

**Lenten Sermon Series #4**

**“What Led to the Cross?—The Trial & Crucifixion of Christ”**

March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

Based on Psalm 51:1-12 and John 19:14-30

**SCRIPTURE:**

**Psalm 51:1-12**

<sup>1</sup> Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. <sup>2</sup> Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. <sup>3</sup> For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. <sup>4</sup> Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. <sup>5</sup> Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. <sup>6</sup> You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. <sup>7</sup> Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. <sup>8</sup> Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. <sup>9</sup> Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. <sup>10</sup> Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. <sup>11</sup> Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. <sup>12</sup> Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.  
[NRSV]

**John 19:14-30**

<sup>14</sup> Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, “Here is your King!” <sup>15</sup> They cried out, “Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!” Pilate asked them, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but the emperor.” <sup>16</sup> Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

So they took Jesus; <sup>17</sup> and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. <sup>18</sup> There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. <sup>19</sup> Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” <sup>20</sup> Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. <sup>21</sup> Then the chief priests of the Jews said to

Pilate, “Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but, ‘This man said, I am King of the Jews.’” <sup>22</sup> Pilate answered, “What I have written I have written.” <sup>23</sup> When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. <sup>24</sup> So they said to one another, “Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it.” This was to fulfill what the scripture says, “They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.” <sup>25</sup> And that is what the soldiers did.

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. <sup>26</sup> When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.” <sup>27</sup> Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

<sup>28</sup> After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), “I am thirsty.” <sup>29</sup> A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. <sup>30</sup> When Jesus had received the wine, he said, “It is finished.” Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. [NRSV]

**OPENING PRAYER:** Startle us, O God, with your truth, and open our hearts and our minds to your wondrous love. Speak your word to us; silence in us any voice but your own, and be with us now as we turn our attention, our minds, and our hearts, to you, in Jesus Christ our Lord; and let all God’s people say ... Amen.

### Imagining the Final Moments (Courtesy of C.S. Lewis)

In the classic *Chronicles of Narnia* tale, “The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe,” C.S. Lewis shares a powerful imaginative rendering of what Jesus probably experienced on the day of his death. As Lewis’ story goes, in both book and movie, Aslan, the great lion—who is the divine, messianic figure of the story—is escorted through the woods late at night by Susan and Lucy. Susan and Lucy know not where they are heading, but Aslan surely does—he’s on his way to the Stone Table to be executed in order to satisfy the need for death in place of Susan’s & Lucy’s brother, Edmund. Eventually, they reach the edge of the woods, and Aslan instructs them to remain hidden in the bushes for safety. He then approaches the gathered crowd—a great crowd of all sorts of vile creatures, many

of which Lewis interestingly described in the book by saying he shouldn't describe them for fear that grown-ups wouldn't let us read the book. But, there they stood, howling and laughing at the great lion as he approached the Witch. And, then she cried out, "Bind him!" and various creatures tied his four paws together. But, Aslan put forth no resistance. Even as the crowd shouted and cheered against him, he made no noise. Even when the enemies strained and tugged and pulled the cords that bound him so tightly that they cut into his flesh, he did not resist. Then they further humiliated him by shaving his beautiful, thick mane, taking away all semblance of the great lion leader. And, as he lay there, exhausted and wearied, the crowd surged in again, jeering at him, calling him names, taunting him with insults, and kicking, hitting, and spitting on him. But, Aslan never moved. Then they drug him the final, short distance onto the Stone Table and tied him down securely. And, before the Witch struck the final blow with her knife, Lewis wrote that she mocked him one last time ... and then it was over.

### **Sermon Series: What Led to the Cross?**

During the past few weeks (the majority of the month of March), we have all—each in our own way—journeyed through this season of Lent. And, we have all—together as this particular body of Christ gathered for worship on Sunday mornings—journeyed with Jesus and the disciples on our way to Jerusalem and the cross. Together, through this ongoing sermon series, we have focused on a few of the main characters involved in the final days of Jesus' own journey, and we are hopefully developing a deeper understanding of the circumstances that led up to and through the trial and execution of Jesus Christ.

### **Weeks 1-3 Recap: The Last Supper, the Betrayal of Judas Iscariot, Caiaphas the High Priest, and the Governor, Pontius Pilate**

In Week 1, we explored the context and the background story behind the Last Supper, and the subsequent betrayal of the disciple, Judas Iscariot, which led to Jesus' arrest. In Week 2, we explored the high priest, Joseph Caiaphas, and the motives and calculations he made to eliminate the Jesus threat. And, last week in Week 3, we explored the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, and the predicament he found himself in as he was forced to make choices between competing

priorities. Fortunately, for Pilate at least, he chose to maintain 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 in the crowded Passover city of Jerusalem on account of what he could best describe as a carpenter turned holy man from Galilee. But, unfortunately, for Jesus, Pilate chose a path that led Jesus down a narrow road to the outskirts of town—“out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha” (v.17).

