

Grace Under Fire: The Palms and The Passion  
*What Good is God?*, by Philip Yancey, Part X  
 April 17, 2011  
 Rev. Heather Leslie Hammer

Grace Under Fire: The Palms  
 Matthew 21:1-11

"The whole city was in turmoil, asking 'Who is this?' The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'" It was festival time. Everyone was entering Jerusalem for the Passover.

Though it was a time of celebration, the people were poor and oppressed by the Romans, who occupied the Holy City of the Jews. And so the people shouted, "Hosanna!" which means "Save us!" or "Help us, we pray!" There may have been a happy feeling in the crowd, as we *like* to think of Palm Sunday, the week before Easter, but the overriding feeling likely would have been more desperate than joyous. "Save us, Jesus, you who are the prophet." "The whole city was in turmoil," the writer of Matthew tells us.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem would have been in the year 33 of the Common Era. The Book of Matthew was written some 50 years later, after the Roman-Jewish War. The Jewish people defended the city of Jerusalem and their Temple from the beginning of the war in the year 66 until the Romans destroyed the Temple in the year 70. We know this historical record from the Jewish historian, named Josephus.

The history of the siege of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. goes like this:

The Roman army under the direction of Titus (later to be Roman Emperor) surrounded Jerusalem with 4 legions. Street fighting broke out between the Roman soldiers and the Jewish zealots. But, overpowered by the Romans, the Jewish defenders of the Temple had to retreat into the Temple compound. They were cut off from food and water, so they sent out small foraging parties into the city. The Romans put an end to the foraging groups by constructing a new wall and siege tower. The Romans then led a secret attack on the Temple and threw burning sticks onto the Temple walls. The Jewish Temple was under fire! The flames spread, and the Temple burned, all but the Western Wall, and the Romans crushed the Jewish resistance. According to Josephus, the Jewish historian, 1,100,000 Jews perished in the siege. Those that could fled from Jerusalem to areas around the Mediterranean ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege\\_of\\_Jerusalem\\_\(70\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Jerusalem_(70))).

Some ten years later, one of these groups of Diaspora Jews, scattered around the Mediterranean, had gathered together as followers of Jesus, the Messiah, and a scribe in their group, called Matthew, wrote the Gospel account of Jesus' last days in Jerusalem. We can assume he wrote this account with the memory of the fall of Jerusalem on his heart. He would have surely remembered Jerusalem, the Holy City, under fire.

And so the story of the Palms is not all happy. It is a story from the time leading up to Jesus' death, a time of poverty and oppression that later led to a war with the Romans and a fire that destroyed the center of Judaism. The cry was "Hosanna to the Son of David! Save us!"

This kind of violence is not unknown in our world today. We have seen terrorist attacks on September 11 in our country and in Mumbai, India in November 2008. We have witnessed religious violence: between Muslims and Jews, Christians and Muslims, even in Sacramento, violence against Sikhs. We have participated in a "War on Terror" in Afghanistan and Iraq, and we have feared for our troops' safety and mourned the need for war itself.

Where is God in the violence of terror and war? Where is God in the fire? At such times, we can't help but ask ourselves, "What good is God?"

Our religious practice takes us on a journey through Lent and through life, looking for a faith that matters even in the fire of terror and war and even in the fear of earthquake and tsunami.

Philip Yancey says, "Grace meets its test in the context of difference" (272)...and his hope is: "May the church be known as a place where grace flows on tap: to sinners, to rich and poor alike, to those who need more light, to outcasts, to those who disagree, to oppressed and oppressors both" (282). Grace for all—especially in times of trial.

Save us from the fire, O God. Send us your grace.

### Grace Under Fire: The Passion Matthew 26:14-27:66

The passion story includes both personal and societal sin—in the form of personal betrayal and social violence. Where is God in our moments of weakness? Where is grace under fire?

The story begins with Judas, who betrays Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. He is weak. And he hates himself for it.

Jesus says they will all be deserters, all his disciples. And Peter is so sure of himself, so sure that he could not possibly deny Jesus. But he is weak. And he hates himself for it.

And Jesus asks the disciples to stay awake, but they are weak and they fall asleep.

Jesus, praying in the garden, succumbs to weakness himself, saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me," but he goes on to say, "Yet not what I want but what you want...your will be done" (Mt. 26:39-42).

We are human and we are weak. But God's grace gives us forgiveness and offers us the hope to repent and begin again. God's grace gives us the opportunity to say, "Your will be done." This is the message of Lent.

Pilate claimed he was innocent. Though ruler of the province, he was weak. The soldiers mocked Jesus and called him names, for they were weak. The disciples were nowhere to be found, for they were weak.

I'm afraid we would not have been any stronger than any of the characters of the passion story cast. And this is just exactly why we needed Jesus to come to earth—Emmanuel, God with us, with us in our humanity, in our weakness. Even in the turmoil of unjust violence and death, God is present. God was present there at the cross even after betrayal, cowardice, and weakness; God was present at the cross even at an unjustified execution, a violent act by an occupying government. This is the lingering message of the cross: that God took the form of humanity and accepted torture and death by execution to be one with us, to be one in our human weakness.

In the turmoil of betrayal and war and violence, what good is God? God is grace. At the cross, in the flesh, God is with us, grace under fire.