

**24 Hours That Changed the World:  
Jesus Before Pilate  
Isaiah 53:1-7 and Mark 15:1-15a  
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Just after daybreak Friday morning, Jesus was bound again and led away from the palace of the high priest. The Sanhedrin had judged him to be guilty of blasphemy and decided he must die. The only trouble was that they did not have the authority to execute Jesus. Capital punishment was solely a Roman prerogative. Not to worry—they would take Jesus to someone who *did* have the authority—Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. The religious leaders knew the charge of blasphemy would mean nothing to Pilate, but they also knew that if Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah, he was claiming to be king, the Anointed One who would rule over the people. Rome would take a great deal of interest in someone who was plotting insurrection. These would-be usurpers of power were routinely tortured and crucified.

So as the sun rose over Jerusalem, Jesus was led through the streets to Pilate's Antonia Fortress, just a quarter mile from Caiaphas' palace. The crowd that followed included members of the Sanhedrin, Jesus' mother, his disciple, John, and likely Peter. In yet another ironic twist, the Gospel of John tells us that the place where Jesus was to be tried was called the Stone Pavement which in Greek is *lithostrotos*. Just days earlier Jesus had quoted Psalm 118:22: "The stone [Greek, *lithos*] that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." Now the "stone" was being rejected by the Jewish leaders at the stone pavement. Before the day was finished, Jesus would be laid to rest in a tomb hewn out of rock, and a large round stone would be placed at the entrance.

The Antonia Fortress was both the governor's residence and a military garrison in the heart of the city. It was adjacent to the Temple itself, and a Roman military presence so closely connected to such a holy site both grieved and angered the Jews. On this particular morning, however, the Sanhedrin was glad to have Pilate so conveniently located. They knew that Jesus had no intention of leading a rebellion against Rome; the only authority over which Jesus had ever expressed outrage was theirs as religious leaders. Still, their charge would either force Jesus to deny that he was the Messiah or, if he refused, force Pilate to condemn him for insurrection.

As he had at the trial before the Sanhedrin, Jesus remained virtually silent before Pilate, who was astonished at Jesus' unwillingness to defend himself. Pilate seemed to know that the chief priests were accusing Jesus out of envy—Jesus was, after all, becoming more popular than they were, and as we saw last week, their fear and insecurity drove their venomous rage—but why, Pilate wondered, wasn't Jesus speaking up for himself? He was charged with claiming to be king of the Jews, a capital offense. Caesar was king of the Jews now, and claiming that title was a sign of rebellion. When Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?", Jesus gave a short and cryptic answer: "You say so." He might have been saying, "Yes, of course I am" or perhaps, "You have spoken and I'm not going to disagree with you." But he did not elaborate. In the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus does not utter another word to Pilate.

Looking back on these events one wonders whether Jesus' silence was resignation to what was coming or perhaps even a determination to die. He was not trying to get out of his approaching death—he had settled that question with his prayer in Gethsemane. It seems Jesus went to Jerusalem anticipating his execution, believing it was part of God's plan. In his prayer of surrender he accepted his fate and then fell silent. Perhaps as he stood before the Sanhedrin and then Pilate, he thought of Isaiah's words about the "suffering servant" who remained silent. Jesus had often acted intentionally to point toward or fulfill certain scriptures. He rode a donkey on Palm Sunday to point to his identity as the Messiah, knowing the prophet Zechariah spoke of a king entering Jerusalem in such a manner. Perhaps his silence before his accusers was meant to help his followers see his suffering and death in light of Isaiah's prophecies.

During this Passover feast, Jesus was offering himself as a sacrificial lamb for the sins of the world. Christians believe his death was redemptive. It was purposeful. Jesus did not die a disillusioned prophet. He was not simply a great teacher put to death by the Romans. He chose to go to Jerusalem, anticipating and even predicting his death. The Church proclaims that his death was the vehicle by which God redeemed humanity.

At the Last Supper, Jesus said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." He understood that his death would bring about our salvation, but the question that has puzzled people of faith for 2000 years is: exactly how does that happen? Theologians call it the doctrine of the Atonement—how humankind is reconciled with God through Jesus' death on the cross. Let me say at the outset that I think exploring the doctrine of the Atonement is a lot like exploring the

doctrine of the Trinity. It is important that we think about and wrestle with them but no matter how hard we try, we are never going to get to the full truth of the matter. If we know that going in, it allows us to probe the mystery of atonement not so much expecting answers as expecting that we will be changed by our quest.

There are several theories about atonement and over the next couple of weeks we'll be looking at some of them. One theory says that Jesus suffered and died in place of humanity. He bore the punishment that all of us deserve for our sin and in place of punishment, we are offered grace and pardon. This is called the substitutionary theory of atonement. In the trial before Pilate we get a concrete example of how substitutionary atonement works as Jesus ends up taking the place of a notorious criminal named Barabbas. Barabbas, who himself had been condemned to die, is set free, while Jesus is killed in his place.

