaks to pave the way for Jesus to become their new leader. Finally, it is time to restore systems of dignity. It is time to reclaim national sovereignty as was promised by the prophets long ago. With every step closer their feet stir up more and more hope. Their voices grow louder and louder, “Hosanna, save us! Jesus, save us!”

Except we know what happens next. Jesus confronts the empire and the empire strikes back. He calls religious leaders blind guides. He says their sacred temple is nothing but a heap of ash. He tells them they are the spiritually walking dead and the worst part is that they don’t even realize it. So they arrest him under trumped up charges and bring him to the state to face trial. And it is at his trial when we get the first hint of what kind of savior Jesus really is: when he is asked to defend himself—to share his side of the story—he doesn’t do it.

Now imagine you were at this trial. Where the leader who you thought could save you from all this collective pain and suffering had a chance to speak up for himself—and for all of us—and he doesn’t say a word. Pretty disappointing, right? We might begin to question if he was really the leader we had thought he was. We might even wonder if this person was really from God.

But at the trial, Pilate, the governor of the area, sees through the religious leader’s plan, so he tries to give Jesus another way out. In a moment of democracy, he lets the people vote on who they would rather release—who they would prefer have with them. Another prisoner, named Jesus Barabbas, who was a fierce patriotic zealot and a pain in Rome’s side; or Jesus the Messiah—the donkey riding King of the Jews—who, when it came down to a moment of crisis, wouldn’t even defend himself.

Which Jesus do you choose? Pilate asks the crowd. Jesus Barabbas or Jesus the Messiah?  
Which Jesus do you think can help you? the gospel writer is asking us.

Do we choose the Jesus who is a strong and in control, a nationalist and a natural born leader, a savior who could offer us a way out of our suffering? Or do we choose the Jesus who is weak, vulnerable, silent, and ultimately powerless?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, while he was awaiting his own execution in prison wrote, that “Only a suffering God can help.” I’ve been thinking a lot about what his words mean for us as we try to make sense about where God is in all of today’s chaos. Is the coronavirus our punishment for abusing creation? Has God allowed this to happen as a way to teach us about all the ways we’ve gone wrong? Does God have anything to do with this crisis at all? How does a suffering God help us in these times of uncertainty anyways?

I heard a story on NPR about a nurse practitioner from Louisville, KY who contracted the virus while working at her hospital. She said she had to quarantine herself from her family, but the most painful part was when she had to tell her ten-old-son that she was infected with the virus while speaking to him through the door. She said, he replied to her news by making her promise him that she wouldn’t die.

You see, I long for a God who can help this mother keep her promise to her child. I long for a God who can make all that is wrong and unjust in our world right again. I long for a God who can take away our fears and who can save us from our suffering, in all its forms.

But if the cross shows us anything, it is that this just isn’t who Jesus is.

Only a suffering God can help, because at some point in life we all end up there. We might get sick and face the possibility of our end. We will one day stand on the brink of death’s edge. We will bury someone we love. And when these moments in life come, the God who knows suffering is right there with us.

Only a suffering God can help. It is at the core of what we as Christians believe. That this is a God who is both breakable and eternal; who knows what it is like to grieve and be afraid and feel abandoned in his deepest moment of human need. This is a God who transforms the world not by fixing us, as much as we desire it sometimes, but by joining us.

This holy week, as we try to make sense of the chaos in our world, may we remember the one whose power is love. And whose brokenness paradoxically brings us together and makes us whole. May we remember the God who knows what it means to live and to love and to suffer with us. And for this God, the trembling church says, Amen.