

Weekend of the Passion (RCL/A)  
Passion According to St. Matthew: Matt. 26:1-27:66  
April 1-2, 2023  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

There's a lot of **irony** in the story of our Lord's Passion: people who speak the truth without realizing it, folks who think they're putting Jesus on trial but who are actually on trial themselves, authorities/power-brokers who have no idea how **limited** their **actual** power is, secondary players who end up in important roles....

And much of the irony, of course, is in what happens to Jesus.

- We can guess that the first one who ever kissed Him was His mother Mary, when He was newborn and still slick from birth; the last one to kiss Him was the person in His inner circle who betrayed Him: Judas;
- The One who gave sight to the blind is blindfolded and challenged to identify the person who slapped Him (Luke 22:64);
- The One who used spit to heal the man who was deaf and mute (Mark 7:31-37) is spat upon by soldiers who mock Him (Matt. 26:67-68);
- The One whom St. John describes as the **Word** made flesh (John 1:1), the One who preaches the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) and teaches so many other lessons, is **wordless**, **speechless**, before Pilate (Matt. 27:12-14);
- The One whom St. John says ordered onlookers to unbind Lazarus' grave bandages (John 11:44), the One who straightened the bent-over woman, "whom Satan bound for 18 years" (Luke 13:16), is Himself bound and led away to be crucified (Matt. 27:2);
- The body of the One who multiplied 5 loaves and 2 fish and fed many thousands (Matt. 14:13-21), the body of the One who blessed and broke the bread of Passover, saying, "This is my body, given for you" (Matt. 26:26), is broken on the cross;
- The One whom St. John says turned water into wine at the wedding of Cana (John 2:1-11) **and** offered the woman at the well "living water" (John 4:1-42), the One who offered His friends a Passover cup of wine, saying, "Drink... this is my blood... poured out... for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:28), thirsts on the cross and turns

His head away from a sponge soaked in sour wine and bitter gall, impaled on the end of a stick and thrust upward at Him (Matt. 27:33-34);

- The One whom St. John tells us called forth Lazarus from the tomb (John 11:43) is Himself laid in a tomb (Matt. 27:57-61) by Joseph of Arimathea.

Ironically, Jesus' male disciples fled, though they were His closest friends, so

**overwhelmed** were they, so **terrified** by Jesus' arrest, condemnation, execution. The person who was **bold** enough to go and petition Pilate for Jesus' body was the one St. John writes, "...was a disciple of Jesus, though a **secret** one because of his fear of the Jews...." (John 19:38). Joseph of Arimathea wasn't operating **completely** under the radar, though, for St. Luke tells us that he was "a good and righteous man," and "though a member of the [ruling] council [the Sanhedrin], had not agreed to their plan and action" (Luke 23:50-51).

There's lots **more** irony in the fact that the voices proclaiming Jesus' innocence in this Passion story include **Judas**, who betrayed Him (but who later repented, saying, "I have sinned by betraying **innocent** blood" Matt. 27:4), as well as Pilate and Pilate's wife, who are pagans. Pilate keeps asking those who accuse Jesus, "Why? What has he done?" and clearly hopes that the crowd will cry out for **Jesus'** release rather than that of **Barabbas**. Pilate's wife is the recipient of divine revelation while she sleeps: "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him" (Matt. 27:19). She feels so strongly she **needs** to get this message to her husband that she barges into his work space on a work day and interrupts his official business!

Pilate puts up some resistance but caves, finally. What we learn from sources other than Scripture is that he lives in fear of the Jewish leaders complaining about him to the Emperor in Rome. The Emperor is his boss, and the last thing he wants is to be recalled to Rome because of perceived misconduct or poor administration. He's already skating on

thin ice. He hates the Jews and they reciprocate by hating him. He is not just culturally insensitive; he seems to delight in poking his finger in their eyes, waving a flame around gasoline. He raided the Temple treasury to build a new aqueduct; he refused to remove the Roman eagle or the Emperor's image from the standards bearing the Roman flags as they were processed into Jerusalem, despite his full awareness that his predecessors did so in sensitivity to the Jewish prohibition against graven images.

Pilate's anxiety about **aggravating** the Jewish leaders (despite the fact that he frequently **antagonized** them) was well-founded. Beyond Jesus' death and resurrection, after he had served for about 10 years as procurator/governor of Judea, he was indeed recalled to Rome. Interestingly, it's the Samaritans who blew the whistle on him. You may recall that in Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, which we heard the 2<sup>nd</sup> weekend in Lent, she refers to the Samaritans worshiping on Mt. Gerizim instead of in Jerusalem. Well, some wannabe Indiana Jones claimed that he'd found relics Moses buried over a thousand years before on Mt. Gerizim. A large crowd gathered to witness the unveiling of these supposed sacred vessels, and many people unfortunately and inexplicably brought along weapons. Pilate learned of it and ordered wholesale slaughter of those people, who were essentially religious pilgrims. In their grief and shock, the Samaritans sent word to Rome, and Pontius Pilate was recalled.

Tiberius Caesar died when Pilate was en route back to Rome, so he was not formally tried. I've read both that he was sent into exile, and that he committed suicide; maybe both outcomes are true. However, there **is** a legend that he and his wife both became Christians. In the Coptic (Egyptian) Church, they are actually considered saints. Ironic, huh?

Pontius Pilate is the only person other than Jesus and the Virgin Mary who is named in the Apostles' Creed. Mention of him tethers our **salvation** history to **world** history, beyond the Bible. Mention of him reminds us how easy it is to sell out our beliefs in deference to our fears or in pursuit of our earthly ambitions. How many of us can say we've **never ever** "expedited" a situation less than honestly to simplify our life? That we haven't **ever** looked the other way when an inconvenient fact surfaced? That we haven't **ever** left truth by the side of the road to travel lighter and get on with the journey? That we haven't **ever** been "swayed by the crowd," especially when it threatened to crush anyone or anything in its path? We've done it. We have plenty of company. And we have a Savior.

Jesus died for Pontius Pilate. And for Pilate's wife. And for Barabbas. And for Judas who betrayed. And for Peter who denied. And for friends who fled. Not just for the women who stayed close and who stayed faithful. Not just for Joseph of Arimathea who boldly claimed and devotedly buried His body. Not just for us on our best days. Jesus died for us on our worst days. Let us pray for **grace**, for **strength** to do the next right thing, even when the temptation is great to do otherwise, even when the price of holiness is high. Let us pray to live for love of Him, who died that we may live. Let us pray that with Heaven's help we may **rise** rather than **sink** to each occasion. Let us remember that we have been "bought with a price," and that our lives are therefore not ours, but His. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

