

PALM SUNDAY

Year C

Tina Francis is a seminarian at the Seminary of the Southwest.

The Descent of Love

Here we are again, at the threshold of Holy Week, poised between the hosannas and the shadows. We clutch palm branches like spiritual tourists, reenacting the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. But Palm Sunday is a study in contradictions— both celebration and warning, joy wrapped in the shadow of betrayal.

Rome understood power. It was built on the unassailable right of the strong to rule over the weak, crushing all who resisted. And then—there was Jesus. Not on a warhorse but a borrowed donkey. Not seizing power but surrendering to it.

It's tempting to sentimentalize this day, reducing it to pageantry, instead of a reckoning. Palm Sunday holds up a mirror to us. We long for love, yet we betray it. We sing of peace yet clutch our swords. We cry, "Hosanna!" with one breath and "Crucify him!" with the next.

And still, God does not turn away or wait for us to be worthy. He comes. And a choice is set before us: Will we follow him—not just into the singing streets, but into the silence, the garden, the cross?

Isaiah 50:4-9a

⁴The Lord God has given me
a trained tongue,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.

Morning by morning he awakens,
wakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.

⁵The Lord God has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious;
I did not turn backward.

⁶I gave my back to those who struck me
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.

⁷The Lord God helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;

⁸he who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?

Let us stand in court together.
Who are my adversaries?

Let them confront me.

⁹It is the Lord God who helps me;

who will declare me guilty?
All of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up.

Commentary from Tina Francis

Isaiah 50 is part of the Servant Songs—strange, luminous texts about a servant who suffers but does not back down. Is it Israel, clinging to hope in exile? A prophet, embodying God's truth at great cost? Or Christ, walking into suffering, eyes wide open?

The servant says: "I have set my face like flint." Flint—a stone that does not soften under pressure but sparks when struck. It does not crumble; it ignites. The servant does not strike back. He listens—not in resignation, but in holy defiance, refusing to let suffering steal his tenderness.

The world glorifies power that strikes first, that devours. But the servant speaks words that sustain the weary words that do not lash out, but also do not fade into silence. He lets the bruises bloom and the spit dry on his skin, not because suffering is noble. It is the power of the dissident, the prophet, the truth-teller who stands before empire and says, "You do not get to name me."

This is not the might of empires. This is the might of mercy.

Discussion Questions

Where are you tempted to grasp for power?

How might you, like the servant, stand firm—not with clenched fists, but with open hands and holy defiance?

Psalm 31:9-16

- ⁹ Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am in trouble; *
my eye is consumed with sorrow,
and also my throat and my belly.
- ¹⁰ For my life is wasted with grief,
and my years with sighing; *
my strength fails me because of affliction,
and my bones are consumed.
- ¹¹ I have become a reproach to all my enemies and
even to my neighbors,
a dismay to those of my acquaintance; *
when they see me in the street they avoid me.
- ¹² I am forgotten like a dead man, out of mind; *
I am as useless as a broken pot.
- ¹³ For I have heard the whispering of the crowd;
fear is all around; *
they put their heads together against me;
they plot to take my life.
- ¹⁴ But as for me, I have trusted in you, O Lord. *
I have said, "You are my God.
- ¹⁵ My times are in your hand; *
rescue me from the hand of my enemies,
and from those who persecute me.
- ¹⁶ Make your face to shine upon your servant, *
and in your loving-kindness save me."

Commentary from Tina Francis

Isaiah's servant does not shrink back. He listens—not with resignation, but with defiant faith. The psalmist picks up the same posture. This is not quiet, composed lament. This is *ugly-cry-in-the-parking-lot* grief. It is the shouted prayer of the abandoned, the desperate plea of one who has no illusions about his fate.

"I am in trouble," he says. "My eye is consumed with sorrow." The psalmist does not dress up his pain. He lays it bare. To cry out, to name suffering as real and unbearable, is not faithlessness but faith itself.

Even in the wreckage, the psalmist says, "But as for me, I have trusted in you, O Lord." This is stubborn belief, not toxic positivity. It is a prayer of protest. Insistence. Defiance.

The psalmist's lament echoes through generations—the exiled, the displaced, the ones who refuse to be ignored or erased. This psalm reminds us that faith isn't about projecting strength but about bringing our full, unvarnished selves—petty, angry, exhausted—to the God who sees, holds, and loves us.

