“The Powers that Be” - Stephanie Sorge, 4/3/22

Will and I have been reading Harry Potter with Isaac, a little bit each night. I hadn’t read any of the books - or seen the movies - until 5 years ago. I had just heard Valerie Kaur speak for the second time at Montreat - this time with the College Conference as her audience. She’s just a year younger than me, but her resume and list of accomplishments as a Sikh American woman are unbelievable. I could say more, but I’ll just say that the way Harry Potter had inspired her, in the excruciating days after 9/11, finally inspired me to turn to the books in those very difficult days of early 2017.

In those days, I was often up late and through the night with Micah, and sometimes Isaac, so the Kindle versions on my phone were easy to have at hand, and I read through the whole series in a month. Now, we’re going at a much slower pace. Isaac doesn’t know the whole story, and we’re not reading at a pace to resolve quickly the tensions that build over the series. I can’t separate what I read from what I know will happen, but he can, and it changes the way he enters the story. What if we could enter these stories with the same kind of innocence? What would it be like to experience all of this in real time?

Imagine being a child, maybe 9 years old - a few years shy of the rites of adulthood during Jesus’s day. Life wasn’t easy, but your parents mostly shielded you from that, as best they could. You know they worried about taxes they couldn’t pay, and the delicate political realities of being a Jew in the Roman Empire. Most of the hushed conversations you overheard were full of stress and worry, but then a new character entered them. When your parents spoke to each other about Jesus, it was full of some new excitement. A hope you hadn’t even realized your parents had been lacking.

Then one day, Jesus comes near your town. You ask if you can go hear him teach. Along with everyone else, you’re hooked on Jesus’s every word. His presence. It’s unlike anything you’ve ever encountered. You don’t notice the time passing, and neither do others, until hunger starts to creep in. Your own stomach starts growling, but you gladly offer Jesus the small meal that you brought - a lunch packed with love by your mother, and offered to this person who embodies love, in a way you’ve never experienced.

You can’t believe what happens next. Your lunch feeds the entire crowd - with leftovers! Wait until your mom hears about this! You’re not the only one who is amazed. People around you are talking. Some suggest they should make Jesus king! Could that happen? Wouldn’t that solve so many problems for these people, just like your parents? You look around to see his reaction to the buzz, but he’s slipped out of sight.

Over the next few years, you try to see Jesus whenever you have a chance. You overhear what you can, more about amazing things he is doing - even raising someone from the dead. You also know from the chatter that Jesus is getting into hot water with the leaders. But you can’t imagine, after all that Jesus has done, that he could be silenced.

You and your family make the journey to Jerusalem for the Passover. Along the way, you keep an ear to the ground. Has anyone seen Jesus? Surely he’ll be in Jerusalem, too, right? You can hardly believe your luck when you see Jesus and his disciples going into the house right next to the one where your family is staying! Your family is busy with preparations for Passover, so you slip away and manage to find a perch from where you can hear what is going on inside. You’ve heard Jesus before, but not like this. It’s the most intimate and important teaching you’ve ever heard, all about love.

You follow Jesus and his disciples at a bit of a distance, over to a garden, and suddenly the peace is disturbed by a whole cohort of soldiers who arrive to arrest him. You continue to follow through the evening, undetected, and it has brought you here, to Pilate’s headquarters. How can people be saying these things about Jesus? Why do they want to kill him? Surely, all of this will get worked out. Even Pilate can’t find a reason to condemn him. He’ll be exonerated and released.

And then Pilate has Jesus flogged. Almost in slow motion, you see the scenes unfold - a crown of thorns is forced on his head, a royal robe covers his torn flesh, and the crowd is shouting for his death. Suddenly you feel your last meal about to come up. This can’t be happening. It can’t be. At any minute now, you’re sure, Jesus will shake off the robe and crown, regain control of the situation, and all will be well. It has to be.

Pilate asks the crowd, “Shall I crucify your king?” You remember when the crowd wanted to make Jesus king. When they thought he would deliver them from the emperor. But now, you hear the response: “We have no king but the emperor.” Stunned, you fall to the ground, tears streaming down your face. Silently pleading to Jesus: “Get up now. End this now. I know you can do it.”

All of the powers that be are against Jesus. And he seems to have no power at all. Except the power to endure. To persist. The power to stay there, in the pain and humiliation. But then you notice something: Pilate is terrified. The crowd is scared. Nothing that is done to Jesus can shake him. So who has the greater power? Jesus remains. He abides. Anchored in purpose, in mission, and in love. You see it in his eyes. This isn’t the end. You don’t know where the day will take you, or how this weekend will end, but this can’t be the end, can it?

In this scene, Jesus displays true power. His nonviolent response was a powerful form of resistance in the face of seemingly impenetrable powers. Aside from one statement, reminding Pilate that he doesn’t have any power that God hasn’t ultimately given him, Jesus is silent. His stoicism and willingness to die demonstrate the ultimate emptiness of the powers of the state against him.

What seem to be the most potent powers of our day? Violence and brute force seem impossible to overcome without taking up similar arms. Money and access to influence purchase power that is out of the reach for most of us. We are all part of bigger, nameless, nearly invisible systems, that seem to make any kind of real change far beyond our power. Poverty is powerful. Addiction is powerful. Despair is powerful. Hate is powerful. Fear is powerful. All of these seem insurmountable. Many days, it seems like they will win.

It’s easy to lose faith. To decide that it is better to align with the strongest power. To proclaim that we have no king but the emperor. If you can’t beat them, join them, right? The powers that be in our world are deadly and destructive, and we continue to give them life. But Jesus reminds us that true power comes from God, and God alone, and God’s power is love.

Throughout this Gospel, Jesus has invited us to abide with him. And here, he abides with us. With the very worst of human powers and capabilities. In the depths of suffering, and injustice. He abides, and reminds us that the powers that be have no ultimate power. God will prevail.

When it looks like things can’t get any worse, when it feels like all of the bad in the world, or in our world, is way beyond our control, remember that we, also, don’t know the end of the story. It might not be unfolding the way we had expected, or hoped, but God is still at the center. Whatever it is we go through, God is with us, and the story is not over.

A young boy offered his lunch to Jesus. What he witnessed was amazing. If he kept following Jesus to Pilate’s headquarters, what he would have witnessed would have been devastating. But that wasn’t the end of the story. The story continued to unfold in death, and in resurrection. As the story continued, he became part of the story. We are part of God’s story.

God took on human flesh to show us the depths of God’s love for us. Jesus willingly handed himself over to the powers of this world, proving that the power of God’s love is far greater. Even a death sentence isn’t the final word. Life is more powerful than death. Love more powerful than hate. The moral arc of the universe does bend towards the beloved kindom of God. As hopeless as things may sometimes seem, the story is not over. God is not yet done. Thanks be to God!