

The Palm Sunday Mixed Emotion Cocktail

Ken Wilson, 3/28/21

God works in mysterious ways. Like before Christmas I'm reading the Obama memoir. I say to Julia, "It's amazing what Presidents have to learn as soon as they take office." Julia replies, "Can you even imagine doing that job?" OK, I'm about to incriminate myself. In my defense, it was late, my verbal censor was half-asleep, so my residual male-pattern-maleness was temporarily in charge of my brain and it made me say, "Sure! I could imagine being President!" Julia looks at me over top her glasses. She says, "I'm gonna order you something I saw on FB for Christmas." This is what comes in the mail---a coffee cup that reads "**Carry yourself with the confidence of a mediocre white man.**" I have that coffee cup staring at me now, as a memorial.

That coffee cup came to mind again when Sarah Ruden's translation of the gospels was released this month. Background: Best-selling modern translation is NIV, translated by a committee of 15. Original committee? All men. After 10 years, one woman added. Now two. There are also translations by a single translator. Before Sarah Ruden, virtually all solo translators were by men: two (JB Phillips and Eugene Peterson) were pastors, with no special training in translation. Another, Kenneth Taylor, had a pastor education and worked as a publisher, no special training (his Living Bible is best-selling solo translator translation). Sarah Ruden, by contrast, has translated innumerable ancient works of literature and written a book on translating the Bible, and a book on Paul's letters. She is familiar not just with the high classical Greek literature that Bible scholars know, but also what she calls "the dirty books"—popular writings that entertained the people. Even the so-called experts who translate the NT in committee translations like NIV, are unfamiliar with this material, but it really helps to understand the popular-level Greek that the NT was written in. Sarah Ruden knows this material inside-out and so she runs circles around the good old boys.

When her new translation arrived last week, I devoured the Palm Sunday accounts which blew me away. Then I heard an interview with Sarah Ruden. She says so many translations of the NT miss the humor and the subtleties and the intense emotional appeal of the writing. She says popular authors of that period, including those who wrote the gospel in what was called *Koine* Greek, or Street Greek, knew they had to grab

the attention of their audience and they were adept at doing so. She captures this in her translation--*because she has the chops.*

Ruden knows the street-Greek for “crowd” connotes “mob.” In events around Palm Sunday the word that means crowd or mob is used several times—and it’s always surrounded by lurking danger and intense emotion when its used. Emotion that Ruden conveys vividly where other translators fall flat. Let’s dig in.

Our reading—Jesus mounting the donkey for his final entrance into Jerusalem—takes place after a long journey that started in the morning, as Jesus left Jericho, the lowest elevation on earth, toward Jerusalem, a steady climb to a much higher elevation. Whoever wrote the gospel of Matthew wants us to feel the impending danger of the day. So on his way out of Jericho a crowd has already formed around him, also heading for Jerusalem, when two men who have lost their sight start **yelling** (Ruden’s translation) at him, **“Son of David have pity!”** Then **“the crowd scolded them and warned them to be quiet.”** Her translation captures the hostile turn of the crowd toward two men making a ruckus. Jesus stops, calls these guys, asks what they want. (Jesus didn’t *assume* he knew what people wanted. He *asked* them.) They say, “Open our eyes!” Next, where other translations have “moved with compassion, etc.,” Ruden translates it more in keeping with the emotional intensity of the Greek: **“And Jesus was wrenched by pity and touched their eyes and right away they could see again and followed him.”**

The author of Matthew’s gospel is setting the scene—capturing the emotion as the crowds from the hinterlands surge into Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover. Tensions are high wherever crowds are, especially under Roman occupation. Those traveling with Jesus are called “people of the land”—lower class, viewed as inferior by the Jerusalem’s elites—those running the temple, the scholars, the experts ... and certainly the reinforced Roman troops on the look-out for sedition. The people with Jesus are desperate people like the two men who got his attention on his way out of Jericho earlier in the day.

