

Matthew 27:15-26

¹⁵At the time of the Festival the governor had a custom to release to the crowd any one prisoner they wanted. ¹⁶At that time they were holding a notorious prisoner named Barabbas. ¹⁷So when they were assembled, Pilate said to them, “Which one do you want me to release to you? Barabbas—or Jesus, who is called Christ?” ¹⁸For Pilate knew that they had handed Jesus over to him because of envy.

¹⁹While he was sitting on the judgment seat, Pilate’s wife sent him a message. “Have nothing to do with that righteous man,” she said, “since I have suffered many things today in a dream because of him.” ²⁰But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus put to death. ²¹The governor asked them, “Which of the two do you want me to release to you?”

“Barabbas!” they said.

²²Pilate said to them, “Then what should I do with Jesus, who is called Christ?”

They all said to him, “Crucify him!”

²³But the governor said, “Why? What has he done wrong?”

But they kept shouting even louder: “Crucify him!”

²⁴When Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing and that instead it was turning into a riot, he took water, washed his hands in front of the crowd, and said, “I am innocent of this righteous man’s blood. It is your responsibility.”

²⁵And all the people answered, “Let his blood be on us and on our children!”

²⁶Then he released Barabbas to them, but he had Jesus flogged and handed him over to be crucified.

Hands of Self-Preservation

I.

It happened sometime after the events we just read about in the sermon text for today. It was weeks after Good Friday; after Jesus’ death and resurrection; after his ascension into heaven; after, even, Pentecost. It happened in Jerusalem.

Peter and John were on their way to the temple to pray. There was a man there who had been lame from birth. As so many people who are in need do, he stopped Peter and John and asked them for a donation. He was looking for money, but Peter gave him something much better. In the name of Jesus, he commanded the man to walk. “Jumping up, he stood and began to walk. He entered the temple courts with them, walking, jumping, and praising God” (Acts 3:8, EHV). Such an astonishing miracle! It wasn’t as though the man slowly got to his feet and began to test his long-unused muscles; since he had been lame from birth, he had never learned to walk in the first place. Without having to first learn *how* to use such muscles, the man jumped to his feet and began to walk. He was walking and jumping as he praised God.

Certainly such an event would garner some attention. A crowd gathered outside the temple in Solomon’s Colonnade. Peter began to give a sermon to the crowd. It didn’t take long before Peter’s sermon had some pretty harsh things to say to his countrymen. “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and disowned in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him” (Acts 3:13, EHV).

Is it shocking to hear that? Peter’s testimony was clear: in his own mind, Pilate had decided to *release* Jesus. Pilate did many things on Good Friday, but there is one thing he *didn’t* do. Unless you are very new to Christianity, you know that Pilate didn’t let Jesus go. He will forever be remembered as the man who sentenced to death the author of life.

What happened? What made Pilate change his mind? Believe it or not, I wasn’t there.

I didn't talk personally to Pontius Pilate to find out what was going on in his mind, and God didn't see fit to record any more details about it in Scripture. Only God knows what was in his heart.

Still...there are some things God *did* tell us about the interaction between the King of the Jews and the governor of Judea. All four gospels record some of the details. Only Matthew mentions something Pilate did before he handed Jesus over to be crucified. To protect his position and proclaim his innocence, Pilate washed his hands. It was an act of self-preservation.

II.

It didn't have to end that way. Pilate had at his disposal a long list of reasons he could have used to release Jesus. When Pilate first met him, Jesus said nothing. The chief priests and elders were accusing him of anything and everything, but Jesus said nothing. He didn't protest his innocence. He didn't plead for mercy. He didn't say a word in his own defense. Pilate was amazed.

When the two men were alone, Jesus did open up. What he said made a deep impact on Pilate. "My kingdom is not of this world...³⁷ For this reason I was born, and for this reason I came into the world, to testify to the truth...^{19:11} You would have no authority over me at all if it had not been given to you from above" (John 18:36-37, 19:11, EHV). No one spoke to the Roman governor like that. Come to think of it, no normal person *ever* spoke like that. Pilate was beginning to understand that this man was no ordinary human being.

Then an unsettling message came in from his wife: "'Have nothing to do with that righteous man,' she said, 'since I have suffered many things today in a dream because of him'" (Matthew 27:19, EHV). She didn't even need to find someone to interpret her dreams. The meaning was clear: don't have anything to do with that righteous man; if you do, you'll regret it.

