

## **“Searching for Alternatives and Accepting the Inevitable”**

**Matthew 21:1-11**

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Nearly twenty years ago biblical scholar and member of another church I served, Beatrice Bruteau, developed an alternative theory for all of Holy Week, including Palm Sunday. It could not have happened the way it is described in scripture, Bea argued, the Romans would never have allowed a parade to welcome someone into town like this, as a military hero or political leader. Nor would they have made a big deal about trying and executing Jesus. There is no external evidence for all of this. What is more likely, she said, is that Roman soldiers found Jesus camped out on the edge of town with his disciples and killed them there.

It is an interesting theory based on plausible logic, but there isn't any external evidence for it either, just a general knowledge of how the Romans worked. I doubt many of us are tempted to embrace this view. But I suspect a part of us does wish that we could find an alternative story for this week, if not this alternative.

Approaching Holy Week is like watching *Titanic*. Here at the beginning we see the festive activity, and we'd like to get our hopes up that perhaps things will be different this time, but we know deep down the ship will sink, one crowd will be replaced by another, and shouts of praise will give way to cries for crucifixion. It's like enduring the last weekend of March Madness with all of our teams long since defeated, waking up in the night and wondering — if only we had made that shot, if only we had gotten that rebound, if only ... We'd like to find an alternative for this story. We'd like things to be different. We'd like to make some changes in how the people act and thus how Jesus fares.

And yet, setting aside the biblical story for a moment, we're not very good at changing our own script, are we? On a personal level, we just don't tend to change who we are, even if we think we want to, as a clothing salesman once pointed out to me. While shopping for some

slacks and sportscoats, I noted that I always wear out the pockets in my trousers first because I put my hands in my pockets. “If I could stop doing that, my slacks would last longer,” I said. He looked at me with knowing resignation and said, “We don’t change who we are.”

If I believed that we never change, I would find a different profession, but it is true that we don’t change very often. We keep the same personalities, the same tendencies to worry or hold on to anger, work too much or overthink things. We struggle with the same self-defeating habits, excesses, and obsessions, if not addictions. In fact, people often beat one addiction only to take on another. A state-of-the-art treatment center in Lexington, Kentucky, closed years ago mostly because when they did long-term follow-up studies, they found that patients may have given up heroine but they had become addicted to other substances. Lasting change is difficult to achieve.

But we don’t change much on a cultural level either. How many shootings of how many children will it take for us to get it, to be motivated enough to make substantive changes? Minority views funded by powerful lobbies, along with politicians afraid of those lobbies and people influenced by them, keep stopping anything and everything that would help. We make a lot of noise, leaders retreat to the same faux positions even they don’t believe, arguments of distraction are made, and soon the noise calms down and we do nothing different.

The only question is — whose children or parents will it be next time? We know the definition of insanity, and we know it applies to us as a nation, and not just on this issue. We have a wonderful heritage with so many good qualities, but we also have a few defining sins like racism, this frontier mentality about guns, and the notion that we alone are God’s people. In regard to these sins, we never seem to change.

So, if we were to change the biblical story, how might we change it, we who don’t really do change? Would the people in the story respond in a more faithful way beyond this one celebratory moment on Palm Sunday? Would they stay with Jesus, defend him when others call for his crucifixion, be willing to die with him if that is what it takes — hundreds, perhaps thousands of them? Does this seem likely? Would

we be willing to do this for Jesus — stay with him in times of opposition, stand up for him publicly, be willing to die for him and his teachings?

We have had a family among us from Pakistan who have done this. The father defended a young girl who was wrongly incarcerated because of her faith. He ended up having to leave the country. His son-in-law was later kidnapped by the Taliban. There are people to this day, even in this country, who lay down their lives for others. How many of us would do that, if push came to shove? Is it reasonable to imagine different behavior from first-century disciples of Jesus?