Later that day, Jesus is nearing Jerusalem, at the Mount of Olives, where he can look across the Kidron valley and see the Temple Mount. He tells two disciples to

commandeer some donkeys at a nearby village for his entry into the Big City. To this point in the gospel, he's always hushed crowds who wanted to make him into a ruler. He's dampening down publicity where possible, moving from small town to small town. But now he's enacting an old prophecy of a different kind of ruler, a lowly ruler, one like a son of man—could be anyone—riding into the city on a donkey. Ordinary people in that time didn't ride on horses or donkeys. This is something special happening, everyone knows it.

When they see Jesus enacting this well-known prophecy, they get excited, throw their cloaks on the road. (Most only had two articles of clothing, so the one they throw down on the road is not one of 20 spares in their closet) Ruden's translation brings out the desperation other translators miss. They start chanting, she says, in "**piercing voices**"—**Hosanna!** which Ruden notes is Hebrew for "**Rescue, please!**" (The Hosanna songs I knew were upbeat happy tunes, but the word is a desperate cry, Rescue, please!)

For these "people of the land" most other leaders offered little hope of rescue. Jesus was their only champion at this stage—the kindly and wildly popular Pharisee Hillel having died. **Rescue please, son of David.** Like "If not you, who?" **Rescue please, in the highest places** (remember they are now at a high elevation having ascended from the lowest place on earth, literally.) **Rescue please!** —with **piercing voices**, they cry. Desperate people only have desperate hopes.

In Matthew's gospel, that very day, as Jesus descends into the Kidron Valley from the Mount of Olives, then up to the Temple Mount, he enters the Court of the Gentiles (the crowded area of the Temple Mount) and disrupts the Temple commerce—overturning the tables, kicking over the "**backrest chairs**" as Ruden translates it: she knows these are particular kinds of chairs that show up in the popular literature she is so familiar with. This was a prophetic act too.

Like religious institutions everywhere, the Temple had a business side, and the out-sized influence given to the business side of the Temple angered Jesus. (I wonder what Jesus might do with the "Joel Osteen Daily Inspiration Cube" for 34.99 online?) And lest we have a Chamber of Commerce objection: Jesus well knew he wasn't putting anyone out of business; this was a temporary disruption; the next day all was back as before.

Then after he tips the tables, the most desperately afflicted among the people of the land who came with him, now swarm into the Temple Courts—and he does his healing among them. All this, against the emotional back-drop—Ruden helps us feel it--of anger with the temple authorities who are angry with him: anger, anger, all around...everyone on high-alert/alarm

Luke's gospel adds another layer of deep emotion. Instead of disrupting the temple commerce the day of the triumphal entry, as in Matthew, Luke has Jesus looking around at the temple like a tourist might and turning in for the night. In Luke, he comes back the next day to tip the tables. Instead of anger, Luke stresses the sorrow of Jesus on the day he rides in on a donkey. Jesus has intense sorrow, with weeping, as he looks over the city, like a spurned lover—aware that the city-based leaders will turn on him. He seems alone in his sorrow at this point.

Why these different sequence of events in Luke and Matthew? The gospel writers had sayings of Jesus and stories of Jesus that were circulating, based on eyewitness recollections, but not written down or recorded as they were happening. Matthew and Luke are writing decades after the events, stitching together a narrative as best they can to convey Jesus. Reynolds Price the 20th Century Southern novelist, a gay man who loved Jesus and did his own translation of the gospels—and had severe spinal pain healed during a visionary experience of Jesus—says the gospel writers had, **"the ancient trust of all those who bet their entire hand on story, whether oral or written: the thin compelling thread of an action that is worth our attention."**

What we have in these compelling threads is a Palm Sunday Mixed Emotion Cocktail: DESPERATION-ALARM-ANGER-SORROW. We've been nursing our own mixed emotion cocktails this past year, haven't we? To mix up the metaphors even more, it's like four sides of a boxing ring: one labeled DESPERATION, another ALARM, a third ANGER, and a fourth SORROW and we're bouncing off the ropes from one side to another, our mixed emotion cocktail in hand.

