

“Crucified under Pontius Pilate”

Midweek Lent

Mark 15:6-15

2/14/18 – Ash Wednesday

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⁶ Now it was the custom at the Feast to release a prisoner whom the people requested. ⁷ A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. ⁸ The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did.

⁹ “Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate, ¹⁰ knowing it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. ¹¹ But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead.

¹² “What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?” Pilate asked them.

¹³ “Crucify him!” they shouted.

¹⁴ “Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!”

¹⁵ Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

I’ve never been a fan of politics. I know there are plenty of people who enjoy debating politics and different political views and candidates. Maybe you like doing that, but that’s not for me. The whole political game – and that’s what it often seems like, isn’t it, a game? The whole political game, to me is frustrating.

In this series, “Crucified under Pontius Pilate” we meet a true politician – Pontius Pilate. Pilate had political ambitions, he was already the governor of the Roman province of Judea, but wasn’t content with that. So, Pilate had to play the political game to keep rising through the ranks of Roman governmental power. It’s ironic, then, that of all the people involved in Jesus’ Passion, Pilate is the one who lives in infamy. Every Christian, from the time they’re first able to say the Creeds of worship, know the name Pontius Pilate – but not for the reason he wanted.

We all know Pontius Pilate as the Roman governor who caved to pressure and had Jesus crucified. But Pilate’s goal was to have nothing to do with Jesus of Nazareth. He wanted nothing to do with Jesus because his road to success in the Roman government hinged on his success in Judea. And here Jesus comes, riding into town on the back of a donkey, right when the city is full of pilgrims – Jewish citizens not fond of Roman rule. Jerusalem was a powder-keg ready to go off and Jesus was the spark that could ignite it and blow up Pilate’s career in the process.

So Pilate had to figure out a way to defuse this situation. He knew Jesus was innocent – he didn’t want that blood on his hands. But he also feared a riot if he simply let Jesus go. His career would be over if he couldn’t keep control of Jerusalem.

It was the crowd that gave Pilate what he thought was his way out. There was no way he was going to make everyone happy. He knew what needed to be done – Jesus needed to be released because he was innocent. So he had a plan to show the crowd – it could be worse...

Every year, as a show of good will toward the people, Pilate had a tradition of releasing a prisoner during the Passover feast. Usually, I'm sure, it was some low-level, petty thief – no real, hardened, dangerous criminal would ever be released. Well, this year, it just so happens that he had a real, hardened, dangerous criminal in custody – a man named Barabbas.

Think of the contrast – on the one side stood Jesus – innocent of all charges, one who had only ever helped and healed. On the other side Barabbas – a notorious criminal, a murderer of the highest degree, a political terrorist. Pilate thought he had a sure thing on his side. There's no way the crowd would agree to release Barabbas. Surely they could not, simply could not, prefer a terrorist and murderer like Barabbas to Jesus.

It's quite amazing how spineless Pilate was, isn't it? He should have set Jesus free as soon as he realized there was no basis for charges against him. Instead, he made justice for Jesus – life or death for him – dependent on a choice he hoped the crowd would make. And so, Jesus was **"numbered with the transgressors"** (Isaiah 53:12), as God had foretold through Isaiah, placed on par with a most notorious criminal.

Of course, it was a deep humiliation for Jesus that Pilate numbered him with transgressors. But, do we hear any objection from Jesus? Do we hear any cry of "that's not fair"? No! Here we see Jesus bearing also this insult and injustice without a word of protest. Here we see Jesus willing to be numbered with transgressors, willing to be numbered with sinners. Why? So he could take the place of sinners.

And that's exactly what he did for Barabbas. After giving the crowd enough time to decide who they would ask to be released, Pilate asked for an answer and found out how badly he had misjudged the crowd. They asked for Barabbas! They chose a murderer over the Prince of Life! They decided to let a man roam the streets who had been convicted of shedding blood simply so they could shed the blood of Jesus! And in the greatest injustice of all, Pilate gave in! He released Barabbas and handed Jesus over to the death Barabbas deserved!

Jesus took Barabbas' place. The innocent one was condemned so the guilty could go free. But this wasn't the last time Jesus took Barabbas' place. On the cross as Jesus underwent the torture of a crucifixion, he took Barabbas' place again. Jesus suffered for Barabbas' sins as that known criminal was able to walk free. Barabbas was obviously guilty, but he didn't have to pay.

Neither do you. You are obviously guilty, too. None of us wants to be lumped in with a murderous terrorist like Barabbas, but you and I aren't any better than him. You and I are convicted criminals in the court of God's law. Your sin is clear and plain evidence that you deserve God's penalty of death in hell. But you don't have to pay! You don't have to pay because Jesus came and took your place as a substitute.

God made this need for a substitute very plain to the people of Israel through his prescribed worship at the Temple in Jerusalem. Every day they went to the temple they'd see countless bulls and rams and sheep sacrificed because of their sin. When they sinned, they were required to bring a sacrifice, to confess their sin, and offer that sacrifice. You wonder how the people ever got anything else done! I'd be at the Temple all day long offering those sacrifices! The point God was making was this – your sin requires death. **"The wages of sin is death"** (Romans 6:23) Paul told the Romans. Your sin requires

death – either your own, or a substitute in your place. Every sacrifice at the temple pointed ahead to Jesus – the perfect substitute for your sin.

Look at how, in the Second Lesson this evening, Paul describes the substitution Jesus made for you: **“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”** (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Jesus took your place. He was perfectly innocent, he was perfectly holy, but he took your place under God’s Law. He took all your sin upon himself because you can’t get rid of sin on your own. He took your sin upon himself so he could take your place under the punishment you deserve because of your sin against God’s Law. Jesus took your place as your substitute, he took on the death sentence of a crucifixion he did not deserve. He took your place and now you don’t have to pay. You have been released, set free from sin. There is no more sentence for you to serve – Jesus has paid the price in full for you. The exchange has been made: the innocent for the guilty, Christ for the criminal. The exchange has been made and you, through faith, reap all the benefits.

Amen