

Sermon Palm Sunday C
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All Saints, Mt. Pleasant
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Luke 22:6-23:25

When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people, both chief priests and scribes, gathered together, and they brought Jesus to their council. They said, "If you are the Messiah, tell us." He replied, "If I tell you, you will not believe; and if I question you, you will not answer. But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God." All of them asked, "Are you, then, the Son of God?" He said to them, "You say that I am." Then they said, "What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips!" Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. They began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king." Then Pilate asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" He answered, "You say so." Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no basis for an accusation against this man." But they were insistent and said, "He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee, where he began, even to this place." When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies. Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. I will therefore have him flogged and release him." Then they all shouted out together, "Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!" (This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; but they kept shouting, "Crucify, crucify him!" A third time he said to them, "Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him." But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.

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“*And he handed over Jesus as they wished...*” Just moments ago, we heard the cries of “hosanna” as the crowds of disciples heralded the coming of king Jesus. And now, we’re left with echos of “crucify him” ringing in our ears as we take the final turn in our journey of Lent to set our faces, with Christ, toward the cross.

This scene today, this great perversion of justice plays out like a grotesque comedy of errors, and the crowds just can’t turn away. We see disciples turn into traitors, priests become prosecutors, criminals walk free while the Innocent One gets sentenced to death. The religious leaders - the ones who are supposed to owe their allegiance to God alone - are in so tight with the Romans they can’t see the Messiah when he's standing right before their eyes. Pilate, the ruthless Roman ruler known for his vicious and murderous ways, is the only one arguing for clemency. Three times he begs the people to spare the blood of this faultless Galilean preacher.

And Herod just wants a show. He’s been hearing of this Jesus of Nazareth - and he’s all ready for a miracle. But the prophet does not perform. And the irony of ironies is that on the day of Passover, the commemoration and celebration of the freeing of God’s people from the tyranny of Pharaoh, the people cry for the Prince of Peace to be bound, and dragged away by Rome, like a lamb led to the slaughter.

“Their voices prevailed... So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted and he handed over Jesus as they wished.” The question is: who? As who wished? Who really holds the blame for this shameless perversion of justice? In this tragedy of tragedies, whodunnit? Well, let’s consider each member of the cast of characters.

Was it Pilate? We recite in the creed that it was at his hand that Jesus suffered. Although this public episode makes him out to be a sympathetic character who nearly begs for Jesus’ life in front of the crowd, History tells us he was a ruthless and violent dictator sent by Caesar to keep this occupied territory under tight control, by *any means necessary*. And he liberally used the means of crucifixion to make a public spectacle of Israelites who tried to buck the system. Although he himself ruled that there were no grounds on which to punish Jesus in this way, He did it anyway. Murderers gonna murder, amirite?

Or was it Herod? I mean, Herod’s father tried to Kill Jesus once before, when the Wise Men reported the news of the newborn king in Bethlehem. Herod, who had heard of Jesus’ fame spread all throughout his Galilean ward, himself professed Jesus to be a wonder-worker. He had heard only good things from the people healed, cleansed and fed by this Nazareth native. Surely he could have done more to spare the life of Christ. But instead, he and his people mocked and mistreated him and sent him back to Pilate.

Or was it the religious authorities? After all, it was the Elders, the Chief Priests and the Scribes that been plotting against Jesus all along. Ever since word about him got up to the Holy City of Jerusalem, these religious insiders made up their minds that he was a threat. They recruited Judas. They paid the thirty pieces of silver. They arrived in the garden with their thugs after dark to take him away. They dragged him from Pilate to Herod and back again, “vehemently accusing him” of blasphemy all the way. They infiltrated the crowds, slandering his name, and whipping them up into cries of “Crucify! Crucify him!”

But what about the crowds? Despite the accusations the religious authorities were lobbying at Jesus, Pilate wasn’t buying it. Herod didn’t give a flip. Pilate even tried to appeal to the crowd’s

religious sensibilities by offering to release Jesus simply because it being a festival day - a day for grace, mercy and freedom (or so he heard). But instead, they cried for Barabbas. Instead, the force of their shouting out for blood struck the fear of revolt into the heart of the governor. Instead, they united their voices to demand the release of a murderer, and the murderer of the innocent itinerant carpenter-turned-rabbi. Their voices prevail. Their cries turn the tide. Their will is done, and off to Golgotha they go to watch the bloody spectacle.

