

“Why Jesus Allows This Day to Happen and What It Means for Us”

Mark 11:1–11

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A biblical scholar who was part of another church I served came up with an alternative version of Holy Week beginning with Palm Sunday. She asked the question of whether it is even possible that the ancient Romans would allow a Jewish leader to enter Jerusalem to a hero’s welcome. Her answer was a resounding no! They would capture him and his followers on the edge of town and kill them all on the spot. Thus, neither this day nor any of the traditional Holy Week events is historically possible. This wouldn’t necessarily deny the significance of Jesus’ life or death nor even his resurrection. It would simply call into question some of the details as we have them.

I have not bought into this alternative version of Holy Week, though the question, “Could it have happened this way?” is valid, but I am drawn to a different question. Assuming it does happen in the way tradition claims, why would Jesus allow it to happen? It would stir up trouble with the Romans — Jesus has to know this. Entering Jerusalem to a hero’s welcome is a way of thumbing your nose at the authorities. It is an overt act of political provocation. Furthermore, allowing this day to play out in this way will risk misunderstanding among Jesus’ followers. He has tried to say he is a different kind of Messiah, but the expectation is of a political leader who will rule from Jerusalem, the city of King David. So, why would he allow them to welcome him there as a king?

New Testament scholar Ira Brent Driggers suggests it is because Jesus cannot tone down God’s healing love by avoiding death. He can only love at full speed. He knows what his calling is — it concerns nothing less than the redemption of the world. It includes suffering and death — there is no way to avoid it. So, he keeps moving full speed ahead toward the cross, the consequences be damned and blessed.

In regard to the political consequences of his actions, Jesus doesn't fear Rome. He does not look forward to suffering. His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane makes this quite clear. But he knows that suffering will be required and his greatest allegiance is to God and God's intent. He fears falling short of his calling, not being in the center of God's will, far more than anything the Romans can do to him.

Jesus does care about how people view him, especially his followers, and he has tried repeatedly to tell them what kind of Messiah he is. Three times he tells the disciples that he must suffer and die and then be raised again. Over and over again he tells them that his followers must deny self, take up a cross and follow him; that those who would save their life must be willing to lose it; he has come not to be served but to serve and to lay down his life for others. But despite all of these efforts, people welcome him as a political ruler.

While the phrase, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" is a part of the normal pilgrimage refrain of Psalm 118:26, "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David" is an explicit royal proclamation. Ceremoniously covering the ground with cloaks evokes images of Jehu's coronation as king of Israel in 2 Kings 9:13. And the waving of leafy branches echoes the narrative of 1 Maccabees 13:51 in which Simon Maccabeus conquers Jerusalem.

Jesus pushes back on these images of royalty by riding on a colt, a humble beast instead of a great stallion. I love Emily Hoover's image, which we included in the Holy Week Devotional Guide and earlier during the chimes, of Jesus cuddling up to this humble animal, visually identifying with its humility. This is who he is and how he wants people to view him. But he knows they won't get it until his work is finished. So, their potential misunderstanding is not a reason not to enter town.

What Jesus is doing in conquering through sacrifice is so counterintuitive, so countercultural, that it is going to be resisted by Romans and Jews, no matter how he tries to explain it. In truth, as New Testament scholar Warren Carter has argued quite compellingly in his 2019 commentary on Mark, this entire Gospel seeks to subvert imperialistic notions of power and authority.

In the language of Isaiah, Jesus is a teacher/leader who does not hide his face from insult and spitting. In the words of what may be an early Christian hymn included in Paul's letter to the Philippians, Jesus is in the form of God but does not count this reality as something to be exploited, but rather empties himself into the form of a slave and becomes obedient to the point of death on a cross. Jesus has a view of power that is antithetical to Jewish and Roman understanding.

I'm not sure any of this fully explains why Jesus allows this day to play out as it does, but it does help us understand why he shows up. He simply cannot avoid the cross.

But what are the implications for us in this story? What might Jesus' actions, as well as we can understand them, say about our calling? One thing this story seems to suggest is that there are times we just have to act, even if we know our actions will create tension or controversy. On an individual level, this may involve pushing someone we know and care about to acknowledge a problem and address it. They may not like us in this moment — we can rightly assume that they will not — but sometimes acting in someone's best interest requires enough conviction to overcome resistance. On a social or political level, this means speaking up for what we believe is right, most often speaking up for those who have little or no voice, even if we know others will not agree with us and may even push back in a forceful way.

