

**When Herod and Pilate Become Friends**  
**Luke 23:1-12**  
**Palm Sunday**

<sup>1</sup>Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate.

<sup>2</sup>They began to accuse him, saying, “We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.”

<sup>3</sup>Then Pilate asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

He answered, “You say so.”

<sup>4</sup>Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, “I find no basis for an accusation against this man.”

<sup>5</sup>But they were insistent and said, “He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.”

<sup>6</sup>When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. <sup>7</sup>And when he learned that he was under Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time.

<sup>8</sup>When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign.

<sup>9</sup>He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer.

<sup>10</sup>The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him.

<sup>11</sup>Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate.

<sup>12</sup>That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.

### The Sermon

Facebook used to have a notorious motto for their product development department: Move Fast and Break Things.

In other words, they said to their development teams, go innovate and create and introduce new tools and applications for us to put out, as fast as you can.

They may not work perfectly right out of the chute, and may cause unforeseen problems that you haven't had time to predict, let alone plan for. But go ahead and move fast anyway. We'll figure out how to fix whatever gets broken later—or maybe it's just time for some things to get broken anyway.<sup>1</sup>

That makes a certain kind of sense. Human civilization needs iconoclasts—the people who, literally or metaphorically, knock down false idols left over from previous generations. It keeps us realistic; it keeps us moving forward, getting better, usually becoming more ethical. Jesus was an iconoclast.

So “Move fast and break things” sounds like an exciting way to bust through the status quo. But usually when people adopt a motto like that, what they're really saying is: feel free to go ahead and break somebody else's things.

It's a false sense of liberating abandon if you're just giving yourself permission to break things that aren't yours to begin with. And now, look how much you have broken—promises, confidence, trust.

It turns out that it's possible that you can go fast, maximizing your profits and your power, and in the process break things that belonged to the people you are claiming to serve, but never belonged to you.

That's Herod.

The Herod who interrogated Jesus was Herod Antipas, one of the sons of Herod the so-called Great, whom the Roman senate had named King of the Jews, the one who had been ruler of Judea when Jesus was born.

This Herod didn't control as much territory, but he maintained his father's tradition of building structures and cities, including Tiberias on the Western shore of the Sea of Galilee. Josephus reported that Tiberias was built on top of a graveyard, so having built this triumphant city for his people, the Jews, most of them refused to live there.<sup>ii</sup>

He moved fast and broke things that weren't necessarily his things to begin with.

Pilate, on the other hand, was not a Jew. Pilate was a "prefect"—a European term we don't have much history with. "Governor" is a decent approximation,<sup>iii</sup> but the thing about Pilate is that he is a Roman governing a Jewish region that's under Roman occupation.

Nobody around there voted for him; he was assigned to his post by the higher-ups in Rome.

He is not from around here; he's not one of the people; he represents nothing that means anything to these people; and his presence is not neutral. He is the authoritative representative of a brutally occupying power.

In the Ken Burns documentary about World War II,<sup>iv</sup> they interview an American soldier who, more than five decades later, recounts the time

when his unit had had to surrender and he'd been taken to a German prison camp.

A German officer asked him where he was from, and the G.I. told him the name of his hometown back in Connecticut.

And the German guy, who's never been to the United States, starts mentioning specific landmarks and information about that hometown—and it's not one of the cities or anything; this was a nondescript little town. And the American prisoner of war is hearing all these things and going, “yeah...yeah...that's right...” and finally asks him, “How do you know all this stuff about my hometown?”

And the German says, “That's in the area that I was going to be responsible for when we took over. We were supposed to learn everything we could know about it before we got there.”

55 years later, that American P.O.W.'s blood still ran cold when he thought about that conversation. Probably he had never imagined his own quiet little hometown through the eyes of an occupying prefect.

That's what Pilate is to the people of Judea.

Herod is the earthly power that we recognize: he's one of us, in terms of looking like us and being from where we're from; but he's not one of us in the sense that he was born into privileges that we will never have. And he will do whatever desperate things he needs to do in order to hold onto his privileges.

Pilate is the earthly power in whom we do not see anything of ourselves. Unlike Herod, Pilate doesn't know our culture, our religion, the subtleties and nuances that make us who we are, most of which we ourselves are unaware of but we know them in our bones. Pilate is the outside power who controls our lives without understanding us at all, who arrogantly feels like whatever he does know about us is enough.

Pilate's rule is not about our interests being looked after; it's about the interests of Rome being looked after.

Herod and Pilate are both powers that we fear, and they're both powers that, as long as we don't break their things and don't complain too loudly when they break ours, can actually make our lives easier to live than they would be otherwise: they give us order, and an economy, and social stability.

And tonight, around the phenomenon of accusing, belittling, threatening, abusing, and passing Jesus back and forth like a "plaything"—the late Luke scholar François Bovon found specifically that sense in the Greek verbiage in this passage<sup>v</sup>—these two earthly powers have become friends.

What happens to Jesus when we make friends with the powers of entitlement, privilege, convenience, security?

What happens to Jesus when we fall in love with self-obsessed power, or with someone else who is self-obsessed with power?

What happens to Jesus? And what happens to our relationship with Jesus and with the God who created us and sent Jesus to save us?

And what happens to us?

Will you pray with me:

God of silent nights sleeping in heavenly peace, and painful nights of agony, fear and sorrow,

You look with kindness and mercy and parental love on your children, and you stop at nothing to save us, even from ourselves.

When we look in the mirror, we need to know that you see beauty that we do not see.

When we think about what we have been and what we have done,  
and how we have disappointed ourselves,  
please help us turn our relief into rejoicing when we realize  
that you are more forgiving of us than we are of ourselves;  
that you can do more with us than we could ever do without you;  
that you want to see us make this world better for all people,  
and that it is not too late for us  
to shape our lives around doing so.

Lead us on, O God, we ask in humility;  
so that when our savior goes to the cross,  
our tears may not be for fear and anguish,  
but in the wonder, and deep gratitude, and breathless awe  
of those who have just seen  
the magnificence of the universe unveiled before our eyes,  
and that when he calls us to follow him,  
though we may have our trepidations  
at what it takes to be as loving as he is,  
yet we will follow with the courage of those who know  
they are redeemed,  
and would gladly follow him anywhere.

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<sup>i</sup> “Facebook Changes Its ‘Move Fast and Break Things’ Motto” (<https://mashable.com/2014/04/30/facebooks-new-mantra-move-fast-with-stability/#qVTowMizIPqO>)

<sup>ii</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.37–38.

<sup>iii</sup> Emerson B. Powery, “Exegetical Perspective,” in Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson, eds., *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Volume 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 309

<sup>iv</sup> *The War* (2007)

<sup>v</sup> François Bovon, *Luke 3* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 270