

“Pulling Back the Curtain”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
John 19:16a
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Fifth Sunday in Lent

“Who asked you, Chad?”

I was six years old, and I was back in my old stomping grounds. Between kindergarten and first grade, my parents had moved me from the school run by our Lutheran Church into the New York City Public School system. The purpose was to have better access to Board of Education resources for students with visual disabilities. An unintended consequence was that I was now in the mainstream, with all those other Staten Island first graders. And so here, back at the Lutheran school with my mom to pick up my brother from pre-school, I had to show that I was a man of the world. (This was before Iowa and Illinois softened me up and Alabama added some sugar.) I was a street kid now. I was a tough guy. So when Chad ran up to me excitedly and said, “Hi, Joey!” I responded like the cool dude I desperately wanted him to think I’d become. “Who asked you, Chad?”

It will come as a shock to precisely none of you that I wasn’t a cool kid, or a tough kid, in first grade, second grade, third grade, or at any point since. And Chad could tell. He didn’t think I was cool. He just thought I was a jerk. And he was right. I was pretending. I was putting on a show. I wasn’t tough. I was terrified. That’s usually when we do these things — when we’re scared.

Do you remember the scene in *The Wizard of Oz*, after the Wicked Witch of the West has been melted and Dorothy and company bring the witch’s broom to the Wizard? They have called his bluff, and so the Wizard tells them to go away and come back tomorrow. As his giant green face surrounded by flames and smoke tells them not to “arouse the wrath of the great and powerful Oz,” little Toto scampers over and begins to pull back the curtain that conceals an old man who is speaking thorough a microphone and twisting knobs and pulling levers to make all the pyrotechnics. “Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!” Oz implores them.

In the original book, the Wizard explains that he has worked hard to keep up the image of being great and powerful, for fear that the Wicked Witches would discover that he was just a common man and would destroy him. We can only put on these facades of strength that come out of fear for so long. Eventually, the curtain gets pulled back. The truth is revealed. We are seen for who we really are.

Inside and outside of Pilate’s headquarters, with the soldiers and then with the crowd, right there on the judge’s bench, the curtain is pulled back. The truth is revealed about Pilate and the empire and the Judean religious leaders.

They portray themselves as tough guys. Pilate and his soldiers have the power of Rome behind them. Together with the religious leaders, they have control of the people. The Judean authorities claim the authority of the divine as they conspire with Rome to keep a compromised peace. Over a man such as Jesus these all seem to have power to destroy. Pilate, wrapped up in fear about the suggestion that this is the Son of God he’s got on his

hands, gets frustrated and asks Jesus, “Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?”

There are different liturgies for the modern Jewish Passover Seder meal, depending on what language you read and how formal your family is. In one Haggadah setting, after the fourth cup of wine is poured, a hymn of praise is spoken or sung which includes the lines:

From the beginning to the end of the world You are Almighty G-d; and other than You we have no King, Redeemer and Savior who delivers, rescues, sustains, answers and is merciful in every time of trouble and distress; we have no King but You.

This idea of God as the only ruler is absolutely central to the Jewish faith. I think it’s why the stories in the Hebrew Bible are so honest about the foibles of the Israelite royalty. Only God is the rightful monarch. And yet, here we find the leaders telling Pilate, “We have no king but the emperor.” The curtain has been pulled back, revealing them to not be searching for truth or holiness, but for comfort and power. They seek power because they don’t actually have it.

They don’t have it, and neither does Pilate. Jesus tells him, “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above.” Pilate seems to be clinging to the high wire here. He wants to release Jesus, but he is unwilling to exert his alleged power. He fears the Judean leaders. They fear Rome. He fears Rome. These tough guys aren’t so tough. Jesus is beaten and dressed up like a fool. In cruelty and violence and mockery, we see who these tough guys really are.

Pay no attention to the men behind the curtain. Crucify him! Crucify him! There’s so much fear being slung back and forth. Everyone is afraid. Of the loss of power. Of the other parties to this sinister negotiation. Of Jesus. *Ah, not everyone here is afraid.*

There is another revelation in the film version of *The Wizard of Oz*. After the Wizard himself is found to be, in his words, “a very good man. Just a very bad wizard,” he has a long talk with Dorothy’s companions. The Tin Man learns that he has been acting out of deep love all along. The Scarecrow learns that he’s the best thinker in the group. And the Cowardly Lion learns that he has demonstrated great courage. Even Dorothy soon discovers that she had the power to go home the whole time. Though they all appeared to be lacking what they sought, the truth was that they had *a brain, a heart, a home, the nerve* with them throughout their journey.

Now I don’t want you all to run out and tell your friends that your pastor compared Jesus to the Scarecrow, but this further revelation has a parallel in our Gospel lesson. This judgment scene, this trial, is truly a judgment of all involved. The curtain is pulled back and Pilate and the authorities are revealed for who they are. But the same is true for Jesus.

Beaten and ridiculed and forced to wear a robe and a crown of thorns, the king of fools is anointed with spit. He is pitiful. Pilate trots him out and declares, “Here is the man!” They all think they are degrading him and mocking him. But here he, too, is revealed for who he is. He is the suffering servant, the bread of heaven, the light of the world, the Lamb of God.

When it comes to the intersection of God and suffering, the logical conclusion is that either God is the cause of suffering, or God is indifferent to suffering, or God is powerless in the face of suffering. Completely illogically, we find that the one we have been following comes to the question from a totally different angle. We find a God that suffers. Jesus is the vulnerable incarnation of God's deep love for a broken world.¹ Here he stands, robed in purple with a thorny crown, and he is judge and ruler and truth. In his pitifulness, we find hope and home — a God we are invited to know. A Way we are invited to follow — not to seek suffering, but to understand that it is part of life, and that meting out suffering is a tool of fear and illusory power, not of the kind of power God wields.

When we are following Christ, the community of faith is one in which curtains are pulled back. Idolatries are called out for what they are and the truth is told about our broken structures — religious, financial, and political. When we are following Christ, we allow the curtain to be pulled back on ourselves.

There is sin infecting a community of faith when people are installing new curtain rods instead of dismantling them. If a religious leader tells you to hide how God made you, to pretend to be something you're not, or to put on a show for the people, you would be within your Gospel rights to ask that person to which monarch they bend the knee.

Especially as we get so close to the cross — to cruelty and death and silence and then to the greatest surprise of all — this is not the time to hide. This is the time to be found by the living Christ, who turns and asks us what we are looking for and who wants us to see everything as God sees, including ourselves. This is the time to pay close attention to whatever we find behind the curtain: be it fear lashing out in its language of violence, or love pouring out in its language of grace. And Lent is a time for listening, so be warned that God might have news for you about the power you've been carrying within you all along the road you've walked.

One of our denomination's Confessions, called *A Brief Statement of Faith*, offers a word about the Holy Spirit that I'd like to use as a prayer here:

In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage
to pray without ceasing,
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.
In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
and to live holy and joyful lives,
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,"
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"
Amen.

¹ Rev. Dr. Meda Stamper, commentary at https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3409