

## “Subvert the Paradigm”

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(Isaiah 50:4-9, Mark 11:1-11)  
Palm Sunday  
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Palm Sunday, on the surface, looks like a plain vanilla event, turned into a children’s processional by the church. But what if Palm Sunday is a power event?<sup>[1]</sup> A planned political and symbolic demonstration of Jesus aimed at the power structures of Jerusalem.<sup>[2]</sup> Speech acts protesting that Jesus is the real power not the puppets, suck-ups, and bought and paid for priests, procurators, and puppet kings. “My kingdom is not of this world,”<sup>[3]</sup> Jesus says.

Consider some basic power principles: There are codes for participating in the power. The keepers of the codes guard their power with more fervor than Coke its secret formula. Acquiring power is difficult on outsiders. And those with power are the least willing to acknowledge its existence.<sup>[4]</sup> Everyone wants power and strives for it.

Well, ready or not, here comes Jesus confronting the powers-that-be. And his only front men – a pair of disciples – certainly no Karl Rove or David Axelrod. And his only prop – a borrowed donkey. This never-before-ridden donkey was about to get the ride of his life.<sup>[5]</sup>

Bonhoeffer said that when a community of order built on lies and injustice is confronted by a community of peace a battle must ensue.<sup>[6]</sup> But let’s face it. Our world of power pays scant attention to a country Bible-thumper, an evangelist ranting about revival, salvation, and a peaceable kingdom unless he comes to town riding on a donkey, or has a graduate degree.

The comic spoof of the King of kings on a donkey aligns all worldly powers against him. Mikhail Bakhtin points out that the medieval Catholic Church used the “Feast of the Ass” to keep the people in their place – under the thumb of church and empire.<sup>[7]</sup> There’s no hypocrisy as rank and embarrassing as the church using its authority to legitimize the injustice of the government. But Jesus refuses to stay in his place. So insider power faces outsider power. Allow me to tweak my favorite bumper sticker SUBVERT THE PARADIGM to say SUBVERT THE POWER. Jesus subverts the political power of Pilate, the religious power of Caiaphas, and the revolutionary power of Barabbas.

**Let’s start with the political power of Pilate.**<sup>[8]</sup> Arriving in Jerusalem for Passover, Pilate sauntered through the front gate. But Jesus entered through the back gate to the city. Pilate rode a powerful stallion; Jesus a donkey. Pilate was supported by Roman legions; Jesus followed by country bumpkins. Pilate’s triumphal entry ended at his palace; Jesus at God’s Temple.

Paranoid Pilate put Jesus on trial. Yet Jesus stands before Pilate in silence, and his silence says that Pilate power is no power at all.<sup>[9]</sup> Poor Pilate fears the breakdown of order worse than he fears the injustice of killing an innocent man.<sup>[10]</sup> Pilate doesn’t know what his wife knew – Jesus is innocent. He doesn’t know what Paul would later learn: “Therefore God highly exalted Jesus and gave him the name that is above every name.” **Even the donkey knew more** than Pilate. Remember the talking donkey of Balaam who saw the angel of the Lord standing in the middle of the road with his sword drawn?<sup>[11]</sup> Sometimes a jackass sees more than politicians. Well, Pilate saw the donkey of Jesus, but not his true kingship. That’s the joke.

Pilate got the joke, but **worldly power has no sense of humor; therefore it lacks humanity.** Preachers usually paint Pilate as a sort of good man, but I want you to see him as consummate politician whose instincts for self-preservation made him a cold-blooded killer. What we see are the indirect speech acts<sup>[12]</sup> of a heartless and powerful man. In *Godfather II*, Michael kisses Fredo and says, “Fredo, you broke my heart.” There’s Fredo in a boat with the hit man and the gunshot we hear is the death of Fredo. Indirect speech acts mask violence. Still Pilate doesn’t know what we know: **“when power crucifies truth, it signals to all the world that [power] has come to its effective end.”**

**Now, let’s look at the religious power wrapped in the robes of the high priest, CAIAPHAS.** To Caiaphas Jesus says, “You think you are judging me, but I am the one who will be seated at the right hand of the father in glory, not you.”<sup>[13]</sup> Caiaphas was made high priest by political intrigue; Jesus by the power of an indestructible life. Caiaphas dies in office; Jesus holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever.<sup>[14]</sup> In 1990, the tomb of Caiaphas, marked clearly with his name, was discovered; the tomb of Jesus: empty, not here for he has been raised from the dead. Caiaphas didn’t know what the church as early as the second century proclaimed, **“Jesus shall come again to judge the living and the dead.”**