If the people aren't going to change, perhaps we need Jesus to change, if we are going to find an alternative to this story. We need a different kind of Jesus, a more muscular Jesus, one willing to embrace political and military options. Lest you think this is an absurd notion, Kristen Kobes Du Mez, in her book *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, documents a movement now over 100 years old to create this kind of Jesus. It was formed around 1910 to forward a more manly view of masculinity and a more bulked-up Jesus. He may look like the Jesus in Mel Gibson's film who can take a beating and still look strong or he may be like the Jesus others today envision wearing tattoos or body armor and wiping out the enemy! But he is a tough guy who conquers by force, à la the crusaders.

Of course, this is not who the Jesus of scripture is. He tells people repeatedly what kind of Messiah he is, one who will suffer and die, but it's not what they expect to hear. It's why he tells many people he helps not to say anything about what he has done — he knows they will misunderstand. They will think he has come to conquer the Romans!

The other texts we have read provide commentary on Matthew's Palm Sunday narrative and thus insight into who Jesus is. Isaiah speaks of a prophetic figure who gives his back to those who strike him and his cheeks to those who pull his beard. He does not hide his face from insult and spitting, yet he is not humiliated because God helps him and vindicates him. That is an image not of a conquering warrior but of a suffering servant, one who sacrifices his wellbeing for others.

The Apostle Paul, writing to the church at Philippi, refers to Jesus, probably using the words of an early hymn, as one who was in the form of God, but did not count equality with God as “something to be exploited.” The Greek word here, *harpagmos*, might be translated as “booty,” “plunder,” or “seizing,” connoting something that is received as a prize for the exertion of exploitative power (Melanie A. Howard, [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)). Jesus does not use power in that way.

In fact, Paul continues, he empties himself, taking the form of a slave. He humbles himself and becomes obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. That is the Jesus of scripture. We’ll get no help from him if we are looking to take out the Romans.

So, though we might prefer an alternative, the story cannot end any way other than how it ends. It is inevitable. This is who we are, and this is who Jesus is. This may seem dismal or fatalistic, and thus we may wonder where the good news is. Isn’t there supposed to be good news in every sermon?! A word of comfort, encouragement, and hope?! Well, as English minister Leslie Weatherhead said during World War II, there is no final comfort in a lie. Perhaps we need to live with the weight of this part of the story for a while before rushing to the happy conclusion.

But perhaps there is good news here. Jesus is willing to come — into the world, into Jerusalem; even knowing how people will respond, he is willing to come anyway. He accepts shouts of praise, even knowing they are superficial and inadequately informed, as he accepts our worship today. He knows our hearts, what a mixed bag of sincere faith and utter cowardice we are, and yet he comes to us anyway.

This is good news because it means that God’s actions are not dependent on our response. God’s love is not dependent on our faithfulness. Jesus comes to save us, even though we aren’t worth saving, at least in our own eyes, and yet somehow in his eyes, in God’s eyes, we are. We don’t have to get it all right. In fact, we won’t. But God loves us anyway. If that is not good news, I don’t know what is.

Stories do sometimes have alternative endings. Novels have been written imagining what would have happened to the world if Hitler had

won. It is not a pretty picture. Stephen King wrote a novel entitled 11-22-63 in which a man travels back in time to try and stop JFK's assassination. It is a complicated picture. Harry Chapin wrote a song about education verses indoctrination which has a sad ending wherein a child's creative capacities have been utterly suppressed. But when Harry performed this song at concerts, after seeming to end it this way, he would pause and say, "But there must a way to teach our children to sing..." and then he would add a happy and hopeful ending.

But in the final analysis, I'm not sure we want to find an alternative to this week's sacred story. Some parts of it are difficult to face, but we don't get to cheat and skip to the last page of the story. We wouldn't benefit from doing so anyway. The Gospel is bad news before it is good news, as Frederick Buechner once put it, and to get the good news, really get it, we have to hear the bad news first.

But the good news is really good, and to the extent that change is ever possible for us, this is how it happens — not out of our nobility alone, but in response to grace, this good news of God's love in Christ we celebrate this week.