

“By Whose Authority”

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Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures quoted are from 2011 New International Version.)*

Meet me at the cross.

Luke 20:1-19

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Authority and things

Bob: I am eager to speak on today’s text in Luke, because what happened on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday of Holy Week is too often overlooked.

Jordan: Pastor Bob, I was wondering if I could say a few words this morning.

Bob: Jordan, you’re one of my favorite singers, but I wasn’t planning on a speech.

Jordan: But what I have to say is important and your people might like to hear it.

Bob: On most Sundays I would, but we’re kind of short on time today.

Jordan: You would deny the floor to *Jesus?!?!*¹

Bob: Yes, if Jesus is interrupting my sermon.

I hope that exchange felt awkward and uncomfortable if just for a split second. I know the religious leaders in Jerusalem are the bad guys in the story, but at least try to see their side. They are in charge. Jesus is a usurper in their minds.

On Tuesday of Holy Week, therefore, it’s understandable that the religious leaders ask Jesus, “Who do you think you are?” When they ask, “By whose authority,” they are referring to a formal process of laying on of hands, aka ordination. They held

¹ Jordan sang the part of Jesus in multiple songs from Peter Corneliussen’s musical theaters today.

their places of authority either from birth or through decades of training and waiting. There had been a public recognition authorizing them. Who authorized Jesus?

Jesus is a 30-something Nazarene with no pedigree or formal training but with undeniable celebrity status. As he walks on to the massive temple platform packed with the mushrooming Passover throngs, he not only draws a crowd to himself, he draws them away from those who usually provide both order and instruction. I'm not surprised that they ask, "By whose authority are you doing these things?" I would too.

What "things"? On Sunday he descended the Mount of Olives on a donkey, riding into the Kidron Valley and up through the eastern gate on to the temple platform as crowds waved palm branches and shouted words from Psalm 118, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord." This was so unlike Jesus. Even with his prior popularity, he had stayed on the move or out of sight or outright shushed those who had proclaimed him Messiah. The Jesus we have met so far in Luke's gospel doesn't readily accept palms and praises.

On Monday he returned to the temple mount and assumed for himself the role of temple police and judge. Caiaphas had devised a monopoly on selling lambs and doves for sacrifice, padding the coffers of the temple and using zealots for salesmen. It was a profit-hungry power move, displacing Gentiles and women from the only place they were allowed to pray. Jesus angrily upset the temple bazaar with words and deeds. Who gave him the right?

Each day Sunday through Tuesday, he also taught publicly in the temple, presumably the same teaching as previously in Luke's gospels – blessings on the poor and humble, woes to the rich and powerful, stories and parables. Luke says he was also proclaiming the "good news," a word the Greeks used for an emperor's tax relief notice. Jesus' good news is that the kingdom of God is right here. The people are glad; the religious leaders are threatened.

Stalemate

Tuesday of Holy Week, sometimes called "The Day of Questions," is about their effort to use words to discredit Jesus, to diminish his popularity, to get him in trouble with the Romans. When that doesn't work, they will use force against him on Friday, cooperating with the Romans to destroy him. This sometimes works with charismatic but threatening leaders. It had been effective with John the Baptist.

At the height of John's popularity, Luke had written this about John,

All the people, even the tax collectors...acknowledged that God's way was right, because they had been baptized by John. But the Pharisees and the experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John. (Luke 7:29-30, emphasis added).

After Herod had John beheaded, everyone seems to have forgotten about him. They were assuming the same would happen with Jesus. It will come to that on Thursday and Friday, but on Tuesday they send delegation after delegation to challenge Jesus before the mesmerized masses. They will attempt in words to embarrass him, to refute him, to trap him. Whatever works.

In answer to the question, “By whose authority?” Jesus recalls their John the Baptist dilemma. “John – remember him? By whose authority did he baptize? God’s or yours?” I love how they “discussed among themselves” – I picture a conference on the baseball pitcher’s mound or a Family Feud huddle. “We can’t say God’s – because everyone knows we never bought into him.” “But we can’t say human authority because the humans who loved him are here. John’s legacy was sealed by his martyrdom.”

The crowd hushes. An elder speaks: “We don’t know. The book’s still out on him.” Round 1 of this verbal boxing match is a stalemate. “Then I won’t answer your question about my authority,” Jesus says.

They will send many more delegations throughout the day on Tuesday, some recorded here in Luke 20 and others in Matthew and Mark. Roman sympathizers try to trap him with a question about paying taxes to Caesar. Sadducees, who don’t believe in the resurrection, use one of their private jokes to make resurrection look ridiculous. “If a woman was married sequentially to seven brothers, as the law allows, which ones gets her in your silly notion of a resurrection?” By the end of the day, it’s a verbal knockout by Jesus. They run out of ideas for a peaceful resolution, so they conspire to kill him.

Vineyard

For now, Jesus takes the initiative. He tells a parable. This parable, unlike most of his parables, has multiple points of connection – it’s an allegory.

Jesus’ parable draws on an analogy those on the temple mount would likely have known well from Isaiah 5. Through the prophet Isaiah, God says, “Israel is like my vineyard. I started with a fertile hillside, cleared the stones, and planted the choicest vines, but all I got in return were bad grapes. I’m going to destroy this vineyard.”

