

John 19: 16b-22  
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## One Word

“In the beginning was the Word.” That’s how it started. That’s where we began all those months ago when we first stepped into the gospel of John back in December. There have been lots and lots of words since then. A lot from Jesus, some from the disciples, a few from Jesus’ mother and from John the Baptist, a few more here and there from a woman at a well, from a puzzled Nicodemus, and from a man who can now see for the first time. There have been grumbling words from religious leaders and words full of promise from the likes of Peter. And there have been even more words spoken by preachers and others in bible study and over coffee and around the breakfast table, as we have tried to listen to and make sense of God’s Word made flesh.

We began the morning waving palms and singing “Hosanna!” with friends of all ages. *Hosanna* is one of those church words we associate with Palm Sunday. It sounds like a praise word, a celebration word, and yet it actually means, “Save us.” When Jesus rides the donkey into Jerusalem, only a few days have passed since he raised Lazarus from the dead. This unheard-of act of life trampling death has sent the religious leaders into a tailspin, and the growing crowds do not help.

At least for a moment, the people see something new and powerful in Jesus, someone who can upend all that oppresses them, including Rome, the religious establishment, and death itself. “The world has gone after him,” the Pharisees insist. And then the crowds begin to drift away.

Over the past few weeks, we have been witnesses to Jesus’ trials before Caiaphas, the chief priest and before Pilate, the Roman governor who has come to Jerusalem to keep a lid on things during the festival of Passover. Rome has no interest in letting the Jewish people get any ideas from a celebration commemorating their ancestors’ liberation from Pharaoh. Historians report that Pilate was a notoriously brutal governor, unlikely to be at all inclined toward decency, compassion, or genuine justice. And now Pilate finds himself dealing with the religious leaders and their outrage about Jesus. These leaders have had their eyes on Jesus for a while now. In other gospel accounts, Jesus draws the leaders’ ire when he storms into town and cleanses the Temple on the Monday after Palm Sunday. In John’s gospel, Jesus cleanses the Temple way back in chapter 2, so it is the raising of Lazarus that tips the leaders over the edge. Jesus goes on to gather with his disciples for a final meal and washes their feet to show them what love looks like. And then he spends the rest of that one long night teaching

them and praying for them before he is arrested in the garden. [Read John 19:16b-22]

So, after all the words, all the teaching, all the praying, all the volleying back and forth debating who he is and what he's about, Jesus does not speak, and Pilate—of all people—has the last word, or so it seems. In bible study we debated whether Pilate actually sees the light and genuinely comes to understand who Jesus is. After having Jesus flogged, Pilate sends him off to be crucified. John also tells us that Pilate has a sign placed on the cross that reads, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews,” in three languages, Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. The religious leaders wish to suggest a few tweaks to the sign. And Pilate insists that what he has written will not be edited to make the religious leaders more comfortable: “What I have written, I have written.” Full stop. No notes. It is settled.

While I would love to think that his conversations with Jesus have cracked Pilate's brutal armor even a tiny bit, I believe Pilate's declaration is less a confession of faith than the height of cruelty and cynicism. He makes it clear in no uncertain terms that he and Rome hold the upper hand. The sign written in every language spoken in that part of the world at the time is intended to mock not only Jesus, but to deride and even warn his followers and his enemies alike. *Here is your king*, Pilate said in last week's text. And this is what the Roman empire does

to anyone who claims to be king, anyone who pretends to be as powerful or more powerful than Caesar. The sign—paired with the public humiliation of crucifixion—is the perfect way of putting everyone in their place, or at least in the places where Rome thinks they should be, which means the religious leaders get their way, but only on Rome’s terms. Those who waved palms and celebrated the coming of a new king just days before are now made to see how little power they and their king actually have by Rome’s standards. With Pilate’s words and in Pilate’s eyes, Jesus, the ringleader, the rebellious rabbi is made a public mockery, and the God all these people claim to worship and serve is exposed as no match for the powers of the empire.

And Jesus—God’s Word made flesh—does not utter a word.

He doesn’t have to. His actions speak louder than any propaganda or threat. He is human and vulnerable, and yet he is no passive victim. Here in John’s gospel, he steps forward in the garden and submits to the sham arrest. Here he carries the cross alone and makes his way to the hill outside the city as a crowd follows along. By the empire’s standards he and his cause are defeated, written off. And yet that sign—unknownst to Pilate—speaks the truth, points to the truth. Jesus is the one true king, not only of the Jews but of the world as demonstrated by the languages inscribed on the sign. In his crucifixion Jesus exposes the immense

cruelty of humanity, our capacity for evil and violence, and at this darkest moment, Jesus also reveals his astounding and unrelenting compassion for that same humanity. As we will hear on Thursday evening, Jesus will only speak briefly after this. He will cry out with thirst. He will care for his mother by directing the beloved disciple to take her into his home. And he will declare “It is finished,” and give up his spirit. Pilate does not have the final word, after all.

We know where the story is ultimately headed and I am tempted to race ahead to flowers and bunnies and baskets and an empty tomb. It is crucial, however, to rest here for a moment, painful as it may be. While I do not relish the violence of Good Friday or the extraordinary inhumanity on display that day, I am profoundly moved by the God who gives his only Son to us out of love for us in the first place, awful and spiteful and cruel and petty as we may be. This same God allows that Son to die at humanity’s hands, to suffer the depths of human pain and cruelty. God gives us his best, and we give God our worst. And astonishingly, God does not end it all right then and there. God doesn’t not burn it all down or whisk Jesus away. No, God is somehow still determined to redeem us, to save us, to make us and the entire world whole. The Good Shepherd will not rest until every last lost sheep is found, no matter where that Sheperd must go to find us, no matter how great the risk or how steep the cost. “No one has greater love than

this, to lay down one's life for one's friends," Jesus taught his disciples just hours before. And that is exactly what he does. This is what holy kingship looks like with its unstoppable willingness to give his life for others and its fierce determination to love them—to love us and the entire world—fully and completely to the end.

The empire does not have the last word. The empire cannot undo what God has in mind; the empire cannot thwart the Lord of Life. It is also true that the empire does not and cannot save us. It doesn't want to; empire only seeks to save itself. All the words, all the spin, all the threats, all the braggadocio and bluster will not and cannot save us or make us whole. They cannot answer our cries of "Hosanna!" They are not meant to. This Jesus, this one Word can, this one Word does, not by what he says or promises or shouts or screams, but by what he does for the world, what he does for us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.