Discussion Questions

When have you allowed yourself to grieve openly before God? How did that act of honesty shape your faith?

Philippians 2:5-11

⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, though he existed in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be grasped,

⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
assuming human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a human,

⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

⁹ Therefore God exalted him even more highly
and gave him the name
that is above every other name,

¹⁰ so that at the name given to Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹ and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Commentary from Tina Francis

Philippi, a Roman colony. A city where power is everything—who has it, who keeps it, who gets crushed under it. Paul knew how to climb the ladder. And yet, here he is, in a prison cell, urging a weary community: Have the same mind as Christ.

And then—he sings a *Hymn of Descent*. A protest anthem and a theological grenade: Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not exploit it but emptied himself.

The way of Jesus is downward mobility. He does not hoard power. He releases it. He kneels. He washes the feet of men who will ghost him. He descends—into flesh, into sorrow, into death itself. And we—like Rome—struggle to comprehend a God like that.

Power, as we know it, devours. But love that lets go unsettles us. We want a God who wins. But Paul reminds us: *Power that hoards itself is no power at all*. True power bends low, breaks open, and empties itself—until only God remains.

This is the shape of love. This is the pattern of the kingdom. The way up is down. The way forward is release. And maybe—it is the only way resurrection happens.

Discussion Questions

Where in your life is God calling you downward—not as a loss, but as a reorientation toward something truer?

Luke 23:1-49 or Luke 22:14-23:56

23 Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. ²They began to accuse him, saying, “We found this man inciting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to Caesar and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.” ³Then Pilate asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” He answered, “You say so.” ⁴Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, “I find no basis for an accusation against this man.” ⁵But they were insistent and said, “He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.”

⁶When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. ⁷And when he learned that he was under Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. ⁸When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. ⁹He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰The chief priests and the scribes stood by vehemently accusing him. ¹¹Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him and sent him back to Pilate. ¹²That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.

¹³Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people ¹⁴and said to them, “You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people, and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. ¹⁵Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. ¹⁶I will therefore have him flogged and release him.”

¹⁸Then they all shouted out together, “Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!” ¹⁹(This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city and for murder.) ²⁰Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again, ²¹but they kept shouting, “Crucify, crucify him!” ²²A third time he said to them, “Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him.” ²³But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified, and their voices prevailed. ²⁴So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. ²⁵He released the man

they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.

²⁶As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. ²⁸But Jesus turned to them and said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹For the days are surely coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.’ ³⁰Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us,’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ ³¹For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

³²Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [[³⁴Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”]] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵And the people stood by watching, but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!” ³⁶The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine ³⁷and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” ³⁸There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴²Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom.” ⁴³He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

⁴⁴It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, ⁴⁵while the sun’s light failed, and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶Then Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having said this, he breathed his last. ⁴⁷When

the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, “Certainly this man was innocent.”⁴⁸ And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts.⁴⁹ But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance watching these things.

Commentary from Tina Francis

The Passion narrative in Luke is a collision of love and betrayal, faithfulness and fear, grace and violence. It exposes the best and worst in us—Peter’s denial, the mob’s cruelty, the women’s unwavering presence, and Jesus’ radical grace. “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

The crowd unsettles us because we see ourselves in it. One moment, they hail Jesus; the next, they demand his death. Fear is contagious. Silence feels safer. So, we too, turn away when love asks too much. We choose self-preservation over courage. We fail to see Christ in suffering.

But Jesus does not meet our failures with condemnation. He meets them with grace. The cross is not just an act of suffering; it is the ultimate act of staying. He stays when the crowd turns. He stays when the disciples flee. He stays when all signs point to despair. And this is the scandal of the gospel: grace is for the deserters, the betrayers, the executioners. It is for us.

This is the paradox of the cross. The site of deepest suffering becomes the site of deepest love. Absolute failure becomes ultimate redemption. In Jesus, the story of the crowd is rewritten—not as a tragedy of fickle allegiance, but as a revelation of grace that refuses to let go.

Discussion Questions

Where do you see yourself in the Passion story?

When have you chosen self-preservation over courage?

How does seeing yourself in the crowd change how you think about grace?