Jesus alters the analogy a little. “A man planted a vineyard,” he says, “and went away for a long time. He sent servants to receive his share of the crop, but successively each servant was treated with shame – abused, rejected, and sent back to the landowner empty handed. The vineyard owner decided on one final strategy. He would send his beloved son.”

The crowd is drawn into the story. Whether the religious leaders or the people have grasped that son is Jesus, we don’t know. But they’re hanging on every word. What’s going to happen? Surely the tenants will respect the son.

When the tenants saw the son, they “talked the matter over” (does that sound familiar?) and decided to kill the son. What’s the landowner going to do now? He’s going to take his revenge and kill the tenants. The idea that slaves would rebel against the lord of the vineyard is so outrageous that the people shout, “God forbid!” This is the same phrase (*me genoito* in Greek) Paul uses in Romans multiple times. “May it never be!” It’s an expression of horror and shock and dismay. “No way!”

Cornerstone

Jesus “looked directly at them” (NIV). This verb here is stronger than just “glanced” or even “looked their way.” He gazed, locked eyes, stared them down. I picture a dramatic pause after the crowd exclaimed, “No way!” A hush falls across the temple mount. It’s sinking in what he is saying. The religious leaders will not accept Jesus; indeed, they know they are conspiring to kill him. He has reminded them of their ancestors’ rejection and abuse of the prophets. He has said in no uncertain terms that he is no mere servant, not just a prophet, not a messenger. He is the Son.

Jesus quotes from Psalm 118, the same psalm with which the crowds had hailed him saying, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” A few verses earlier the psalm reads, “The stone the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone” – literally “the head corner.” Whether this is a reference to the first stone laid to keep the building’s walls perpendicular or the keystone at the top of an arch is unclear and unimportant. What’s important is rejection v. prominence. The builders had laid aside a stone that didn’t fit their preconceptions, but God turned it into *the* stone.

By now the religious leaders know precisely what he’s saying, and their urgency is palpable. But, as with John the Baptist, their problem is Jesus’ popularity. So they continue trying to trap him all day on Tuesday. They fail in their attempts, and still don’t know exactly how they’re going to pull this off until Judas comes to them and agrees to betray Jesus.

It’s at this point and all week long that you and I have a mixed response to everything that unfolds. How can we not feel empathy and even pity for Jesus – innocent, authentic, perfect, the Son of God – and rage toward those who would conspire to condemn, torture, and condemn him.

On the other hand, we know how this story plays out. We know why he died, and we know as the believers pray in Acts 4, This is all what “God’s will and power had decided would happen” (Acts 4:28). They weren’t setting Jesus up; he was setting them up. We ask silly unresolvable questions like, “Was Judas responsible for his betrayal or was it all God’s plan?” Yes!

At the cross

I've had a special burden this past week or two, one I've had in other years, to ask you to join me in on Thursday and Friday pondering the cross. Years ago, we had a Good Friday service, but it was so poorly attended we stopped it. For about 20 years, we had a Last Supper recreation, and some of us loved it – but it ran its course as well. So we did something different last year, and it wasn't well attended either.

Honestly, it bothers me that we jump from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday. That sounds more like the culture than followers of Jesus. Or worse, like we've succumbed to the schemes of the devil. We claim we're people of the Book, but the Gospels devote 47 verses to Palm Sunday, 95 verses to Easter Sunday, and 530 verses to Thursday and Friday. We like to jump from Palm Sunday to Easter, and we rarely take time to stop in the Upper Room and the Garden of Gethsemane and the House of Caiaphas and the trial before Pilate and even the six hours at Calvary.

Can we make this year different? Will you make this year different? We've created a web page, corinthtoday.org/cross, devoted to ideas you can use at home and opportunities here at church as well.

Thursday from 6:00 to 7:30 we have several opportunities for you on the West Campus – a room just for kids to learn about the cross and have a special activity, you can have a pastor wash your feet or wash the feet of your own family, there's a room to come if you want to pray with others for a few minutes, a room for communion – all of these can take just a few minutes each and you can pick and choose. Also there's been an amazing collection of cross-focused artwork over there all during Lent, and you can take your time walking through or even speak with one of the artists.

At the same time, the sanctuary will be open if you want to pray quietly alone. Dr. Peter will be playing the organ during that time. We'll have a self-guided "stations of the cross" walk as well.

At 7:30 Thursday, we'll close the evening with songs and a meditation around the outdoor cross on the West Campus. If it rains, we'll move into the sanctuary. If Good Friday daytime works better, there's an organ concert here in the sanctuary at 12:30, and a community "Seven Last Words" service at Mt. Pisgah AME church from Noon to 3pm.

The main thing is to determine this week that what Jesus did on Thursday and Friday will not go unnoticed by you. This is the heart of the Gospel. "God forbid that I should boast," Paul says, not "in the empty tomb" (I'm not diminishing that – but wait until next week) "except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." There he gave his life there he suffered, there he was separated from his Father for your sins and mine. Make this the year your focus on what the Gospels focus on. Meet me at the cross. Amen.