Pilate was no dummy. He didn't get to his position by being naïve and easy to manipulate. He could see what the Jewish leaders were trying to do. He knew they were jealous of what Jesus had become. Pilate was convinced that Jesus was no criminal; we know that because he, himself, said it more than once.

He weighed all the testimony. He examined all the evidence. It should have been an open-and-shut case. Pilate should have set Jesus free and sent the Jewish leaders home. But he didn't.

Instead, Pilate tried to pass the buck. First, he told the chief priests to judge Jesus according to their own law. That didn't work. Then he sent Jesus to Herod, hoping that a Jewish court would handle the case. That didn't work, either.

Running out of options to protect the innocent and at the same time save his own position, Pilate grasped at the straw of a Passover custom. The custom was to release a prisoner chosen by the people.

Pilate gave them an obvious choice: "Which one do you want me to release to you? Barabbas—or Jesus, who is called Christ?" (Matthew 27:17, EHV). Barabbas was guilty of rebellion and murder. He was a criminal so bad it would make *anyone* else look good. Pilate's plan backfired. "'Barabbas!' they said" (Matthew 27:21, EHV).

III.

Imagine the slack-jawed look Pilate must have had at their response. Seriously? Barabbas? A hardened criminal? At a loss for words, Pilate asked: "Then what should I do with Jesus, who is called Christ?" (Matthew 27:22, EHV).

The response came immediately. "They all said to him, 'Crucify him!'" (Matthew 27:22, EHV). Pilate tried to reason with them, but it was too late. "They kept shouting even louder: 'Crucify him!'" (Matthew 27:23, EHV).

The attempts to free Jesus, instead of keeping the peace as Pilate was supposed to do, had started a riot. He *needed* to do *something*. What does one do? Do you do what is right, or what you think is best for yourself?

Pilate chose himself.

He sentenced the world's only truly innocent man to die. At the same time, he tried to proclaim his own supposed innocence. "Pilate...took water, washed his hands in front of the crowd, and said, 'I am innocent of this righteous man's blood. It is your responsibility'" (Matthew 27:24, EHV).

Was it, really, the responsibility of the crowd? Was he, really, innocent? In spite of his claims, only Pilate could authorize Jesus' execution. Two thousand years later our creeds still confess that Jesus "was crucified under Pontius Pilate."

No amount of water—no amount of ritual washings—will ever make those guilty hands clean.

IV.

Pilate didn't just condemn an innocent man—he condemned the sinless Son of God. He was too much of a coward to even admit his own cowardice. Pilate wasn't a Christian, he was a pagan. An unbeliever acted like an unbeliever. Not surprising, really.

What is surprising, and much more troubling, is when people who call themselves Christians follow Pilate's example. It is easy to sing God's praises here in the sanctuary. It's more difficult when you get together with friends—and even family—and not all of them are Christian. Some of them are pretty outspoken, and might make fun of you for what you believe. How often do you say nothing. How often do you come up with excuses, like: "it wasn't the right time." "I didn't want to get into an argument." "I don't want to lose my friends."

On the Last Day, Pontius Pilate will have to answer for choosing himself over Jesus. But *he* didn't believe in Jesus. That, you might say, was his excuse. *We* are Christians who claim to be followers of Jesus. What's *our* excuse? There are none. Jesus said: "Whoever denies me before others, I will also deny before my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 10:33, EHV).

Pilate didn't do what he could have or should have done on Good Friday. But he wasn't the only one who was in a position to take action. Jesus could have come to his own defense. He chose not to do it.

It is good and right for Christians to praise our Savior-God for everything he has done to save us. In addition to that, remember this evening everything Jesus *didn't* do and everything he *allowed others to do to him* to save us. He allowed his enemies to arrest him. He allowed the soldiers to mistreat him and humiliate him. He allowed a crooked court to convict him and a weak judge to wash his hands of him. He allowed himself to be numbered among the transgressors to fulfill prophecy and pay for the world's sins. Jesus allowed his own life to be taken from him so that we might live in his presence forever. Praise God!

Later on Good Friday Pilate did one thing we might consider positive. When Jesus was crucified, Pilate had a notice fastened to the top of his cross: "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews" (Matthew 27:37, EHV). Was there a part of Pilate that believed it? We don't know. The fact remains: he was right. Jesus is a King. Jesus is *our* King. He rules in our hearts by the faith the Holy Spirit created there. As his humble, grateful subjects, we want to follow him. We eagerly seek opportunities to serve him. We pray for his kingdom to come and his will to be done on earth. We look forward to the day when we will reign with him in heaven. Amen.