### **The Stage is Set for the Trial**

So, as I said last week, on the morning following the interrogation of Jesus by Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, the Jewish authorities confer and decide to send Jesus to Pilate, and the ball is now in Pilate’s court. According to all four gospel accounts, the focus of Pilate’s trial and examination of Jesus was on the allegation that Jesus had presented himself as the “king of the Jews,” which was precisely the same title granted and given by the Roman Senate to Herod the Great years before. Even more, however, is the fact that Caiaphas and the other Jewish leaders convinced Pilate that Jesus was a political threat because Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, which was a treasonous offense in Roman eyes since the Roman emperor, Tiberius Caesar, was also known as “the son of God.” Thus, Jesus was judged to deserve death.

Still, Pilate was uncertain. Maybe he had a gut feeling that something was amiss. Perhaps he didn’t like the idea that he was just a pawn being manipulated by Caiaphas and the crowd. Nonetheless, the crowd “cried out, ‘Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!’ ... Then he [Pilate] handed him [Jesus] over to them to be crucified” (v.15-16). And, the painful, final steps of Jesus’ journey began.

### **Crucifixion in the Ancient World**

Now, crucifixion was a form of execution of particular cruelty in the ancient world, whereby a person was tied or nailed to a pole, or cross, and left to hang. Historians agree that crucifixion was the worst form of death possible. In fact, the words *cross* and *crucify* actually derive from the same Latin word *cruciare*, which means *torture*.

It was practiced long before the Romans adopted the practice, but the Romans utilized it especially to make an example out of people. It was primarily reserved for murderous or rebellious slaves. And, the Romans would place crosses along well-traveled highways, on tops of hills, and at city gates so as to maximize visibility and to help insure that it was a deterrent for others.

In Jesus' case, he was first humiliated, taunted, and jeered, but then, like all crucifixion victims, he was also beaten—scourged with whips, to which hooks, nails, or sharp pieces of metal or glass were attached, and then nailed to the cross, through wrists and ankles (or heels). People were left to die by suffocation, thirst, or both, for however long it took (sometimes several days). Sometimes friends or relatives were allowed to feed their loved one, as apparently Jesus was.

John's gospel records that "when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), 'I am thirsty.' A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit" (vv.28-30). It was mid-afternoon, probably around 3pm best we can tell from all the sources available.

### **Theological Implications of Jesus' Death**

Now, there are three perspectives from which to understand the theological implications of Jesus' death by crucifixion ... From the "Jewish perspective," and their belief in the Messiah, Jesus was a failed messiah—the Messiah was supposed to prevail over Israel's enemies as a conquering hero! But, Jesus gained no such victory over the despised Romans, and instead of enthronement, his end was crucifixion, which as was covered above, was a degrading form of execution, reserved for slaves and the worst of criminals. And, from the "Roman perspective," Jesus is nothing more than just another executed criminal. In their eyes, there is no honor in such a death.

But, from "Jesus' perspective"—a perspective his disciples embraced after his resurrection—his death opened up a new understanding of sacrifice and atonement—that God and God's children are made right by the offering and sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. The death of the one has atoned for the sins of the

many ... just like both Caiaphas and Jesus had each calculated and concluded with quite different arithmetic—that one person needed to take one for the entire team! And, we know from Mark’s gospel that Jesus saw his suffering and death as giving his life as “a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

For centuries, Presbyterian-flavored Christians have affirmed theologically that Jesus died as the sacrifice and substitute for sinful humanity, bearing in himself the sins of the whole world, and thus offering himself, in his death, as the deepest possible expression of God’s love. The death of Christ on the cross does for us what his life and teachings cannot fully do by themselves alone. It brings us into a right relationship with God. And, this is why the cross is the central symbol of our Christian faith—it points us to the inexhaustible riches of God’s love!

### **What Led to the Cross?—Trial and Crucifixion**

But, on the Friday afternoon in which Jesus died, none of this occurred to his disciples, friends, and family. The cross only represented horror to them. Their rabbi and their master was dead. Their movement had been stopped in its tracks. They themselves had fled or were in hiding. Only a few had remained behind to witness the very end.

But, thanks be to God for the fact that, instead of an ending, it was really only the beginning. For through the experience of Jesus’ death, the Spirit brings God’s forgiveness to us, creates that clean heart and right spirit within us the psalmist talks about (Psalm 51:10), then moves us to respond in faith, and initiates the new life we are given in Christ. We therefore accept ourselves and love others, knowing that no one ... NO ONE ... has any ground on which to stand, except God’s grace (adapted from *The Confession of 1967*)! Amen.