

“God Moves...To the Cross”

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Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church

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Luke 23: 1–49

Luke 23: 1-12

Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. ² They began to accuse him, saying, “We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.” ³ Then Pilate asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” He answered, “You say so.” ⁴ Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, “I find no basis for an accusation against this man.” ⁵ But they were insistent and said, “He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.”

⁶ When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. ⁷ And when he learned that he was under Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. ⁸ When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. ⁹ He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰ The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. ¹¹ Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. ¹² That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.

Homily #1 – The Trial

When he walked the earth in the first century, he was called “Divine”, “Son of God”, “Lord”, “Redeemer”, “Liberator”, and “Savior of the World”. That’s what those around him called him but his name was Caesar Augustus. That’s right – those titles were not first given to Jesus, before Jesus was ever born in a manger, those monikers belonged to the Roman emperor and to him alone.¹ So imagine the threat when people started using those terms to describe a Jewish peasant from Galilee who was stirring up the masses everywhere he went. Jesus was healing the sick and teaching and drawing crowds and some were saying that he might even be the Messiah, the chosen one of God, who had come to deliver Israel.

¹ John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus against Rome, Then and Now* (San Francisco: Harper, 2007), 1, 13, 28.

And, clearly, the popular image of Messiah was one who would come with a sword and start the warring rebellion against Rome that would deliver Israel.

But right now, *“Israel”* is a huddle of Jews who live in the belly of the Roman beast. These Jews gather meekly on the Sabbath and they worship and pray for the one who is coming, from the stem of Jesse, who will one day lead the revolt. In the stories they tell, about Messiah, he will ride into town like Judas Maccabeus did when he led the great Maccabean revolt - when he rode into town on the back of a war stallion and led the people into rebellion.

So, word is wafting up to the people in power. This Jewish teacher named Jesus is causing quite a stir. Men are cutting palm branches. Women are getting the children ready, combing their hair, they are going to town to get a glimpse of the one who some say might be the Messiah.

There are two power groups needing to deal with the Jesus threat and the group that is most challenged by him are the Jewish leaders, those who hold seats of power in the temple. They are threatened because this Jewish rebel is breaking with tradition, healing on the Sabbath, touching lepers, eating with sinners. He is causing quite a problem for the religious power structure and something needs to be done. And, of course, rebel groups are always a threat to leaders of the empire. A guy with Jesus' popularity, whom some are calling *“Messiah”* – it's worth keeping an eye on, but the mighty rulers of Rome are not all that concerned. A carpenter's kid from Galilee is not exactly a major threat to the Governor of Judah or the Emperor of Rome.

But when the streets lined with a peasant frenzy and shouts of *“Hosanna”* and people were laying out palm branches like they did when that rebel Judas Maccabeus rode into town... well, enough's enough. So, the threatened religious leaders for once saw the political power as an ally. The scribes and Pharisees of the temple could use the weight of the governor as a way to solve their problem – as a way to be done with Jesus. They could shift the focus from his religious crimes, to political crimes. They could take him to Pilate, the local ruler and tell Pilate how people are calling this guy *“King”* and *“Messiah”* and *“Lord”*. *“He's a threat, you should do something.”*

So, they haul Jesus in, and Jesus stands before Pilate, hands tied behind him, and Pilate says, *“Are you the king of the Jews?”* An unflappable Jesus says, *“You say so.”* Pilate rolls his eyes, he just wants this case dismissed, this peasant teacher is no threat to Rome – *“I don't get it”*, he says, *“nothing here to prosecute.”* They answer, *“But he started trouble in Galilee, and it has followed him all the way here. He's trouble I'm telling you.”* *“Galilee, hum...”*, Pilate sees a way out, a way to not have to deal with this. *“Ah”*, he says, *“this is perfect. If this guy is a Galilean, then this is not really my jurisdiction anyway. And, as luck would have it, the Emperor of Rome, Herod himself is in town. Send him over and let Herod deal with this one. Get him out of here.”*

So, the prisoner is taken across town to Herod, who questions Jesus for a while, but ends up just mocking him and sending him back. “*No, let’s let Pilate deal with this one.*” He passes the buck back to Pilate and laughs. But at least, now, Pilate and Herod, who have never liked each other, have bonded over something. Jewish leaders have appealed to Pilate, Pilate has appealed to Herod – this unlikely alliance is all in one accord over one thing: nobody wants his power threatened. Nobody wants his power threatened.

At one level, Jesus is a meek Galilean with his hands bound behind his back. But he was far from powerless. Real power, real power doesn’t pound its chest, real power is found in the pure eyes and inner depth that is standing in front of them and at some level they all knew who in the room really had the power. He might just be a king of sorts.