The other day I'm doing my chess app with my grandson and get a news alert on my phone—Oh the Georgia Governor, surrounded by the good old boys signing a voter suppression bill behind closed doors, and Georgia State Legislator, Park Cannon, an

African American woman whose constituents were targeted by this racist legislation, had the temerity to knock on the governor's office door, at which point she was arrested...and charged with a felony?! Take another sip from the DESPERATION-ALARM-ANGER-SORROW cocktail.

We've been sipping this cocktail all year, haven't we? Depending on our circumstance and our vulnerability, and our awareness and our capacity for empathy—for much longer than a year.

Intense feelings bottled up, weigh us down, make us numb. Leak out later in confusing ways.

Intense emotion is often mixed-emotion and it takes time, and multiple opportunities to unpack. Feelings are called emotions because they are meant to move through us, not park in us. We need places, time, and opportunity to express them in ways that work for us.

What do we look for, instinctively, when we have need of metabolizing our emotions? We look for someone who understands. Someone who is not going to question, critique or judge, not going to mollify or manage our emotion. Someone who has been there before, is with us now.

Sarah Ruden says the gospel writers don't try to explain Jesus, to make sense of him. They are writers who have heard of Jesus and have come within the spiritual-emotional orbit of the God who was working in Jesus. And what they really want to do in their writings is to present Jesus to their audience. Reading them leaves us with so many unanswered questions. The earliest gospel of Mark is missing the ending—it got lost. But the gospels are not an explanation of Jesus so much as a presentation, says Ruden. Somehow, these writers trust the story.

This presentation of Jesus in the gospels invites us to imagine a God at home with our humanity and with our subtle, mixed, and intense human emotions as they ebb and flow, as they get bottled up and leak out and find expression. A God who is not *managing* our emotions but at home with us having them. Maybe even a God who has some divine equivalent of emotion.

To be at home with such a God is to be at home with ourselves.

It's an unanticipated part of my experience of church during this past year—but I feel more feelings at church than ever. Not the wonderful and sometimes powerful group feelings that happen when we sing together, I do miss that. I miss seeing the kids. I miss Maurice. I simultaneously miss everyone and appreciate everyone as we gather in this way. Somehow it's a feeling-hour for me. Maybe it's not having to pay attention to as many details. Maybe it's being alone here in my home office, so I'm not even tempted to feel self-conscious. I know I'm on the screen now, but I don't feel observed.

You know how when the ground is really dry, a sudden downpour is kind of wasted on it? The ground needs a gentle rain to soften it before it can absorb a downpour. It's like that only from the inside out. I have all these feelings bottled up inside—necessarily, too much happening at once, and first, we have to get through it. But I know I need to find ways to release these mixed feelings. So on Sunday, they bubble up, so to speak. The movement of the feelings is welcome.

I think the meditations help me pay more attention to my body, where feelings reside. I'm totally into the kid minutes, especially lately with the stuffed animals. I'm moved by the young people reading, by the messages from different voices. I get way more out of the announcements than I ever did. And I feel myself beginning to face and name and feel the anger, sorrow, and the hope, as we remember our loved ones, and pray for different groups affected by the pandemic, and name a sampling of the indigenous people, Asian-Americans, Latinos, transgender people, and African Americans whose lives have been cut short by state-sanctioned, society-tolerated violence. And we do all that in close proximity to the remembrance of the son of man in communion, who likewise suffered and did his suffering in solidarity with the many who are like him, oppressed, accused falsely, treated unfairly by systems that are supposed to honor not make a mockery of justice. Empathy is a form of feeling and it requires exposure to the suffering of others. All of this is meant to soften us, to inform us, to change us.

For me at least, the resurrection of Jesus only makes sense, not as some grotesque heavenly sign of religious superiority, but as the fulfillment of the desperate hope of desperate people that the long arm of the universe really does bend toward justice...and

the falsely accused, falsely criminalized, and those who love them and stand with them, get the final word beyond the grave. Even the possibility that such a thing is real can grab our attention in the meantime and affect our response to present reality. Is what I'm thinking and feeling today.

At Tuesday Tea Time (3pm EST, you can come too) Susan King or Diane Sonda lead us in a mid-afternoon guided meditation after we have our afternoon break together. So to prepare us for our Candle Lighting and Communion, Susan is going to do that for us today.