

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/24/2013, Palm Sunday—Passion Sunday
Luke 19:28-40

Isaiah 50:4-9a, Psalm 31:9-16, Philippians 2:5-11, Luke 22:14—23:56
Jesus Holding onto Humanity

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁶³And the men that *held Jesus* mocked him, and smote him.

⁶⁴And when they had blindfolded him, they struck him on the face, and asked him, saying, Prophecy, who is it that smote thee? ⁶⁵And many other things blasphemously spake they against him. (Luke 22:63-65, KJV)

Little did they know it, but these men—the ones who held Jesus—were holding the One who holds *them*, indeed, holds the whole, wide world, in his hands.

These men were not Roman soldiers but rather police charged with maintaining good order in the Temple.¹ They come at the command of the chief priests and elders. Like police everywhere, they are trained to deal with rough characters. When they hold someone, they are not careful to be gentle. They hold firmly. Okay. They hold firmly the only begotten Son of God. So be it. But those things they do next, I can hardly imagine are befitting their profession, but are more along the lines of frenzy and torment. They mock Jesus and smite him—oh, how the angels must have flinched beholding that! They blindfold him and strike him on the face and ridicule him, calling on the Lord of all, the very Omniscient One himself, to guess who had struck him. These police seem to have read the mood of the chief priests and elders, and entered into the violence that those high authorities did not lend their delicate hands to, but who were glad that others would do in their stead. Without restraint and without good conscience, the police holding Jesus do these things.

The police, then, hold Jesus with ill-will. But it is possible for the holding of someone to go in the other direction: to not hurt or abuse the person, but to protect that one. Let me give you an illustration from American history. It concerns a hero from my neck of the woods: Harriet Tubman.

Harriet Tubman was born a slave, around 1820, in Dorchester County, Maryland, on the Eastern Shore of that state. Dorchester County is the next county south from where I grew up, Caroline County. Our high school

¹ Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke: Luke 10-24*, The Anchor Bible (Doubleday & Company, Inc.: Garden City, NY, 1985) page 1451.

basketball team played their high school basketball team down there in the town of Cambridge. Our chess team played their chess team, and so on.

Harriet was born a slave near Cambridge and suffered the blows and heartbreaks of many of God's children back then. When she grew up, she escaped and headed north to freedom. But her heart was so vast and good that she could never be content with freedom just for herself when so many of her loved ones and other folk still languished in slavery. So, she went back and forth down south and fearlessly led many people to freedom. There was a price on her head and determined hunters of humanity chased her and the slaves she led, but she was never caught, never lost a person. She was called "Moses"—the "Moses of her people"—and that seems the right name for her, for she was a person of deep faith in God and she made herself useful to the Lord as one who led her people from slavery into freedom.

Besides her work as a guide to escaping slaves, she also served as a spy and guide for the Union army during the Civil War and as a nurse to sick and wounded soldiers.

She never learned to read or write. Her fellow abolitionist Frederick Douglass knew and honored her. When they were both older (1868), the great orator, Frederick Douglass, wrote these words to her—words that someone else would have to read aloud for her because she could not do it herself:

You ask for what you do not need when you call upon me for a word of commendation. I need such words from you far more than you can need them from me, especially where your superior labors and devotion to the cause of the lately enslaved of our land are known as I know them. The difference between us is very marked. Most that I have done and suffered in the service of our cause has been in public, and I have received much encouragement at every step of the way. You, on the other hand, have labored in a private way. I have wrought in the day—you in the night. ... The midnight sky and the silent stars have been the witnesses of your devotion to freedom and of your heroism. Excepting John Brown—of sacred memory—I know of no one who has willingly encountered more perils and hardships to serve our enslaved people than you have.²

Harriet Tubman was involved in many adventures, but here I want to lift up but one of them. It is a story told in Sarah H. Bradford biography of Harriet

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harriet_Tubman

Tubman.³ The story concerns a fugitive slave by the name of Charles Nalle, and takes place in our state—in Troy, New York, near Albany, in the spring of 1860. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 required law officials in free states, like New York, to aid efforts to recapture slaves. Nalle’s former owner had tracked him to Troy, New York, the law officials had Nalle, and the slaver owner meant to take him back south.

But suddenly Harriet Tubman appears. I’ll let Sarah Bradford tell the story. Sarah was Harriet’s friend. She writes this:

An excited crowd was gathered about the office, through which Harriet forced her way, and rushed up stairs to the door of the room where the fugitive was detained. A wagon was already waiting before the door to carry off the man, but the crowd was even then so great, and in such a state of excitement, that the officers did not dare to bring the man down. [At last the] lane was opened, and the man was brought out...with his wrists manacled together, walking between the U.S. Marshal and another officer, and behind him his brother and his master...The moment they appeared, Harriet roused from her stooping posture, threw up a window, and cried to her friends: “Here he comes--take him!” and then darted down the stairs like a wild-cat. She seized one officer and pulled him down, then another, and tore him away from the man; and keeping her arms about the slave, she cried to her friends: “Drag us out! Drag him to the river!”... Again and again they were knocked down, the poor slave utterly helpless, with his manacled wrists, streaming with blood. Harriet’s outer clothes were torn from her, and even her stout shoes were pulled from her feet, yet she never relinquished her hold of the man, till she had dragged him to the river, where he was tumbled into a boat, Harriet following in a ferry-boat to the other side.⁴

A statement was made by Martin I. Townsend, Esq., of Troy, who was counsel for the fugitive. He also spoke of Harriet Tubman’s protection of the fugitive:

³ Bradford, Sarah H.; Johnson, Oliver; Hopkins, Professor (2008-10-28). *Harriet Tubman - The Moses of Her People* [Illustrated] (p. 1). MacMay. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Bradford, Sarah H., Kindle Edition, page 49.

Harriet Tubman, who had been standing with the excited crowd, rushed amongst the foremost to Nalle, and running one of her arms around his manacled arm, held on to him without ever loosening her hold through the more than half-hour's struggle to Judge Gould's office, and from Judge Gould's office to the dock, where Nalle's liberation was accomplished. In the -meelee- she was repeatedly beaten over the head with policemen's clubs, but she never for a moment released her hold, but cheered Nalle and his friends with her voice, and struggled with the officers until they were literally worn out with their exertions, and Nalle was separated from them.⁵

This desperate holding of the poor slave by a poor, unlearned, humble, but loving woman is a good image for us of what was really going on in the holy passion of our Lord Jesus. Here they were, the Temple police, holding onto Jesus, smiting and mocking him, while all the while he was holding onto them, and onto us, protecting us from death and destruction with his own body. He bore the blows of sin, hell, death, and the devil. He let them rain down on him, together with all insults, injustices, cruel pain, and finally death, so that with his own precious body and blood he might save us and give this old world some hope.

Though police held him, he held them even firmer and protected them. Indeed, he holds the whole world in his hands. And so the children have it right in their song about our Lord Jesus:

He's got the whole world in His hands,
He's got the whole wide world in His hands,
He's got the whole world in His hands.
He's got the whole world in His hands.

He's got the tiny little baby in His hands,
He's got the tiny little baby in His hands,
He's got the tiny little baby in His hands,
He's got the whole world in His hands.

He's got you and me, brother, in His hands,
He's got you and me, sister, in His hands,

⁵ Bradford, Sarah H., Kindle Edition, page 50.

He's got ev'rybody here in His hands
He's got the whole world in His hands.

And to this One who holds us and will not let us go be the glory, together with
the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.