Hymn: *The King of Glory Comes*

Luke 23: 13-25

¹³ Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, ¹⁴ and said to them, “You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. ¹⁵ Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. ¹⁶ I will therefore have him flogged and release him.”

¹⁸ Then they all shouted out together, “Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!” ¹⁹ (This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) ²⁰ Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; ²¹ but they kept shouting, “Crucify, crucify him!” ²² A third time he said to them, “Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him.” ²³ But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. ²⁴ So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. ²⁵ He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.

Homily #2 – The Compromise

“*Look*”, Pilate tells the angry religious leaders who want this troublemaker handled, “*I have questioned the guy and I just don’t understand the charges. He healed people, draws big crowds when he teaches, came into town on a donkey. I mean, really you see this guy as a threat? Granted, this prisoner has the inner strength of 100 wild horses but he’s the meekest man I’ve ever met. I just don’t see this guy leading a bloody rebellion. Besides, I sent him to Herod for questioning and Herod just popped him back over here to me. Look, I’ll have him flogged so he learns a lesson, but then I’m releasing him.*”

Now, the crowd is furious. They want this troublemaker gone. “*If you are feeling like releasing someone, release Barabbas. But we want Jesus out of our hair for good. “Crucify him! Crucify him!”* Finally, Pilate buckles. He’s a politician, you compromise when you need to. Finally, Pilate gives in and releases Barabbas and orders Jesus to death – not because he cares that this Jesus has broken Jewish laws, what is that to the governor of Judah. But this crowd is angry, and he doesn’t need the trouble, so he gives

them what they want – he hands Jesus over to die. Consider who is in this scene – huge crowds in a frenzy, the governor, and the city’s religious elite - and the most powerful person in the room has not said a word.

Hymn: *And Can It Be*

Luke 23: 26 - 43

²⁶ As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷ A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. ²⁸ But Jesus turned to them and said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹ For the days are surely coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.’ ³⁰ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us’; and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ ³¹ For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

³² Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³ When they came to the place that is called *The Skull*, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵ And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!” ³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, ³⁷ and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” ³⁸ There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹ And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴² Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” ⁴³ He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Homily #3 – The Crucifixion

And so, the Via Dolorosa, the way of suffering begins. Jesus is being walked to the hill of Golgotha where the public execution will take place. Simon of Cyrene trudges behind, carrying the heavy, wooden cross of death. A crowd forms and makes the slow walk with Jesus; mourners cry and beat their breasts and wail. When they get to the top of the hill, the place called “*the skull*”, they take huge spikes and drive them through Jesus’ wrists because the bones in the upper hand are just not strong enough to hold his suspended weight. They crossed his feet and drove another spike into the tops of his feet- an agony that our imaginations will hardly allow. When they had finished this gruesome and bloody chore on Jesus and the two others convicted to death sentences, they raised the 3 wooden crosses, secured them upright with stones and waited for the strength of these three men to give way. Finally, eventually, each

of the men hanging there would not have enough energy to lift and clear their lungs to breath, and they would die.

The Roman soldiers, brutish and cruel, threw dice to see who would get to keep the few belongings of the three convicted men. And the crowds mocked Jesus, they tried gut wrenching attempts at humor.

- *“Ha, if he’s really the savior, maybe he can save himself.”*
- *“A king should have his due, hey, let’s put up a sign that says, ‘King of the Jews’”.*
- *“Ha, ha, you look thirsty up there, here’s a little vinegar, that ought to be just the thing.”*

They thought he had no power, so they did what bullies do to people they think have no power. But Jesus bleeding, panting, dying – once again shows what real power looks like. He says between breaths, *“Father, forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing.”*

This is just remarkable - in his final acts before the last breath is taken, Jesus blesses. In the clenched teeth of excruciating pain, Jesus blesses the barren, forgives his tormenters and promises paradise to a criminal. Spikes driven into his wrists, a crown of thorn on his head, mockers and haters deriding him with insults and the response is blessing and forgiveness. Jesus is hanging, suffering, and fully compromised – but he is not powerless. He is far from powerless. Real power is an internal quality, not a given title. Jesus blesses and forgives because he is still in control.

Luke 23: 44-49

⁴⁴ It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, ⁴⁵ while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶ Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having said this, he breathed his last. ⁴⁷ When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, “Certainly this man was innocent.” ⁴⁸ And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. ⁴⁹ But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

Solo: Were You There

Benediction:

Go into this dark week, aware and confessing the way you participate in the power systems of this world. But go in the assurance that next Sunday we will see what real power looks like. Go in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.