

Lenten Sermon Series #3

“What Led to the Cross?—Pontius Pilate”

March 24th, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

3rd Sunday in Lent

Based on Mark 15:1-15

SCRIPTURE:

Mark 15:1-15

¹ As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. ² Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” He answered him, “You say so.” ³ Then the chief priests accused him of many things. ⁴ Pilate asked him again, “Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.” ⁵ But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed. ⁶ Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. ⁷ Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. ⁸ So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. ⁹ Then he answered them, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?” ¹⁰ For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. ¹¹ But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. ¹² Pilate spoke to them again, “Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?” ¹³ They shouted back, “Crucify him!” ¹⁴ Pilate asked them, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Crucify him!” ¹⁵ So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified. [NRSV]

OPENING PRAYER: Send your Spirit among us, O God, as we meditate on your Word and on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Move our hearts to receive what we hear, and grant us fresh insight and understanding. This we pray through Christ, our Savior; and let all God’s people say ... Amen.

Sermon Series: What Led to the Cross?

Today is the 3rd Sunday in Lent, marking the 3rd week of our journey with Jesus and the disciples toward Jerusalem and the cross—a journey that is focused on a few of the main characters involved in the final days of Jesus' own journey. Through this ongoing sermon series, we are working toward developing a deeper understanding of the circumstances that led up to and through the trial and execution of Jesus Christ? And, we are looking for the answers to questions like ... Why was Jesus arrested? Why was Jesus put on trial? Why was Jesus condemned to die on the cross? And, what role did people like Judas Iscariot, Joseph Caiaphas, and Pontius Pilate play in all this drama?

Weeks 1 & 2 Recap: The Last Supper, the Betrayal of Judas Iscariot, and Caiaphas the High Priest

First a quick recap ... so far we've explored the circumstances surrounding what we now call the Last Supper, and the subsequent betrayal of the disciple, Judas Iscariot—that on what we call *Maundy Thursday*, Jesus shared a celebratory, sacred meal with his closest friends and followers, and during that meal, Jesus shared bread, cup, and the foot washing (that we get from John's gospel) with everyone there that night—even Judas Iscariot. It was a profound moment when God made things personal, saying to us forever through Jesus' actions that God wants to wash us and clean us and claim us—every single part of us—(as I said last week) the good, the bad, and the ugly.

And, then scripture tells us that Judas slipped out of the party early and set the events in motion with a kiss out in the garden. Even though he had his feet washed, too. Even though he had tasted the bread and he had shared the cup with all the others. Even though he was trusted and he was loved—Judas sold Jesus out, and Jesus was taken by the Jewish authorities to appear before the Jewish supreme court, called the *Sanhedrin*—a Jewish council made up of seventy priests, scribes, and elders—and it's ring leader, Joseph Caiaphas, the high priest.

Now, Caiaphas was the top dog of the Jewish faith at this time in history. And, as the main figurehead of the Jewish faith, one of his biggest responsibilities was to insure that a delicate balance was maintained between Roman occupation and control and his people's freedom to keep practicing their Jewish customs—a delicate balance that Caiaphas and other Jewish leaders felt that Jesus was disrupting like a bull in a china shop.

So Jesus is arrested by the Jewish authorities, shackled up, and taken in the middle of the night to Caiaphas' home to be interrogated, mocked, and spat upon. And, remember, as a cunning mathematician, of sorts, Caiaphas had calculated that it was better for one person to take one for the entire team than for the many on the team to suffer on account of one person—a conclusion that Jesus, himself, had also reached with a quite different arithmetic. For Jesus knew all too well that the only way to make everything right between God and God's creation was to take one for the entire team. Because Jesus knew that it was better for one person to make the ultimate sacrifice than for everybody else on the team to suffer—a team that included all kinds of people—even Judas and Caiaphas, and it even included a man by the name of *Pontios Pilatos*—better known as Pontius Pilate.