Add the **Pharisees** with their claim on the mantle of righteousness. Jesus subverts the power of religious authority by claiming that he has more righteousness than all the Pharisees. The Pharisees refused to know what Jesus knew, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees, you can’t enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Throw in the **Sadducees**. They stake their claim to power through the Temple. They also claimed the high priest could forgive sins. Jesus subverts the sadducean power by claiming he is the true High Priest of Israel, “Your sins are forgiven.” The Sadducees didn’t know what the writer of Hebrews came to know: “For we have a high priest who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”<sup>[15]</sup>

Mix in the **Herodians** – Herod “groupies.” Herod was a spineless puppet king – his strings pulled by Pilate. So by riding into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus claims he is the true king from the house of David, the true leader of Israel. Neither Pilate nor Herod understood. Pilate, speaking as the politician of the state, asks Jesus, “Are you the king of the Jews?” In other words, are you a rival to Herod. Do you remember that after Jesus cleansed the Temple that he accepted the title, “Son of David”? Pilate didn’t have a clue that Jesus was, in actuality, the rival of Caesar, and indeed, Lord of Caesar. Jesus knew what Herod would never know: “It is I Jesus. I am the root and the descendent of David, the bright morning star.”<sup>[16]</sup>

**Now, let’s consider revolutionary power represented by the Zealots – the party of violence.** “Death to the Romans” – their slogan. Zealots were the party of swords; today gun-toters threatening revolution like Chuck Norris demanding a second American revolution. Or **Michele Bachmann, Congresswoman from Minnesota who recently** called for citizens to be **“armed and dangerous.”** Her figurative language was followed by a bizarre speech act where she showed up at the White House with a plastic GI Joe shotgun. Fortunately only 3 of her fellow Americans joined the newest zany zealot in her misguided attempt to lead a rebellion. Zealots we always have with us.

Two of Jesus' disciples were Zealots: Simon the Zealot, that's obvious; and perhaps Judas. Perhaps Judas betrayed Jesus in an attempt to force his hand. Such an assumption is based on the remorse of Judas when he gave the money back to the Sanhedrin. (Please note that the Sanhedrin, who couldn't have cared less about the death of an innocent Jesus, refused to take the "blood money" because it would defile their laws. Instead they purchased a "potter's field" so foreigners could be buried in Jerusalem. They used the law not to change their own lives, but to keep up appearances and maintain the status quo.) And there were other Zealot tendencies among the disciples: James and John were nicknamed "sons of thunder." Simon Peter drew a sword when the authorities came to arrest Jesus. Religious people have trouble resisting the allure of the sword. Palm Sunday and Jesus' refusal to act with military power bewildered Simon and Judas. Jesus' campaign had palm branches for weapons, a donkey for his tank, "Hosannas" for his message. No violence allowed. Barabbas was probably a Zealot, and he is released instead of Jesus. You can release a terrorist from jail, but you can't release him from the demons of violence in his mind.

Any Christian living in our country for the past two decades knows our appetite for violence is insatiable. Our most popular television shows are based on violence: CSI, 24 ("Jack Bauer"), NCIS, The Unit, Without a Trace, Criminal Minds, Cold Case, and Law and Order. From violent video games to escalating the war in Afghanistan, America reeks of violence. Our country faces an emerging Zealot movement fueled by the belief that violence is the only way out. How many deranged men will kill at job sites and schools before we realize that angry language can poison weak minds? (Bill Maher). The word "zealot" comes from a root meaning "dark red" or "hot under the collar." From *Left Behind's* theological apocalypticism to Glen Beck's secular apocalypticism, America revels in violence. And did you know that 5.5 million Americans bought guns from November to February, 2009? People who embrace violence (rhetorical or physical) may not claim any allegiance to Jesus. His every action speaks against all forms of violence.