The daily news is filled with cries for prophetic action. Recent gun violence is one obvious example. This is not a partisan issue, at least not for the vast majority of Americans. It is an issue for some in office who accept large gifts from powerful lobbies. How many of us have to die needlessly before reasonable changes are made in regard to things like background checks and assault weapons? A subtext of the shootings in Atlanta reminds us that racial prejudice and violence is not just directed at black and brown people; Asian-Americans are also victims in this time, as are LGBT people. And from recent experience, we also know that Muslims and Jews are victims too.

Recent details about immigrant children at the border point to another issue that needs to be addressed from the perspective of a faith

that values every life, as well as a reminder that this issue too is not really partisan. Administrations from both parties have struggled to do the right thing — mostly because of the partisan bickering of Congress — and as is the case with common sense legislation on gun violence, the vast majority of Americans in both major parties agree on the basics of what needs to happen with immigration reform. And when it comes to matters of faith, no ethical imperative is mentioned as often in the Bible as welcoming the stranger in our land.

I realize that speaking to any of these concerns as a church may seem inappropriate. In Baptist churches like ours, we are accustomed to avoiding political issues and we love to hide behind the argument of separating church and state. But the First Amendment, which Baptists fought and suffered for, prohibits the establishment of any one religion, and thus cautions us to avoid partisan stances. It does not forbid us from participating in public life, from freely expressing our opinion on critical matters that affect all of God's children.

Political change is not Jesus' primary method of transformation and redemption, but nor does he ignore political issues. He calls out both Roman and Jewish leaders whenever they use their authority to exploit and oppress people. He enters Jerusalem today knowing that neither the Roman nor the Jewish authorities will like it. He is not afraid of tension or resistance so long as he is doing the right thing.

So, what exactly are we afraid of... when we fail to speak and act in a way that we know is right? Is it that we might offend a friend, family member of someone in our church? Is it that we might upset the peace, and if so, at what cost do we remain quiet, at whose cost? We cannot speak with one voice as a church when we are not of one mind. But there is almost nothing any church agrees on unanimously. If we are waiting on that, we will be waiting until Jesus returns — and he has called us to be working. And if we really are divided, we can speak and act as individual Christians.

Jesus' greatest fear is falling short of his calling, not being in the center of God's will. That should be our greatest fear too.

This story seems to suggest that there are times when we just have to act, even if we know our actions will create tension. It also seems to suggest that we follow Jesus' methodology of change, even if others expect something different. We are called to a path of suffering love, in the spirit of our readings from Isaiah and Philippians, in the spirit of Jesus. He follows his path to a cross not only for our salvation but also to provide an example for us. This is how enduring transformation takes place — not by the force of good overcoming the force of evil, Empire pummeling empire into submission with more powerful weapons, but love transforming hearts and lives.

This may not seem counterintuitive and countercultural to us — we are not the Romans — we live in a democracy and one where the Church has played a central role. But the trappings of an empire mentality are still with us in American society and the Church. Methodologies of power and authority still prevail, force is still used where truth and love ought to persuade, the Jesus way is still not the norm.

I think of the way in which the Interreligious Coordinating Council of Israel is working for peace among Israelis and Palestinians, including Jews, Christians and Muslims. It is a group we heard from several years ago at the end of a common text study with Temple Beth Or and several other congregations. They know political solutions are critical to the future of that part of the world, indeed the whole world, but that is not their focus. Even if political solutions are found, the flesh-and-blood human beings who live in the same land will have to get along with each other. If they cannot, no political solution will endure.

So, they bring together young people across all differences for retreats, conferences and service projects to get to know each other, to get beyond stereotypes and caricatures, to build enduring friendships. That is risky, in that context especially, but that is the way forward, that is the way of love, that is the Jesus way — the way of the one who enters town on a humble colt, accepting a moment of adoration, but knowing the real work is yet to come.

Why would Jesus allow this day to happen? Because he cannot tone down God's healing love by avoiding death. Because he can only love at full speed. Because he does not fear Roman or Jewish authorities; he only fears falling short of his calling, not being in the center of God's will. We are grateful for what he does for us, and we are humbled and inspired by the example he has given us.