

*Texts: Psalm 146; John 19:1-16a*

*Subject: Jesus Condemned*

*Theme: The Power of Grace*

*Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 3, 2022; Living Hope Lutheran, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven, and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's been a busy weekend and the kids have been a bit restless. They have a pretty intense week, with school and homework, the high school prom, projects, and more, and we're trying to keep everybody healthy. Mom is finishing up her final semester before graduating with her bachelor's degree in human and family development, and working many hours on top of that. It is nearly Easter and church activities are keeping me jumping. These kids work hard to get our attention. Their voices are powerful. When we're young, parents and guardians have all the power, or so they think. Better to say they have *control* - control of what we eat and when we sleep, and where we go and what we wear. With 4 kids in our house, some have more power and independence than others. And maybe we feel like we're losing control a lot for the time. These kids - all our kids - are struggling to get what they need and still finding ways to use their own power, to care for themselves and entertain themselves, and get things done. In our house, as in all households, there are power dynamics in play.

But with some things, we're completely powerless. When spring colds and allergies show up, we must stop what we're doing, and care for a sick child. Pick them up from school, bring them home and get gramps to come over and watch them. NO COVID, just a cold. But living for two years with the pandemic has taught us that there are many things beyond our control. We've shut down school and businesses, restricted

travel and tried to reduce the spread of disease with masks and vaccines. A little virus took over for a while, and revealed to us how limited our power can be at times.

Psalm 146 reminds us of the extent of God's power - the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all the creatures, God creates! The Lord executed justice, gives food to the hungry, sets prisoners free and opens the eyes of the blind, watches over strangers, cares for widows and orphans, and *brings the way of the wicked to ruin*. All these things are in God's power portfolio. But we - and the culture we live in - attribute most of these duties to the powers of the world, governments and municipalities. When we are oppressed, or we witness people going hungry, or lacking justice, do we look to God or to the ones who seem to be in positions of power in our city, state, and nation? We advocate on behalf of those in need, hoping against hope that the powerful ones would use their power to help, rather than control, and protect themselves at the expense of the people.

This weekend it was reported that former UN prosecutor was calling for the president of Russia to be arrested and tried for war crimes in Ukraine, including the intentional bombing of civilian buildings, use of mass graves, and shooting and torturing prisoners - "crimes against humanity." What will come of this? Who has the power to bring in this world leader gone rogue? At this point it feels like scorekeeping - we must build the case - but how the invasion will end is still unknown. We may believe and pray that God will bring Putin's unjust plans to ruin. But what do we do in the meantime? Where is the real power?

From the beginning of the Gospel of John we have heard of the power of God present in the world. Remember? "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into

the neighborhood” (John 1:14 MSG). God was in the world, but what would God do with the powers of the world? Jesus had demonstrated signs of power., turning water into wine, by healing disease, walking on water and feeding people, even bringing his dead friend Lazarus back to life. Jesus was showing God’s true power in the world, and that made those who held world power *fearful*.

Pilate was afraid - when he heard Jesus had claimed to be the Son of God. If this was true, Pilate power was at risk, and he could lose control. The town was full of faithful people gathered to celebrate the Passover, and to lose control would mean disaster for Pilate and the emperor to whom he was accountable. The Jewish leaders were afraid too. If Pilate would not accommodate their request, Jesus could cause an uproar among the people who were following him, and their power would be at risk - they could lose control.

Who really has power?

When bedtime comes, and the kitchen is cleaned up, I give the command: “Time to brush teeth!” I usually only have to say it 29 or 30 times. The kids know, this is their cue - find a snack, a toy, get out a game, disappear into the backyard - anything to get out of bedtime. “The kitchen is closed!” I decree. They overpower me. A piece fo toast, a banana or apple, and finally i rally them to obey and get off to bed. My vulgar display of power wins amounts to nothing. And I’m exhausted.

We heard last week that the Jewish leaders were using *their* power to bring Jesus in front of Pilate. They remind Pilate of his duty to the emperor, whose power looms over this entire episode. The religious leaders have made up their minds and want the governor Pilate to crucify Jesus - a punishment reserved for Roman citizens,

which Jesus was not, or rebels, a crime of which Jesus has not been explicitly accused. Pilate finally gives in and has him beaten. The soldiers that guard Jesus use their power to mock him and hit him. They dress him up as a king, wearing a crown made of thorns.

We have already been told that “He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (John 1:11-12). That’s pretty powerful.

The chief priests cry out “Crucify him!” Before Pilate, Jesus is *not* recognized as powerful. He doesn’t resemble our image of one who brings justice and casts out the wicked. Even in what seems to be his weakest moments, Jesus is the righteous ruler, the judge who has the real power to give life. In John’s gospel, the ones who fail to recognize him have brought judgement on themselves. The ones who know him witness - the royal official, the man born blind, the woman at the well - they recognize him - they can see that He is the power of God in the world. Pilate tries to witness to his own power, but Jesus tells him, “You would have no power over me unless it came from *above*” - that word in Greek is *anōthen* - it can mean from above, from the first, front he beginning. That’s where Jesus is from. Jesus knows the source of true power and indeed is that power in the world. Jesus is from above, and the son of God who bleeds under the crown of thorns is the same God who gives us power through the Holy Spirit.

The one condemned to die for us is from above, and still steps in to bleed like us and be harassed and punished and condemned like us. He is the word. He is truth and he is the way for us, who feeds us and heals us, and gives us back our sight to see what God is really doing in the world.

Jesus didn't come into our world with the power of God, to control, but to liberate. In his life and ministry Jesus carried God's real power of grace into the world that would not know him or recognize him - a world controlled by fear of death and destruction, perpetrated by individuals holding on to tentative power. This world condemned him, as a radical, an outsider, an insurgent. We wouldn't speak up for him, testify to the truth in him, or even admit that we knew him, the heavenly king who would bring healing and peace to those in need of help - to those under the fist of rulers - ones waging wars in order to increase their power. Jesus' kingship, and Jesus real power come from *anōthen* - from above - from God who creates, who gracefully gives life and breath and forgiveness and love.

So we believe - we recognize Jesus in our world, when we see love and healing, and peace, we know he's with us. We go and we witness - we tell the story and invite others, we share faith with our children and families, and move forward with faithful imagination and try to see the world the way that God sees it - worthy of love and attention and care. And even when the powers that be in the world try to condemn peace, try to shackle love, and attempt to legislate division, we are not afraid. We recognize where the true power lies - the power of grace - God's love is already loose in the world. It cannot be contained, and even though He was sent to be crucified, we know the end of the story, that love and peace and service and gratitude, forgiveness and promise remain. The real power will rise from the grave.

Amen.