

I was gassed once. It occurred during training maneuvers in my first (and only) year at West Point. To underscore the importance of a gas mask, we were marched through a CS gas tent. The gas was a mild agent (using that term with no small sense of irony), yet the impression was lasting. Try as you might to hold your breath, the cadets overseeing the exercise would force you to take a breath. Then it was all over. Throat burned. Eyes were on fire. Saliva and mucus began to flow excessively from nose and mouth. Exiting the tent, those gassed looked like human albatrosses, flailing their arms to get fresh oxygen into their lungs, saliva and mucus streaming from their faces.

Thus, I looked with informed horror at the images coming out of Syria this past week. The heinous act of the Assad regime to not only gas people, but gas innocent lives, and, particularly, the innocent lives of children is unconscionable. The brutality of this regime has been particularly cruel, and, as we know, this is not the first time that gas has been used on civilians. Various governments of the world will develop some sort of response to this specific attack. However, the ongoing response is clear that, above all, chemical stocks need to be neutralized, and efforts must continue to prevent such weapons from getting into the hands of despots or extremist groups.

The atrocity committed in Syria this past week is another tragic reminder that the world continues to be a dangerous place and that the brutal actions of tyrants continues. While Martin Luther King's insight that the arc of the moral universe is long and it bends toward justice, it is also clear that we have not arrived in that utopia. It is with this specific context, that we enter into Holy Week. Our current setting, while painful and egregious, is also an apt reminder of the events two thousand years ago.

The week begins with the entrance by Jesus into Jerusalem as the Passover feast approaches. According to the gospel accounts, crowds line the way, branches and cloaks are spread before him. And, of particular note, they cry out, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" Thus, the wheels of Jesus' end are set in motion. No one enters the Roman controlled city of Jerusalem during a very politicized festival that celebrates freedom and the end of oppression as a "king" and has much likelihood of leaving unscathed.

Indeed, the events that follow express the brutal power of the state. The people who lauded Jesus' entry into Jerusalem sought a king, and the Jewish expectation of Messiah is deeply connected to a vision of a return to earthly power and peace. Thus, the experience of Jesus is deeply baffling to those who held out such hope for such a Messiah. Jesus' engagement with the power structure of that day is not to meet force with force. Rather, Jesus' engagement is to yield, to relent, to suffer, to die. Throughout, however, the power of love is actively engaged with the

destructive forces. If nothing else, the crucifixion of Jesus is a sign of the inhumanity that humanity meets out against itself.

While we know the end is not the end within the Christian tradition, it is important to sit with this very unsettling scene of an innocent man hanging from a tree. It is a reminder that such barbarous force exists, and we cannot deny it. Moreover, we must wrestle with our own culpability in the violence that continues in our world today. (The Good Friday hymn, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord,” is not just a pious query, but it can be heard as an accusation.)

Ultimately, the import of the events of this week are captured in the title of a famous book by Jurgen Moltmann: *The Crucified God*. What we observe in the cross is our propensity to destroy that which is a threat, perceived or otherwise. What Jesus’ willingness to undergo such brutality and violence to the point of death expresses is the participation by God with all the godforsaken in history. Might does not make right. God enters into the place of suffering that we fear, thus there is no place that God is not. This interpretation does not excuse the continued heinous activity by tyrants. Indeed, it is an exhortation to end such barbarity. The suffering of God does, however, offer a lens through which to see the suffering of the innocents everywhere. They do not suffer alone. God suffers with them.