

If I were painting a picture of our gospel reading, (and because this story is in every gospel, I would probably add a scene or two from the others) I would start in this corner with a picture of the gate Jesus entered Jerusalem,

In the forefront of that corner I would have the religious authorities – properly robed in their Passover liturgical garb, plotting and planning about how it’s better for one man to die than all to suffer...

And over in this corner, in the background would be the outline of that hill far away...where the soldiers have gone to prepare a place for Jesus and they will come back and get him to take him along the way to his death.

From corner to corner across the bottom would be crowds – jeering crowds, cursing crowds, fearful crowds, and maybe if you looked closely would be some disciples trying to hide in the crowds.

But in the middle, where the focus is, would be these two men – Pilate and Jesus...the whole gospel narrative has been building toward this meeting...the kingdom of Rome in all its regal paraments and symbols of power personified in Pilate and the kingdom of God standing there in a bloodied purple robe and a crown of thorns.

And I would name this picture “The Fist of Rome and the Hand of God”.

The fist of Rome – think about it this way: you make a fist and push it in your open hand.

It’s all about power – the powerful fist pushes and for most everyone, that open hand pushes back.

But there are alternatives. You can move your hand; you can hold or even caress that fist, you can do many things with your open hand.

But more often than not, when someone or something pushes against us, we resist...we push back. And we push back hard!

Power with a capital P!

This picture of Jesus and Pilate is colored in shades of power - the fist of Rome pushing against the hand of God.

Let’s take a look at a few of the scenes.

We’ll start with last Sunday. From the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, enters Jerusalem at the head of a column of Roman cavalry and soldiers, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, the beating of drums.

To make a show, to make a statement – to strut his power.

From the east comes this peasant rabbi from Nazareth, riding a colt down the Mount of Olives – nothing to strut about here; very humbling, isn’t it?

Or look at this – Pilate has his ‘judge’s bench’ – a place of power: life and death decisions made by the person seating in that seat.

And Pilate has worked hard to get there, works even harder to stay there, exercises ultimate power to preserve the power of Rome.

From that seat of power, orders given to the Roman soldiers who occupy the land...whatever they want, whenever they want, and you can’t do anything about it

Yet when that power of Rome was led by Judas to the garden in Gethsemane, and Peter resisted that fist of soldiers with his hand on his sword and cut off the ear of the chief priest’s slave; Jesus who would be willing to suffer the curses and drink from the cup refuses to inflict that judgment on others.

He makes a life and death decision and touches his hand to the man's ear and heals him.

And one more scene... Pilate turns to the wash basin and says that he washes his hands of the blood of this innocent man – it is the power to deflect responsibility – power that turns aside any accountability or dependability or any sense of being connected to the consequences of one's actions.

The fist of Rome is a self-serving power that will do anything within its power to keep power.

Compare that to the wash basin Jesus picked up in the upper room – to wash his disciples' feet – the power to be a servant, the power to humble oneself, the power to see the connection with all of God's creation, to bear burdens, go the extra mile, to pick up a cross.

He had said it earlier, this power he had: *“For this reason the father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down and power to take it up again.”* (John 10:17,18)

This is the power to confront the powers-that-be by embracing the pain and suffering inflicted on the world and responding in compassion.

If, as John Dominic Crossan says, the Roman motto is peace through victory, or peace through the destruction of enemies, or peace through domination . . . then for Jesus the motto is peace through nonviolent justice, peace through the forgiveness of enemies, peace through reconciliation, peace through embrace and grace.

But do you get the big picture of these stories of power?

The religious and political-military powers collaborate and negotiate and reach an elegant final solution: Jesus will be crucified as a rebel.

He will be nailed to a Roman cross -- the visible symbol of the fist of Rome, the instrument of torture and execution that is the end of all who stand up against Rome.

They crush him and his movement. And it appears that Jesus has failed.

This is the scandal of the message of Jesus. The hand of God does fail. It is weak. It is crushed.

When its message of love, peace, justice, and truth meets the principalities and powers of government and religion armed with lies and betrayals, spears and swords and crosses, they unleash their hate, force, manipulation, and propaganda.

On this day, the fist of Rome has crushed the hand of God.

But what is the alternative? . . . Could the hand of God hold bigger weapons, sharper swords, manage better political organizing?

Because we want to power up and push back, push harder, beat down the opposition.

Brian McLaren asks if what is often called *redemptive violence* would be effective. And he answers his question wondering if that would simply be another earthly and in some sense demonic power fallen from grace.

What if the hand of God can conquer only by first being conquered? What if being conquered is absolutely necessary to expose the brutal violence and dark oppression of these principalities and powers, their political posturing and cruel counterkingdoms – so they, having been exposed, can be seen for what they are and freely rejected, making room for the new and better kingdom?

What if the kingdom of God must in these ways fail in order to succeed?

What if our only hope lies in this impossible paradox: the only way the hand of God can be strong in a truly resurrecting way is through a scandalous weakness; the only way it can be powerful is through astonishing vulnerability; the only way it can succeed is by failing, the only way it can live is by dying?

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.