

Powers Play

Isaiah 50: 4-9

Mark 14: 1-11

For the weeks of Lent, we have considered the way to the cross, the evolving nature of the covenant, sacrificing the past and the present so that we can pursue and obtain the promise of life that God has placed before us and within us.

We started with the waters, finding new life in a new covenant with our God in Noah's rainbow, and Jesus' teaching on the nature of genuine righteousness in how we share as stewards and how we pray as we distinguish between the sacred and the profane.

We found the promise of God to be remarkable, transformative, and we may have been on the ground laughing with Abraham at the astounding nature of God's promise, or cringing with Peter when the Lord completely overturns our confident (and wrong-headed) expectations, or puzzled by the snakes in the desert and the saving nature of the snake-on-a-stick for both Moses and Jesus.

We considered the distractions, the array of things that have nothing to do with the promise of God, things that may even corrupt and exploit the promise of God. These impediments tell us to examine a difficult reading of the Ten Commandments, and consider Jesus' fiery outburst in the marketplace at the Temple as we fail to regard that critical difference between what is God's – what is sacred – and what is the world's – what is profane.

Finally, we heard last week that there is an hour, a time when people, events, and circumstances come together. Amid Jerusalem's devastation and addressing a defeated people, Jeremiah sees a new time and a new covenant, while Jesus sees the arrival of Greeks seeking him as a new time for his ministry, one that is painfully harsh in its demands and yet abundant in its promise.

This week, on Palm Sunday, we encounter the confrontation with “the powers.” These are powers that are always present, and they are always competing with the authority of God, again the sacred and the profane in continual struggle. The Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians: *For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.* (6:12)

A well-reasoned objection to these “rulers of the darkness of this world” would be that God has allowed other powerful gods to exist within God's sovereign creation. How can that be? Does God allow competitors? And, wait a minute, isn't that polytheism? Is Paul admitting the presence, power, and validity of other gods?

Paul's ancient worldview allowed (in my opinion) a better viewpoint of the forces at work in the world. Sadly, in our divided world between reality and fantasy, fact and fiction, fake news and real news, we often fail to identify the greater motivating forces,

almost ignoring their agenda. We might say that the housing market was demon-possessed before the recession hit. It wasn't as if no one knew what was happening. Sage Fed Chair Alan Greenspan warned that the market was overheated and headed for a meltdown, but he didn't do anything to stop it. That would have killed the goose laying the golden eggs. Greed ran amok, complicity was the rule, and collusion was expected because the money being made was too good to be true. Indeed it was as the powers – the engines of finance combined with the spirit of avarice – brought our economy to its knees and devastated millions of lives.

Between our customary polarities of fact and fiction lie those entities that we invest with power, status, and authority, to which we offer our devotion, our loyalty, and our service, and for which we will sometimes even sacrifice and prostrate our mind, body, and spirit.

Palm Sunday's story is about the powers that are always pursuing an agenda contrary to God's, and it seems to infect everyone but Jesus.

In the reading from Mark's gospel, we have only a small slice of the whole story. Chapter 14 opens with Passover only two days away, and the chief priests and teachers are plotting. They know enough about Jesus to be very anxious. This wandering preacher has been very popular in the countryside, always saying defiant things. Jesus entered Jerusalem with quite a bit of fanfare, and the manner of his entry, riding on a donkey, was clearly chosen to indicate his messianic mission. Connect the dots and it's clear that he's going to be trouble. They need a plan. In fact, they want to be ahead of events, and be in a position to work events to suit *their* agenda.

But how does this one wandering preacher cause such distress among religious leaders? Are they so insecure, so anxious and apprehensive that they fear Jesus?

In fact, they fear the Romans *far* more than Jesus. The religious authorities have their power thanks to the Romans. Their job is to keep order among the restive factions of the religious. This job is particularly important during holidays like Passover, a season fraught with expectations when Jerusalem is packed with every looney who thinks they've now arrived to save the Promised Land for God, and they want to start the revolution or the apocalypse or whatever. Such people, like Jesus, have the potential to cause the religious authorities huge problems.

If trouble happens and the Romans have to bring in the army, they'll be looking for a new job, if they ever see the light of the next day. These religious leaders are not concerned about Jesus, or his message, or his reforms, or his spirituality, or anything else. They are concerned about their keesters. It's that simple.