But what about the disciples? As soon as Jesus starts telling the truth about what he knows will happen when he takes his message of boundary-breaking love to Jerusalem, they start with the back-talking. They're supposed to be his best friends, but they start rebuking him on the road, arguing about who is the greatest, taking to violence in the garden after all Jesus taught about peace, and as soon as things start to get real, they scatter to the winds. Judas flat out betrays him. Totally unprompted, he runs straight to the enemy. Peter denies even knowing him. Even after Jesus warns him he will do it, he turns his back on his Master when his voice could have spared his Lord perhaps a bit of his suffering. By the time Jesus gets to the hill of Calvary every one of the disciples has deserted him except the women, and the disciple whom he loved. For all the Romans, the soldiers, the crowds, the governors and the authorities did to him, this is what hurt the most. That his friends, his brothers, would betray, deny and abandon him in his hour of need.

So... who did it? Who propelled this backwards kangaroo court of a trial which sends Jesus to death? Who is to responsible for snuffing out the Light of the World? Well...who does it now? When the light of Christ is extinguished in this world, who is to blame? When the Word of God is silenced, the lordship of Christ denied, the love of Jesus stifled, who is the guilty? Is it politics? Is it the ruthless and heartless out-for-me-and-me-alone attitude of those who work their way up to the upper echelons of power? whose ascendancy comes only at the expense of others, who climb the ladder of privilege only to betray their neighbors once they've gotten used to how good it tastes?

Or is it religion? Is it the lure of complacency, the tendency of the insiders to squelch the Spirit when the breath of God begins to ruffle their feathers? Is it the constant urge to protect the status quo or to maintain hierarchical power structures that sucks the life out of the living word of God?

Or is it society? Is it that mob mentality that can sway public opinion so vehemently? Is it the thrill of belonging that pushes Christ to the margins? Is it the deafening roar of voices trying to gain our allegiance?

Or is it us? Jesus' own disciples? Who continue to betray Jesus when it's in our financial self-interest, who continue to deny knowing Jesus when it may set us at odds with "the crowd," who continue to this day to scatter to the four winds As soon as following Jesus becomes even the least bit controversial, uncomfortable or counter-cultural? YES. The answer is YES.

On the question of who is at fault for sending the the Son of God to meet his end on the cross while his mother stood by, and his friends hid in shame...the answer is YES, we all did it: the power players, the comfortable insiders, the bloodthirsty bystanders, the betrayers, the deniers, and the everyday cowards, just like you and me. Who dunnit? We dunnit. With our love of sin, our fear of rejection, and our seemingly constant commitment to the comfortable habit of denying Christ.

As we walk this week with Jesus, toward the night in which he was betrayed, the goal is not to find someone else to blame, the intention is to let ourselves feel the weight, to allow the truth and the

burden of the Passion to be upon us. Not so we would be crushed under its weight - because God knows we cannot bear it - but to come face to face with the fact that we exist, we live, we stand and we endure this and every trial by the grace of God alone. We can bear the ugly reality of this week by the love of the one who bore the cross. We can confront the truth of Christ's Passion because we do not walk this way alone. We walk it in the community of believers, under the shadow of the wings of the almighty in the safekeeping of the Spirit, and already redeemed by the loving sacrifice of Jesus Christ our Lord.

That's why Friday is called Good. And that's why Thursday is filled with promises: The sending of the Spirit, the giving of Holy Communion, the washing of the feet. All to bring us through the dark night of weeping and hold us fast until the breaking dawn on Easter Day. Hold fast to those promises, beloved. Drink in the grace showered on you in water, wine and bread. Let yourself feel this week, not to be overwhelmed, but to be overcome with the depths Christ was willing to go to to bring you with him, out of the depths, out of bondage, out of death, alive!