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Mark 15:1-15
Jesus 101: An Introduction to the Depth of Jesus
Power Play

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Palm Sunday

Every now and then, we get a reminder that things we can't even see are able to have a significant impact on our lives. In fact, those things can have a significant amount of power. We're experiencing the power of a virus right now. You can't see it. I can't see it - not without special lenses and extraordinary magnification, anyway. And yet our lives have been upended by it: stay home orders, business closures, the complete derailment of cultural liturgies from sports tournaments to concerts to community Easter Egg Hunts...and all of this is because of the power of an essentially unseen thing: a virus.

Power often works that way. We see its effects – whether it's used wisely or unwisely, positively or negatively. But power in and of its self is not usually seen. Maybe besides the pandemic we are in, you have been in situations where powerful forces were at play beyond your control: the wind, the dynamics of a work team, the interactions in a family, the power of words spoken. For instance, a man once peered over his fence and noticed that the neighbor's little boy was in his backyard filling in a hole. Curious about what the youngster was up to, Mr. Green asked, "What are you doing, Jimmy?" Tearfully, little Jimmy replied, "My goldfish died, and I've just buried him." "That's an awfully large hole for a goldfish, isn't it?" Mr. Green said. Patting down the last bit of earth, little Joey replied, "That's because he's in your cat!" Words have power – to make us laugh, cry, and all emotions in between.

So "power" impacts our lives – for better or for worse, whether we can see the power or not. We feel its effects. And as we get down to the next-to-last week of our sermon series titled, "Jesus 101: An Introduction to the Depth of Jesus," we see powerful forces at work in today's passage. The traditional Palm Sunday passage – part of which was read at the start of today's service – was something we looked at a couple weeks ago, as the last several weeks of this series narrows down to the depth of Jesus' last week of life. So today's events, if we were to lay them out in relation to Palm Sunday and Easter, would be early this coming Friday morning. So, with that, let's dive into Mark 15:1-15 and consider the forces of power that are at play here, and in

our lives as well:

Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, made their plans. So they bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate.

Let's pause there for a moment. Any time you have titles of individuals or titles of a group of people, you know there's power. It's what is often called "positional power." There is power in a person's position – their position in a company, a church, a family, a community organization, and so forth. We see this here with the chief priests, elders, teachers of the law, and the Sanhedrin. These are people who have positional power because of their positions within the Jewish religion.

Pilate also has power, because he's the local governor for Judea. So he's part of the Roman government, since the Roman empire included Israel at this time. So he has a lot of power as well.

Of course, the other person in this power play is Jesus. We get more about him in the next few verses:

2 "Are you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate.

"You have said so," Jesus replied.

3 The chief priests accused him of many things. 4 So again Pilate asked him, "Aren't you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of."

5 But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.

So here we see the conflict and the power struggle growing. But Jesus' power seems to be different. In fact, as you look at this, you wonder if Jesus has any power in the situation at all. He's the one who has worked miracles, taught to thousands, generated a following of people as well as given other people reason to hate on him. Most of the power that stood against him was from the Jewish religious leaders of the day. In fact, the charges they really held against him were trumped up religious charges which Luke and Matthew tell us about. But the Jewish religious courts wouldn't invoke the death penalty, which is what these people wanted. They had to get the Romans to convict

him of something. So that's why he ends up here in front of Pilate.

But Jesus' power, as great as it was and as much as we see it on display in the four biographies of Jesus: it was not for himself. Jesus never uses his power for his own benefit. We'll come back to Jesus' power again in a couple minutes. Let's keep reading the passage:

Now it was the custom at the festival to release a prisoner whom the people requested. 7 A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. 8 The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did.

So now we get the crowd. The crowd has power. Considering that just a few days earlier Jesus had been welcomed into Jerusalem in a one-person parade where crowds of people cheered him on, we might wonder who these people here are. Are they the same people who have suddenly turned against him? Not likely. This is a different crowd. We aren't told anything about them really, but based on the fact that they want Pilate to release someone from prison as he usually does on this day each year, it wouldn't be surprising if they are friends with some of the prisoners. They want one of their buddies to be set free. And as we'll see in the next few verses, they have power. Let's continue...

9 "Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate, 10 knowing it was out of self-interest that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. 11 But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead.

So now we see that the power Pilate had is starting to be handed over to the chief priests and the crowd of people. Pilate had the power to just make the decision about who would be released. He could have released Jesus, and made that decision himself. But each year he lets the people choose, and he does the same thing here: he abdicates his power and asks the crowd who it is they want to be released. They are influenced by the power of the chief priests to have Barabbas released instead of Jesus. The stirring up of the crowds may have been about who was released – Barabbas – but definitely their stirring up of the crowds had to do with the next verses.

12 “What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?” Pilate asked them. 13 “Crucify him!” they shouted. 14 “Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!” 15 Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

So the power play continues, and Jesus ends up convicted without really much of a trial. The power of the crowds and the chief priests carries the day, sending Jesus on his way to the 1st century equivalent of the electric chair.

And it makes you wonder: given the power Jesus had and had access to, why did it go down like this? What can we learn from this and apply to our lives today? What does it mean for us and our own power struggles?

First, we have to recognize that like a virus that is essentially invisible, there are forces at work that also cannot be seen that exude great power in the world and in our lives. And right here, we see that one of those powers is the power of evil. I mean, I don't know how else you describe Jesus getting sentenced to crucifixion. He's the last person on the face of the earth who you would expect to end up in this situation. But sometimes evil gets its way for a time.

