

In November of 1960, following the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, a young girl named Ruby Bridges made history walking up the steps of William Frantz Public School in New Orleans, becoming the first black student at the formerly all-white elementary school.

In the spring of 1960, she took a test, along with other black kindergartners in the city, to see who would go to an integrated school in the fall. That summer, her parents learned she had passed the test and been selected to start first grade at the school.

Originally born in Mississippi, her family moved to New Orleans seeking better opportunities. Her dad worked as a service station attendant, and her mom took night jobs to help support the family. Except for church and the long walk to the all-black school where she went to kindergarten, the world of her family didn't extend beyond their block. But that was soon about to change.

Her mother, when finding she had passed the test, was all for it. But her father was scared. "We're just asking for trouble," he said. As Ruby puts it, being interviewed as an adult many years later, he thought things weren't going to change, that blacks and whites would never be treated as equals. Her mama thought Ruby would have an opportunity to get a better education if she went to the new school—and a chance for a good job later in life. Her parents argued about it and prayed about it. Eventually her mother convinced her father that, despite the risks, they had to take this step forward, not just for their own children but for all black children.

A federal judge decreed that Monday, November 14, 1960 would be the day black children in New Orleans would go to school with white children. Ruby though would be going to William Frantz all alone.

The morning of November 14, federal marshals drove Ruby's mother and her the five blocks to William Frantz. In the car, one of the men explained that when they arrived at the school, two marshals would walk in front of them and two behind, so they'd be protected on both sides.

Ruby said it reminded her of what her Mama had taught them about God, that he is always there to protect us. "Ruby Nell," she said as they pulled up to the new school, "don't be afraid. There might be some people upset outside, but I'll be with you."

Sure enough, there were people outside shaking their fists when they got out of the car, but Ruby held her mom's hand. The first day they spent sitting in the principals office, where through the window she saw the white parents pointing and yelling. One even held a black doll in a coffin, which Ruby remembers scared her more than the words.

But the next day, when the marshalls took her again, another white person greeted her, but this was the voice of compassion. She smiled at Ruby. "Good morning, Ruby Nell,"

she said, just like Mama except with what she later learned was a Boston accent. “Welcome. I’m your new teacher, Mrs. Henry.” She seemed nice, but Ruby wasn’t sure how to feel about her. She’d never been taught by a white teacher before.

Mrs. Henry took Ruby’s mother and her to her second-floor classroom. All the desks were empty, and she asked her to choose a seat. She picked one up front, and Mrs. Henry started teaching her the letters of the alphabet.

The next morning, Ruby’s mother told her she couldn’t go to school with her. She had to work and had to look after her brothers and sister. “The marshals will take good care of you, Ruby Nell,” Mama assured her. “Remember, if you get afraid, say your prayers. You can pray to God anytime, anywhere. He will always hear you.”

That was how Ruby started praying on the way to school. The things people yelled at her didn’t seem to touch her. Prayer was her protection. After walking up the steps past the angry crowd, though, she was glad to see Mrs. Henry. She gave her a hug, and she sat right by her side instead of at the big teacher’s desk in the front of the room. Day after day, it was just Mrs. Henry and Ruby, working on her lessons.

Still, the anger of the mob persisted throughout the city because of Ruby going to the school. Her father lost his job. The white owners of a grocery store told them not to shop there anymore. Her grandparents in Mississippi were asked to move from the owner of the land they sharecropped for 25 years because of the trouble in New Orleans caused by her granddaughter as he put it.

But in this, there was also hope. Some white families braved the protest to keep their kids in school. People who saw what was going on sent in letters of support. A neighbor offered her dad a job painting houses. Others would babysit and watch the house to keep away troublemakers, and even walk with Ruby behind the marshalls. And through it all Mrs. Henry faithfully taught her with kindness and love. Ruby says the greatest lesson she learned that year in Mrs. Henry’s class was the lesson Martin Luther King Jr. tried to teach us all. Never judge people by the color of their skin. God makes each of us unique in ways that go much deeper.

From her window, Mrs. Henry always watched Ruby walk into the school. One morning when she got to the classroom, she said she’d been surprised to see her talk to the mob. “I saw your lips moving,” she said, “but I couldn’t make out what you were saying to those people.”

“I wasn’t talking to them,” Ruby told her. “I was praying for them.” Usually she prayed in the car on the way to school, but that day she’d forgotten until she was in the crowd. Please be with me, she had asked God, and be with those people too. Forgive them because they don’t know what they’re doing.

“Ruby Nell, you are truly someone special,” Mrs. Henry whispered, giving her an even bigger hug than usual. She had this look on her face like her mother would get when she’d done something to make her proud.

