

¹When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus in order to bring about his death. ²They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate the governor.

¹¹Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus said, “You say so.” ¹²But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. ¹³Then Pilate said to him, “Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?” ¹⁴But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed. ¹⁵Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. ¹⁶At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. ¹⁷So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, “Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?” ¹⁸For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. ¹⁹While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, “Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.” ²⁰Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. ²¹The governor again said to them, “Which of the two do you want me to release for you?” And they said, “Barabbas.” ²²Pilate said to them, “Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?” All of them said, “Let him be crucified!” ²³Then he asked, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Let him be crucified!” ²⁴So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, “I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves.”

This is not what you had planned for your Friday. Will anything good come out of this day? You hear the commotion approaching, and this band of local religious leaders are clearly upset over something ... again. Ruling over such people is wearying. You try to remember how long it has been that you have served as the governor of this backwater province and its stubborn people. “It’s been too long, Pontious,” you say to yourself. Their incessant squabbles are infuriating; their unwillingness

to go along with the empire's rule and assume Roman culture eats away at you every day. "I'm a glorified babysitter," you think to yourself.

"STAND RIGHT THERE!" your guards yell as they shove a man toward you. The man stumbles into place, and you glance at him for a moment. He looks like he is no more than a thug who got his nose into something he shouldn't have. What could he have done to rile up the religious leadership? "What are the charges you bring against this man?" you ask. The gaggle of men shout out various charges: subversive speech, insurrection, rebellion, treason. Those are all-too-common charges... they of course must be answered by death. But in the shouting you catch a few... unique charges: this man claims to be king, or that he claims to be a Messiah to deliver the people from their captors. Those are not common accusations, because not just anyone can grow a large following of people to label themselves as a king or a Messiah.

You look again at the man. No one would mistake him for anything more... than a vagabond. Ha! - what type of movement could this man lead? Who in this world would be foolish enough to ever follow a drifter like him? If he made such claims, he truly must not be sane. If that's the case, perhaps a flogging will clear his mind. Yet, why would an insane man stir up the local leaders so much?

Those same leaders hush as you approach this Jesus. "Are YOU the king of the Jews?" You expect a response steeped in lunacy, or in cowardice. But this man sets his eyes on you and coolly replies, "You say so." The chief priests and elders erupt with shouts and accusations: rebellious, seditious, insurgent, zealot. "SILENCE!" You notice that the man offers no response to their insults and accusations, let alone a flinch. You must settle this soon and be on with your Friday. "Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?" He only looks at you, saying nothing, which is perplexing. He appears to be sane. Does he not realize that these accusations will result in his death if he does not defend himself? Why is he not pleading his case for innocence? Why is he not defending himself? Does he not realize that your mercy alone holds his fate? Who is this man? The people of this province – the Judeans – are all a peculiar lot, but this man... thus far, this man is the most peculiar of them all. No one has ever just stood there, accepting his fate. The jeering fades into

the background as the man's solitary answer regarding his kingship echoes in your mind: "You say so."

This man has... conviction. He is nothing, yet he has looked you – a Roman governor – straight in the eye and spoke with conviction. This Jesus of Nazareth... , you realize, he is... truly fascinating. You wish he had more to share, but at this rate the only thing he will be sharing is his death. You remember what this week is for the locals, and that you have a custom. "It is your festival, so let the crowds decide." As your guards usher him away, his sole statement, "You say so," continues to bellow through your mind. You mutter, "May the people have mercy."

The crowds are gathered in the courtyard and you sit in your judgment seat before them. Jesus of Nazareth and the notorious Jesus Barabbas stand there by you. Surely, the people will show wisdom, you say to yourself. "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas... or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" Murmurs and sporadic shouts rise up from the people. You see the faces of the same local leaders stirring up the people. You hope that the people's decency will prevail over the meddling. Yet you hear the growing shouts in favor of Barabbas. You had not anticipated this. You realize that you – the governor – are losing control... this is no longer a crowd, but a mob. If you don't play your cards right, there could be an insurrection.

Word arrives that even your wife wants you to back out of this now. In a dream she had seen that this Jesus of Nazareth was innocent. But you can't back out: you're Pontius Pilate. If you back out now, the people will turn on you. You need to display strength. You must be revered by the people. You can't back down now. It is time to finish this. You stand up from your seat and shout to the people: "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?"

BARABBAS!!! BARABBAS!!! BARABBAS!!!

You take a deep breath. "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" Your stomach lurches as the refrain begins, "Let him be crucified!" It grows and echoes throughout the courtyard and in your soul as well. As governor, you've experienced crowds before. One day the crowd can herald your arrival and the next day the crowd can demand your blood. The people don't know what they want. You could tell them that killing this Nazarene is not in their best interest. You

could stand up to them and set this situation right. It will require strength, decisiveness, power... but the roar of the people make those things impossible to muster.

“Why? What evil has he done?” you barely mutter. You have the political power to do something – anything. You know what the right thing to do is: to save an innocent life. You know what must be done to end this slaughter. But you won’t do anything, because the cost of your own political interests outweigh the cost of the death of the innocent. “Coward,” a voice in your mind says. The voice tells you that you may have the title of governor, but you are certainly not the arbitrator today; the mob prevails. “Coward.” Aagh! You must rid yourself of such thoughts! You are the governor! Turn off those thoughts! Do something, Pontius! You see a basin of water near you, so you go to it to wash your hands. “I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves,” you declare. But that voice tells you that you could have done something... if only you were not so weak.

You are repulsed by the situation. Mostly, though, you are repulsed by yourself. You turn to walk away, and as you do so, you catch a glimpse of this Jesus of Nazareth, who is standing there with no anger, no ill will, and no fear in him. The image stops you in your tracks. You take a moment to absorb the scene, as you hear the growing cries for his crucifixion. You try to pull your composure together. You think how you just cowered in front of the people of this backwater province. “You are not worthy to rule over them,” the voice in your mind says. “You are not worthy to rule over them.” “But who could ever be worthy to do that?” you ask yourself. “Who could ever be worthy to stand before such... sheep... and lead them?!?” You take a deep breath to fortify yourself, and you tell that voice in your mind, “I am a Roman governor, and my legacy will not be defined by this day.” The voice doesn’t respond. You continue your walk away from the whole scene, letting the roar of the crowd fade away as you are left to yourself.

This is not what you had planned for your Friday. Will anything good come out of this day?