Worldly power and violence are not the way of Jesus. Listen, Jesus never attended a power lunch in his life. But he did take bread, bless it, break it, give it to his disciples and say, "This is my body given for you." And that is all the power we will ever need in this world, because the kingdom of this world [of Pilate, Caiaphas, and Barabbas] has become the kingdom of our Lord and he will reign forever and ever!<sup>[17]</sup> Amen!!!

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[1] There are two basic kinds of power on display. I'd like to demonstrate this by contrasting two passages of Scripture: Philippians 2 and Isaiah 14. Jesus emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Label this Jesus power. Jesus refuses all offers of worldly power. Jesus: "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit?" Now let's read slowly through Isaiah's description of one of the great power-mongers of history, Prince Nebuchadnezzar: "How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid nations low! You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit on the mount of assembly on the heights of Zaphon; I will ascend to the tops of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High.'" Label this worldly power.

[2] George Caird.

[3] John 18:36

[4] Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. Lisa, an African American professor of education gave a presentation on her book at LSU and I was privileged to hear her. She is an outstanding presenter and educator. I recommend her book for all teachers.

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[5] G. K. Chesterton, "The Donkey." "The tattered outlaw of the earth, of ancient crooked will; starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb, I keep my secret still. Fools! For I also had my hour; one far fierce hour and sweet: There was a shout about my ears, and palms at my feet."

[6] Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Bonhoeffer observes that when a community built on lies and injustice is confronted by a community of peace a battle must ensue.

[7] M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His Time*. "Carnival festivities and the comic spectacles and the rituals connected with them had an important place in the life of medieval man."

[8] Andrew King, *Power and Communication*. "While recognizing that much power is invisible and routinized, the book treats power as a deliberate act of human organization. It deals with groups and institutions not as mere sources of potential power but as the visible consequences of power."

[9] Stanley Hauerwas says, "Jesus' silence before Pilate is, therefore, the silence of truth required when confronted by an order built on lies and injustice. Jesus' silence before Pilate is the silence of the church whenever it is faithful to the witness of Jesus before those who would tempt us to confuse order with peace. Jesus' silence before Pilate is the silence necessary to unmask the pretensions of those who would have us believe that the violence they call justice is the only alternative we have to chaos. Jesus submits to Pilate, but his submission cannot help but subvert Pilate's authority. Such is the truth of powerful silence."

[10] Hauerwas, *Matthew*.

[11] Numbers 22:21-35.

[12] See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* and John R. Searle, *Speech Acts*.

[13] See also Ephesians 1:20-23 "God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."

[14] In December, 1990 an exciting discovery rocked the world of archaeology! In the Peace Forset section of Jerusalem, a first century Ossuary, or "bone box," was discovered. Inscribed on the ossuary were the words "Yehosef bar Kayafa," translated as "**Joseph, son of Caiaphas**." Excavator Zvi Greenhut of the Israeli Antiquities Authority recovered the artifact, which is now on display at the Isael Museum in Jerusalem.

[15] Hebrews 4:14-16. You may also add Hebrews 5:5 – 10 "So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you'; as he says in another place, 'You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.' Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek." Hebrews 6:19-20 "We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine, behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." Hebrews 7:15-16 "It is even more obvious when another priest arises, resembling Melchizedek, one who has become a priest, not through a legal requirement concerning physical descent, but through the power of an indestructible life." Hebrews 7:23-28 "Jesus holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens." Hebrews 10:19-25 "Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

[16] Revelation 22:16. See also I Tim 6:13-16 "In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to

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keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ – he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and the Lord of lords. It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.”

[17] I end with Revelation because I believe that the best way to read the book is as the ultimate “Subvert the powers” literature in all of Scripture. The amazing hymns that appear in Revelation, a book written in code during the persecution by the Emperor Domitian, offer faithful testimony to Jesus as King of kings and Lord of lords. The living creatures give glory and honor and thank to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their thrones before the throne, singing, “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created” Rev 4:9-11. They sing a new song: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth” Rev 5:9-10. Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, all that is in them, singing, “To the one seated at the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” Rev 5:11-13. And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen” Rev 7:11-12. Then the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, singing, “We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty, who are and who were, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but your wrath has come, and the time for judging the dead, for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints and all who fear your name, both small and great, and destroying those who destroy the earth” Rev 11:16-18. And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb: “Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, King of the nations!” Rev 15:3. “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with all the saints. Amen. Rev 22:21.