Eventually the crowd dwindled as the year went on, and the next year some more integration occurred. Ruby grew up and had 4 kids getting married, and actually ended up back at that school as a liaison between parents and the school. She’d be reunited with her teacher too, who ended up leaving the school in 1961, and the two would speak to groups around the country about learning lessons from the past and how every child is a gift from God.

In many ways, what she went through all those years ago reflects what Jesus went through many years prior - namely entering into sin in all it’s levels, but bringing light and hope into the darkness.

As we hear the Passion from Matthew’s Gospel, what strikes you is so much sin on all its levels. And like Ruby and so many others, what does he do? Not respond with violence or return hate with hate, but let love dispel the darkness. But it’s important to first see sin in all it’s magnitude, because we can sometimes be blind to it.

We begin with Judas; how much will you give me for betraying him? For 30 pieces of silver, he turns his back on his friend. Ruby’s family was betrayed by people who were neighborly on the surface to them, and we can know the pain of people betraying our trust and confidence too.

We continue to the garden; and Jesus prays intensely sweating blood. And what do the apostles do? They sleep. Sloth is known as spiritual laziness; apathy. How many people saw what happened to Ruby, but didn’t do anything about it. How many times in life do people just don’t care about the things that matter most, such as growing closer to God or family. As Ruby’s mother told her, God would be with her, and the two of them recognized that they had to act to take a stand for the other children, and that inaction wasn’t an option.

We then come to the mob showing up. The Prince of Peace, who stressed turning the other cheek, and love of neighbor, is met with hate. It’s been interpreted that Peter cutting off the high priest’s servants’ ear can symbolize how violence cuts off communication. It makes sense; think of the mob Ruby faced that day, they didn’t want to communicate or have dialogue. In violence there is no power of reason or connectedness, just hate fueling upon itself.

We then see the cowardice. We are told Peter and the rest all fled. Jesus called them to come follow Him and become fishers of men, but we see how they flee. How can we too at times be cowards when we do not speak up for what is right. When we ignore injustice, or tell ourselves it’s none of my business or we don’t want to get our hands dirty. Edmund Burke said it best; the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing. It’s this kind of thing that led institutional racism to continue, and why

today we see so much injustice from capital punishment to abortion to the treatment of immigrants to racism. So often evil triumphs because we chose to do nothing about it. The sin continues before the Sanhedrin, the allegedly upright people of the nation and in come the false witnesses, who will say anything to serve their own purpose. How we too as humans can lie and gossip about one another which destroys people.

We then come to Peter, who famously denies Jesus three times. But what's also interesting is the words of the woman - he's one of them because of his accent as a Galilean. As Ruby's story shows too, racism and scapegoating are additional ugly impacts of sin. How often can we do the same thing today with respect to color, religion, or politics. In fact, we even see it now as people look for others to blame with the Corona Virus. The mob didn't see a child; they just saw color, and hated her because of it.

And then we are told Judas hangs himself. Really he's not that much different than Peter, but he just can't bring himself to ask for forgiveness. Sins we commit can be pretty ugly and when it closes in on us, sometimes we can't see the good that is in us, and we need to remember that if we find ourselves falling again and again, or think that we are failures, God's love is always there for us because He forgives, and never condemns.

We then come to Pilate and see how he caves into the crowd and in him, we see abuse of power. Why weren't the local authorities there to help Ruby to school or go with her, but instead federal marshals? Abuse of power is something that happens all the time in both governments but also in families, and leads to others being harmed.

And there you have, what Bishop Robert Barron has called the "symphony of sin" in the Passion. At first glance, sin can be easy to miss. Maybe a visitor to the South in the early 1960s might not have noticed things too out of sorts. But of course the ugliness was there, Ruby simply brought to the surface what was in people's hearts. And it would be rather depressing were it not for the triumph of good in her story, and in the Passion. For while there was the ugliness on that first day of school for her, there was the kindness of her teacher, there was the love in her heart as she prayed for those who hated her, there was the strength and faith of her mom who reminded her that God was with her through it all. Evil may win a battle, but it will never win the war, because God enters into the battle with us, the battle against sin, and the battle against fear that we all endure right now as we deal with this plague on our world. But let's never forget, the story ends at the tomb, but that tomb is empty. And if we are in the tomb of fear or anxiety or sin as I said last week, may we see the hope. For what does love do? It liberates and sets us free - which is exactly what happened to Ruby as the mob eventually dwindled, and was replaced by the people who reached out to help her and stand with her. That is the good news in the Passion - that God journeys into the far country that is earth, and brings light, and does not hate the sinner but goes into the winners world, and with his love absorbs the sins of the world. What an amazing God we have. So let go, and let God, and let light and love have the last word as we enter into this Holy Week and think once again how radically in love God is with us all. May that love truly set us free.