

April 3

Fifth Sunday in Lent

John 19:1-16a

“No Power Over Me”

1. At the time of Jesus, the Romans were in charge
  - a. They were used to having their way in that part of the world, and they didn't take it well when anyone questioned their authority.
  - b. There had been several times when Roman forces had brutally crushed insurrections, people fighting for freedom from the occupation.
  - c. The time of Passover in Jerusalem was one of those times when Romans were on edge
    - i. That's the religious festival which focused on celebrating the liberation from captivity in Egypt centuries earlier.
    - ii. Huge crowds gathered in Jerusalem for the celebration at the temple, and Rome didn't want to let anybody in the Jewish community get ideas of acting out in real life their collective memories of escaping the oppression and slavery
2. Today's passage takes place in that charged time leading to Passover in Jerusalem.
  - a. We have been witnessing this Lent, almost in slow motion, the journey of Jesus following his arrest and now his trial
    - i. We can see Rome flexing its muscle,
    - ii. and the Jewish religious authorities trying to keep the status quo and not upset the Romans,
    - iii. and Jesus' disciples scrambling and hiding in the shadows.
    - iv. And there stands Jesus, in the midst of the commotion, standing firm, at times silent, at times speaking, even tortured and abused by his jailers, but focused nonetheless.
    - v. And we wonder: why didn't he fight back?
  - b. Pilate's exchange with Jesus is one which has us scratching our head.
    - i. Pilate seems tentative, even though he was ruthless and was known from crushing any hint of revolt.
    - ii. Jesus seems in charge, talking back to Pilate.
    - iii. That or Pilate is toying with the crowd
      1. mocking them and mocking Jesus, presenting this beaten up Jesus and saying : here's your king.
      2. The people take the bait: Our real king is the Emperor.
      3. Maybe that's all Pilate really wanted to hear from them, because then Pilate sends Jesus to be killed on the cross, the mode of execution for several offenses, among them for political agitators (like someone judged to be trying to overthrow the government).  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/crucifixion-capital-punishment>
    - iv. The crowd demanding his crucifixion had bought into the power of Rome, for convenience, for survival, for fear, to buy time until they could rise up, or whatever. The people chose what power to honor.
3. What resonates in our ears (and resonated in the ears of the people for whom this gospel was first written) is what Jesus says:

- a. You would have no power over me unless it was given to you from above (implication: by God).
  - b. But basically: you have no power over me.
    - i. I'm here by my choice. I know the score. I know what comes next.
  - c. I wonder if you've seen the 1986 movie "Labyrinth" starring David Bowie.
    - i. It's a fantastical story with magic and spells, strange characters, goblins, and a Goblin King – David Bowie.
    - ii. The main character, Sarah, is a teenager trapped in circumstances she can't untangle, and the Goblin King is tempting her to escape reality, to give in to him, to remain under his spell and never return to her world.
    - iii. In the tense scene, [SPOILER ALERT] Sarah suddenly realizes the key to her freedom, she realizes this had all been a charade, and she looks at the Goblin King and says: you have no power over me.
    - iv. And with that the spell is broken. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= MolWhOGhRc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MolWhOGhRc)
  - d. Maybe the spell isn't broken when Jesus says that to Pilate, but think of the original audience of this Gospel:
    - i. to hear the Messiah say to Pilate "You have no power over me" gave them the courage to say that, even if being defiant to the evil Empire (as Dianne and Ted memorably reminded us last week) even if being defiant to the evil Empire brings terrible consequences.
    - ii. You have no power over me is a freeing statement – and one which unveils the charade.
  - e. For the original listeners it meant:
    - i. Caesar is not God, Rome is not Heaven –
    - ii. God is God and Jesus is the Messiah.
  - f. But how can they say that when crucifixion was the sentence!
    - i. How can they gain courage from this futile act of defiance!
    - ii. They find the courage in knowing that even when injustice throws its harshest punishment, even when an innocent and wise leader is tortured and killed, even when all hope seems lost, the God of their ancestors is never defeated.
    - iii. Death is not the last word, not for a God who created all that is out of a sense of love and delight, not for a Messiah who came to usher in the Realm of God—an upside down reality that goes counter to the top down, heavy handed power of human empire.
4. We have to be aware that we get caught under the spell also
- a. If Jesus taught us to love God with all our being, but religion or State try to edit that lesson to their advantage to tell us what that means – we are getting caught under a spell
  - b. If Jesus taught us to love our neighbor as ourselves, but a materialistic, selfish culture tries to reward us for leaving people behind in the race to be number one – we are getting caught under a spell
  - c. To be able to declare "You have no power over me" requires that we see clearly the power play where we are the pawns.

- i. It means to realize that we are being played by forces which would rather us be quiet and compliant – and not ask any questions, especially uncomfortable questions about why our system is perfectly OK with the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, or why our system benefits men more than women or LGBTQ folks, or why our system created the concept of race and then presents white as normal and better, while everything else is not as good.

#### Reflection questions

1. Share a story when an injustice touched you personally and you did something about it.
2. How would you describe the power struggle between Jesus and Pilate in John 19:1-16a?
3. What is something that Jesus can help us stand up to and say “You have no power over me” in our life? (an addiction, an unhealthy relationship, an unfair expectation, etc.)