For instance, the story is told of Randy the painter. Randy often thinned his paint to make it go further. The Presbyterian Church decided to restore its biggest building. Randy put in a low bid and got the job. He bought the paint, and, yes, thinned it with turpentine. Well, Randy was painting away, the job nearly completed, when suddenly there was a clap of thunder. The sky opened, and the rain poured down. It washed the thinned paint off the church. Randy fell from the scaffold, landing among the gravestones in the church's cemetery. He was no fool. He knew this was a judgment from God Almighty. Randy raised his voice to the heavens, crying, "Oh, God, forgive me; what should I do?" And from above, a mighty voice roared: "Repaint! Repaint! And thin no more!"

More seriously, evil gets its way in our lives in all kinds of situations. Many of them revolve around “not loving our neighbor as ourselves.” Jesus addresses a bunch of them in the Sermon on the Mount: pride (Matthew 6:1-4); adultery, including looking at others with lust in the heart (5:27-30); judging others more harshly than you judge yourself (7:1-6) and did you know that Jesus address hoarding (6:19)? Though I doubt Jesus had toilet paper in mind when he said this. These kinds of things are facets of evil and seek to have power and influence in our lives, and derail you from what Paul writes in Philippians we should be focused on: “whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable...excellent or praiseworthy.” So evil is one unforeseen power here.

Second, is the good power that Jesus had access to from his Heavenly Father – and it’s also a force that itself is not seen. We only see the effects of it. This good power of God is not just to save *from* any particular evil situation, but to save *through* it. God’s power is greater than just being able to prevent some evil from happening; it’s able to overcome the evil once it’s gotten going. This is one of the hardest things for us to get our minds around on one hand, but it’s also something we naturally gravitate toward.

For instance, the games in any sport that are remembered as “the greatest ever” are not the blowouts. They’re the tight, back-and-forth games, or ones where a team comes down from a large deficit and wins in the last seconds of the game. In other words, it’s the games where a significant amount of opposition and power had to be overcome. An objective football fan, for example, will admit that the Super Bowl the Seahawks won against Denver really was not that exciting of a game. I say that as a lifelong Seahawks fan. It certainly is not going to be considered one of the great games of all time. Unfortunately, the one that they lost the next year *will* be considered one of the great Super Bowls of all time, because it came down to the last seconds of the game – even if the wrong team won. Overcoming the power of the opposition in dramatic ways is attractive. We gravitate toward these things.

We gravitate toward the same things with God, too. For example, Jesus experienced praise all the time when he healed people who had been blind, or couldn’t walk or had been bleeding for 13 years. Or we hear of God

transforming someone's life from a life of drugs or gang activity or alcoholism, or some other terrible situation, to a life lived for Him, a life that's on the straight and narrow path – and we praise God for His work in their lives. “Transformed lives” from dire situations are the ones where we give God the most praise and glory. Why? Because the power of God is on full display there. No one gets a standing ovation when they share their testimony of what God's done in their lives and the testimony is: “Well, I was born into a Christian home and I've known Jesus all my life and I've never really fallen into any bad habits or terrible sin.” But we cheer God's work in the lives of people who God has brought out of terrible circumstances and deep sin. And it's not that the first testimony is actually less important or meaningful. A lot of Christians have a testimony along those lines – though oftentimes because of our pride we are just glossing over the ugly parts of our lives that God saved us through. But when it comes to God's power being on display, it's much more evident when God has saved people *through* significant trials, rather than saving *from* the trials.

And yet we doubt God when he doesn't save us *from* the hard, evil, sinful things in life – like a pandemic. We start to question God's goodness. Agnostics and atheists even see it as evidence for God not existing. Why doesn't God just prevent something like this in the first place, or eradicate it after the first initial threat of it? Well, first of all, who's to say He hasn't saved us from something even worse? Second of all, God's power is shown even more emphatically when evil is overcome, not just prevented, and as a result, it draws us to Him even more. **In the midst of the evil and in its eventual overcoming, we are reminded of how desperately we need God in our lives!** This virus, this force, which is essentially invisible, is train-wrecking our lives in so many ways. We can't seem to overcome it. All of our human-made structures and the things that we latch onto and hold dear – often as idols above God, even – are being taken away from us. And so the invisible power of God is also at work, seeking to draw us to Him through this event.

Maybe this will lead people to God for the first time or lead some of us back to God and lead all of us to a greater dependence on God. There's a bigger picture that we can't see – and God is working through this, just as he

worked through Jesus' conviction and death on the cross, to display his true power, his true self. We get to that in depth next Sunday with Jesus' resurrection. God didn't save Jesus *from* crucifixion, he saved him – as well as you and me – *through* his crucifixion. And in doing so, it displays the true power of God, where death is not just prevented, but is overcome.

So where is God's power being shown and even unleashed in your life to save you not just *from* something – and undoubtedly God has done more than you or I even realize...where is God's power not only saving you *from* those things but *through* them as well? What is it in your life that, like Randy the painter, you need to “repaint, repaint, and thin no more”? Or, to put it more properly: Repent, repent, and sin no more? Because there's a lot that seeks to have power in your life – and a lot of it are things you can't even see. Maybe this virus is opening your eyes up to greed or lust or hoarding or pride or something else in your life that has a foothold and God is going to save you through them, even now in the midst of a pandemic. That's the true power of God – to save us through these kinds of things. So: today, in the midst of Covid-19, and in the midst of whatever else is invisible but has power and is seeking to gain a foothold in your life and pry you away from God...in the midst of all that may you know God's power. The power not only to save you *from* evil, but even to save you *through* it. That is the true power of God. Let's pray...Amen.