The Next Character: Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor

Historically, little is known of Pilate prior to his arrival in Judea in the year 26 CE. We do know that he was a Roman knight, and likely attracted the attention of the Roman emperor, Tiberius Caesar, through distinguished military service. So by the time Jesus' ministry was gearing up in the Galilee region, Pilate had become the governor over all Judea—a job he held for 11 years from 26-37 CE. And, his main role as governor was to maintain law and order throughout his territory.

Historical sources provide a portrait of a reasonably able governor, perhaps with little understanding of, or sympathy for, the people he governed. And, while he was capable of acts of insensitivity at times, he was also able to compromise in the interests of peace at other times.

Caiaphas and Pilate Played Nice Together

Now, a little known historical fact, very relevant to Jesus' journey to the cross, is that the Roman Empire had few officials in the provinces (a good amount of soldiers but few officials), and as a result, routine administration was largely left to the leaders of the occupied peoples. In the case of Judea, and particularly Jerusalem, Caiaphas, the high priest, and the Sanhedrin, handled administration. And, while Pilate possessed supreme decision-making power in the Judean region, the local courts scattered about handled local issues.

In addition, Pilate's main concern would have been issues of national security, and he would not have normally been bothered with less important matters. So as a mathematician, of sorts, Caiaphas would also have been calculating how to convince Pilate that Jesus was a threat to national security. Of interest, at this point, are historical sources from the time that indicate that Pilate and Caiaphas presumably worked well together, or at least they played nice, which likely made it even easier for Caiaphas to orchestrate the elimination of the "Jesus problem."

However, historians disagree on whether, or to what extent, local courts had the right to enforce capital punishment. And, remember, Jesus was *only* accused and charged with blasphemy, and thus, in the judgment of Caiaphas and the court, as *deserving* death—they apparently had no power to carry out such a sentence by themselves—because only Pilate had that kind of power. As such, being charged as a messianic claimant with a sizable following in the crowded Passover city of Jerusalem was a clear threat to national security for Pilate, and he would doubtless wish to eliminate this Jesus threat before it caused a real uprising—a fact Caiaphas probably knew all too well.

Setting the Stage for the Trial

So with this information in mind, let's set the stage for Jesus' trial and execution ... that on the morning following the overnight interrogation of Jesus by Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, the Jewish authorities confer and decide

to send Jesus to Pilate. The ball is now in Pilate's court, and Caiaphas and the Jewish leaders have decided that from this point on they will either cheer or jeer from the sidelines. And, Jesus' life is left in the hands of a man who seemingly couldn't get his priorities straight.

“As the Roman governor, Pilate had the last word. He could have saved Jesus if he'd wanted to, and all indications are that for various reasons that's what he'd like to have done.”¹ But, even after personally interrogating him and deciding that no wrong had been done to warrant death, Pilate knew that he would stir up an even bigger hornets' nest than he already had on his hands if he set Jesus free. And, in that, he maintained focus on his greatest priority—to maintain law and order, particularly in the interest of national security—and he didn't need a full-scale Jewish uprising on account of what he could best describe as a carpenter turned holy man.

What Led to the Cross?—Pontius Pilate

What became of Pilate after his rule in Judea is unknown. Where history seems to leave off, Christian imagination began. Pilate's life and death became popular topics of legend and folklore. Interestingly, the treatment of Pilate is one of the big differences between the Eastern and Western church. The Eastern church (Orthodox Christianity), dwelling on his proclamation of Jesus' innocence, regarded him favorably. However, the Western church (Catholic & Protestant), where our tradition is rooted, saw him as the enemy of Christ, and has delighted in casting him in negative light through myth and legend ever since.

Regardless, the fact is that, after Judas Iscariot and Joseph Caiaphas, Pontius Pilate was the third domino to fall in the sequence of events and characters that led Jesus to the cross, perhaps even against Pilate's advice and better judgment. So, now that we've covered these three characters, next week

¹ Buechner, Frederick. Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith. HarperOne: New York, 2004. p.314.

we will deal with the facts and the events and the pain of Jesus' trial and crucifixion, as we continue our own journey to Jerusalem and the cross.

May the God of grace continue to be a powerful presence with each of us on this year's Lenten journey. Amen.