Barabbas is intriguing both as a character in his own right and in his role in the death of Jesus. In Barabbas, we have an insurrectionist who led a revolt against the Romans; someone who apparently had murdered Roman collaborators, perhaps even Roman citizens; and a person who robbed others and presumably used their money for his cause. It was customary for Pilate to release one prisoner to the Jewish people each year during Passover. Timed to coincide with the celebration commemorating the Jews' freedom from slavery in Egypt, it was a politically astute act of mercy meant to appease the multitudes and take some of the air out of the desire for rebellion. On this particular Passover, Pilate had two prisoners before him: Jesus and Barabbas. Both were charged with leading insurrections and wishing to be king of the Jews. Pilate turned to the people and said, "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" Would it be Barabbas, who had robbed and murdered, or Jesus, who had done nothing except love lost people, teach about the kingdom of God, and heal the sick?

Pilate apparently thought the people would ask for Jesus, and he was all too happy to oblige; but instead they demanded Barabbas' release. In Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*, as Barabbas was released, he looked back at Jesus, and a momentary look of understanding crossed his face. For an instant, Barabbas seemed to grasp that this innocent man would be nailed to the cross in his place. Barabbas would be the first sinner for whom Jesus died.

That is a snapshot of the theory of substitutionary atonement, but it confuses a lot of people today. We question, first of all, whether our sin really demands such a sacrifice. We think, "hey, we're not that bad, we're not robbers or murderers; we don't need Jesus to die on the cross for us." It is interesting that

God often gets a really bad rap because evil exists in the world, and we want God to deal with that evil and the sin that causes it—but it's always someone else's sin we want God to judge. We are frequently blind to the alienation our own pride, self-centeredness, anger and greed causes between us and God. Somehow that alienation must be bridged, and Jesus voluntarily took it upon himself to be that bridge. That's why when we look at the cross we are meant to see both God's great love for us and the great cost of grace. It is meant to inspire us to live in loving response and humble gratitude for what Jesus has done for us.

Barabbas is not the only character we have the chance to identify with as we look at Jesus' final hours. We can also find ourselves present in the crowd. As has been noted in countless Palm Sunday sermons, the crowd that was so enthralled with Jesus on Sunday is by Friday demanding that Barabbas be freed and Jesus crucified. That change of fortunes is dramatic and it occurred in large part due to unmet expectations. When Jesus entered Jerusalem on Sunday he was hailed as the Messiah, and to the Jews, Messiah meant one thing: setting Israel free from their oppressors. It has been largely lost to modern day Christians that in the 70 years between Jesus' birth and the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, at least eight men and perhaps as many as 13, called themselves messiah or were hailed as messiah by some of the Jewish people. Every one of these would-be messiahs called for driving out the Romans by violence—sword against sword. Each of them understood this to be the central task of the messiah and each of them was put to death by the Romans.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, people expected that as messiah, he would lead an armed rebellion against Rome, but Jesus sorely disappointed them. He had no interest in inciting crowds to rise up against Roman oppression. He was the only messiah who refused to take up the sword. Instead, he called for people to love their enemies and pray for their persecutors. He taught them that blessing would come to the meek, the peacemakers, to those who suffer for what is true and right. If a Roman soldier forces you to carry his pack a mile, which he could legally do, Jesus told his followers to carry it two miles. If a Roman strikes you on the cheek, turn the other toward him.

This was not what people were looking for then, and it's not what people are looking for now. Our natural inclination is to retaliate, to defend ourselves, to hold a grudge, to look after ourselves first. Jesus says, no; using the power of this world will not set you free. It's the power of the cross that will set you free. And the power of the cross is the way of loving, self-giving sacrifice. It wasn't easy or popular then. And it's not easy or popular now.

There's one last compelling character in this part of the drama. Mark says, "So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas to them." *Wishing to satisfy the crowd*. Pilate knew what he was doing was wrong, and he had the power to stop it. But the pull of the crowd gripped him, just as the voice of the religious leaders had proved persuasive to those members of the Sanhedrin who might have questioned their part in Jesus' death. Pilate sent Jesus to the cross to satisfy the clamor of the fickle and unruly crowd in front of him.

Like Pilate, each of us experiences the pull of the crowd. We feel it in a variety of ways—in what we do or say—or don't do or don't say—in order to be accepted, in our fear of ridicule or rejection, in our willingness to "go along to get along" even when it doesn't feel quite right. We experience it in the subtle, even invisible pressure to look successful or to keep our faith under wraps under the guise of being "politically correct."

Part of the reason gathering for worship is so important is that for at least one hour a week, we are surrounded by a crowd that desires to follow Jesus. We need to be reminded that we are not alone in our struggle against the push and pull of the world. We need to be encouraged and held accountable. We need a safe space to name our sin for what it is, to look at the cross together to see the depth of God's love for us. Only then are we ready to be sent back into the world as forgiven, cherished men and women whose call is to bear the self-giving love of God to the world. Amen.