While they're religious leaders and *might* act in faithfulness, they won't. They are essentially owned by the Romans and serve Roman demands. They serve a power in no way connected to God and God's purpose. We have the same religious leaders among us today who are indifferent to the gospel of Jesus and align themselves with political values quite at odds with anything remotely connected to Jesus' teachings.

In Mark, Jesus is visiting a man named Simon when a woman comes in and starts pouring very expensive perfume on his head. It is an anointing in the tradition that has the prophet **anointing** the head of the King of Israel. You catch the symbolism, right? It's very messianic, that the time for the Sovereign One from God has come and he is being anointed for his role. It's just as amazing that there's this *woman* is doing it.

The people in the house with Jesus are aghast. This woman comes out of nowhere, walks right in and starts dabbing this perfume on Jesus' head. Women are not allowed to do such things for starters. She has completely ignored propriety and stepped far beyond the boundaries of acceptable behavior.

Plus, she has acted with extraordinary extravagance, using perfume costing a small fortune. This was *not* the way Jesus' disciples had been taught; to live frugally so that they could minister to the poor, the one's who had been such a central focus in Jesus' ministry.

Here the disciples get caught up in a kind of legalism as a specter of the powers comes to command their hearts and spirits. This legalism is an inflexible posture about rules and customs that grants authority *to the rules* rather than the *spirit* of the rules, or the *goals* of the rules. In their legalistic response, they show that they missed the spirit of the gift *and* they missed the sacred importance of this messianic-type anointing.

According to their legalism, God should have called on some bum to bring cheap perfume and stink up Jesus. It would be like Jesus making cheap wine at the wedding in Cana. No way; he turned the water into the very best wine. So the woman brings the best perfume to Jesus, fulfilling her role to advance God's promise. But she is scorned as the powers affecting the disciples swarm to oppose her.

We then learn that Judas has decided to betray Jesus by going to the chief priests. In Mark's gospel, it does **not** say that Judas made the comment about the perfume being better sold in order to minister to the poor. In Mark's gospel, it does **not** say that Judas went to the chief priests looking for money, simply that they promised money to him. In Mark's gospel, we are **not** given a reason for Judas' betrayal. What we can be certain of is that there were still other powers at work in this whole mess. From Mark's account, we can only speculate about what Judas may have been thinking.

Whatever Judas thought about Jesus, he was totally disillusioned and felt betrayed himself. Instead of faithfulness, Judas took the matter into his own hands and sought the power to decide Jesus' fate. He would betray Jesus who he believed had somehow betrayed him, and show that he, Judas, was more important, more righteous, more godly than anyone or anything else.

A host of sinful powers are at work, twisting the plot line and using events to create havoc as the powers seem to successfully draw on agendas and intrigues that push away from the promise of God that Jesus bears.

Yet we know how the story turns out. We know that the powers are overturned in the end, that God has expected such outbreaks, and God's agenda is firmly set to overcome the powers and their claims. While God is sovereign over all powers, principalities and schemes, the presence and capability of the powers is unmistakable. They are a force to be reckoned with, and their resistance is ferocious.

The powers also push the people of God to bear a strength and determination in their faithfulness that is exceptional. That's the reason for spiritual discipline and practice, so that when the time comes, we're ready and clear minded about how to respond.

The passage from Isaiah mentions a servant of God who is called to speak God's word to people. Each day he hears God speaking to him, giving him "the word that sustains the weary," a word that discloses God's promise and keeps those exhausted by life's strains and pressures alert to God's work with them.

For his efforts, the servant of God is beaten, ridiculed, and spit on. But he remains steadfast, "because the Lord God helps me, he who vindicates me is near." If God is helping him, he asks, "Who will condemn me?" They will wear out like old clothes, exhausting themselves with their futile efforts. God will prevail.

For God's servants today, the word is the same. God is with us on our way to the cross, giving us strength in our weakness and waiting to declare his victory when the storm passes. It is the faith of Jesus in promise of God that we watch this week, and we are mindful of the many powers that sought to end his ministry in failure.

We are the living proof, the living legacy, that God has succeeded and the Word lives, borne by us today.

May we always seek to be faithful and stand opposite the powers seeking to pull us away from God's promise in Jesus Christ. May we remain steadfast in the values of the gospel and the promise of the Kingdom of our Lord and Savior, resisting the powers and their desire for our devotion to the games that they are playing with God's people and God's good creation.