

Powerlessness
the Rev. Amy Spagna
April 13, 2025 – Palm Sunday
Isaiah 50:4-9a, Luke 22:14-23:56

"But all his acquaintances... stood at a distance watching these things." (Lk 23:49, NRSV)

In the end, that's really all Jesus' friends can do: just stand there and watch. Their lack of power in this moment stands in direct contrast to the display of absolute power put on by Pilate, the soldiers following his orders, and the unruly mob who've pushed Pilate into doing what they want. It seems that nobody can put a stop to what feels like the full weight of the world crashing down on them. Whether their helplessness is rooted in fear, or in the practical reality that they'd be just a small group of people going up against a large crowd that included fully armed Roman soldiers, they know there's nothing they can do to help him. They can't plead with Pilate to change his mind again. They can't reason with the crowd after it's been riled up. They can't bribe the Roman infantrymen to duck into a back alley and let Jesus go. But they can't leave, either: "They stay. They don't turn away. Sometimes bearing witness, carrying the weight of seeing and remembering, is its own holy act... Their seeming powerlessness transforms into testimony, their witness becoming a voice that lingers still."¹

Sometimes, that lingering voice is all that's left after an event like those we will commemorate together over the course of the next several days. It's the voice which tells the story, or at least captures the truth it's trying to convey. In the case of one Jesus of Nazareth, their voices are what we have. No news media as we know it existed

¹ Jasmin Pittman, "What do we do with our powerlessness?"
<https://www.christiancentury.org/lectionary/april-13-passion-c-isaiah-50-4-9a-psalm-31-9-16-luke-23-1-49>
[accessed April 8, 2025].

at that time, and even if it had, it might not have reported anything other than, "The Romans crucified a rabbi and two thieves this afternoon. Sources say the rabbi was charged with sedition after the crowd convinced the Romans he was a threat." The accounts of these sources – the eyewitnesses at the fringe of the crowd who are just watching it happen – formed the backbone of the written gospel accounts of this event. As Luke records and interprets them, they also point to the truth that the death of Jesus is, at its core, about how the exercise of raw power, driven by fear, has dire consequences. And as we will find out, that power, no matter who's using it, can, and will, turn the world upside down.

The use of power is just one of the many things at stake in the events of the final week of Jesus' earthly life. It's not just God's power in accomplishing this thing, but also the power employed by both the mob and by Pilate. By "power" I mean both the ability to take action, and the possession of control or command over other people. The mob has power thanks to its sheer size and the Romans' paranoia over allowing anyone to act in such a way as to even hint at sedition. Pilate has the power his superiors have delegated to him – that is, the power to sentence Jesus to death and give the army the orders to ensure that it happens. Both of them use what power they have within the boundaries we might expect them to. That is, they assert that THEY have it, that they are in control, and that they will maintain that control by killing a fellow human being whom they think threatens them in the process. In that way, the power they think they have is self-centered and selfish. It cares only about maintaining the *status quo*, and it does not tolerate the kind of challenge to its primacy that Jesus, and people like him, present.

As for Pilate himself, he is fixated on Jesus' purported status as a king. For a Roman bureaucrat like him, the very idea of a king conjured up a stereotype of someone with a purple robe and a crown who governed on a whim and paid little attention to what the Romans would have considered "justice." Jesus has not come to claim that kind of power, or political power as Pilate understands it – hence his insistence that Pilate is the one who's pinned the title "King of the Jews" on him. His task here is only to accomplish his departure, the very same one that he himself hinted at when he told Peter and the rest about what was to come.²

What Jesus does in this moment is no less than to shift the dynamics of Roman "power over" occupied people and the crowd's own ability to get what it wants. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, Jesus instead offers his back to those who would strike him. It is uncomfortable to watch – and it should be for anyone who has to the choice to look or move away from witnessing his suffering. And yet, since he appears to just let them do this, he seems to embody the prophet's words "The Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame" (Isa 50:7, NRSV). In our historical context, it's not unlike Rosa Parks' reported response of, "You may do that" to the bus driver who threatened to have her arrested after she sat in the front seat reserved for White passengers.³

This entire week is about power – its use, abuse, and what God, through Jesus, ultimately does to disrupt it and turn the world upside down. As we walk through these

² Andrew McGowan, "The Present and Coming King." <https://abcmcg.substack.com/p/the-present-and-coming-king> [accessed April 8, 2025].

³ Pittman, "What do we do with our powerlessness?"

next few days together, I invite you not to run away, and instead to join the witnesses at the edge of the crowd. Look around at what's happening: Who has power? Who doesn't? How are they using it? Who's fled the scene, and who's stayed to watch? And, as you're looking around, ask what will we do, when we too are faced with the choice Jesus' friends were. Will we to hang around on the fringes, watching and listening, or will we give in to our fear, and go find a hole to hide in?