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Bridgeway Church
Gospel of John #40
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Sermon Summary #40

Which “Son of the Father” Do You Want Me to Release? John 18:38-40; Mark 15:6-15; Matthew 27:19

[John only briefly mentions the incident involving Barabbas (John 18:38-40). Mark provides a much more detailed explanation of what happened (Mark 15:6-15). And Matthew adds one verse concerning Pilate’s wife that comes between Mark 15:10 and 11. Here then is our text.]

Now at the feast he used to release for them one prisoner for whom they asked. And among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called Barabbas. And the crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do as he usually did for them. And he answered them, saying, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?” For he perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up. [Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, ‘Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream’ (Matt. 27:19).] But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead. And Pilate again said to them, “Then what shall I do with the man you call the King of the Jews?” And they cried out again, “Crucify him.” And Pilate said to them, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Crucify him.” So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified (Mark 15:6-15).

Before we get started today, I want to say something to those who are joining us on-line for the first time and especially any of you who aren’t Christians. You may be still searching, still asking questions, and aren’t too sure what to make of Jesus Christ or a church like Bridgeway. What I have to say to you is no less important for the Christians here today. We can all benefit from thinking about this.

As I was studying and preparing this week to preach on this passage that concerns Jesus and Barabbas, it struck me that most non-Christians are likely to be perplexed as to why we would spend so much time and energy talking about something that happened 2,000 years ago. I suspect that even a few believers might wonder about that as well. After all, our country is in one of the worst financial crises in its history. Swept up in this Covid-19 pandemic, everything we’ve come to expect day in and day out has changed. Countless people have filed for bankruptcy and untold numbers of small businesses will likely never re-open.

Add to this the fact that we are about to enter what will undoubtedly prove to be one of the most contentious and angry presidential races in recent history. There is massive famine in Somalia. Thousands are dying of starvation every day. The controversy over homosexuality in our society isn’t going away anytime soon, if at all. The world’s a mess, people. It’s a real mess.

It doesn’t take a genius or a Ph.D. to figure out that something’s horribly wrong with the human race and life on earth. Anyone with a lick of sense only has to look around and see how screwed up people are and how screwed up the world is. I suspect that many of you today have joined us for this service precisely because your own life is screwed up and you’re wondering if maybe Christianity has some answers, perhaps some hope that it might offer you.

So that brings me back to my original question. In light of what’s happening all around us, why bother reading an old book about a very old story and a man named Jesus and how he was horribly mistreated by the religious and political leaders of his day? Why?

There’s a very simple but eternally important answer to that question. It may strike some of you as odd when you first hear it, but bear with me. I happen to believe, and I trust that most of you here today also believe, that the only hope that you as an individual have for setting straight your messed-up life is somehow found in Jesus Christ. I happen to believe, sincerely and wholeheartedly, that the only hope for finding meaning and purpose and value and

joy in life, in the face of all the crazy stuff that's going on in the world, is found in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I happen to believe, as I hope you do, that the only way we will ever see justice served and truth vindicated and righteousness and goodness winning, is because of what this man Jesus of Nazareth did 2,000 years ago.

Now I know for those of you who are new to the Christian faith or new to the local church or are just now beginning to ask questions about Christianity, this sounds outrageous. It sounds ridiculous. To say that one man who lived more than 2,000 years ago is the only answer and solution and hope that any of us have for joy and freedom either now or for eternity sounds really weird.

But here at Bridgeway we believe that Jesus was not just a man. He was also God. As strange as that sounds to some of you, hear me well. Jesus of Nazareth is God in human flesh. The God who created the universe became a human being in the person of Jesus. He lived a perfect life, a sinless life, an absolutely righteous life. Every moral law that you and I have broken, he obeyed. The life you and I should have lived but haven't, he did. In every way where you and I have failed, he succeeded. The judgment from God that you and I deserve to experience, he endured in our place. He was abused in every imaginable way, savagely beaten, humiliated and mocked and spit upon, and then was nailed to a cross. Three days later he rose from the dead and is very much alive today.

We here at Bridgeway believe that all of this was God's plan. It is his way of dealing with our sin, our screw-ups, our injustice, our prejudice, our evil ways, our sinful, God-dishonoring lives. It was because of what Jesus did 2,000 years ago that we have hope for forgiveness and joy and peace and purpose and an eternity of never-ending, indescribable happiness in the presence of God.

That's why we spend so much time reading the Bible and what it says about what Jesus did. That's why we are once again today looking at what he suffered. The fact is, this fractured world will only be put back into place because of what Jesus did. Your fractured life will only be put back into place because of what Jesus did.

That doesn't mean the economy and stock market are going to improve. They may. They may not. That doesn't mean people are going to start treating you the way you want them to or that the temperature outside is going to cool down or that the many wars around the globe are going to end tomorrow. It doesn't mean your personal preference for president will win the election this year. He may or may not. What it does mean is that there is hope for your jacked-up life. There is real forgiveness for the guilt and shame you feel deep in your soul. There is genuine hope for peace and reconciliation with your Creator. There is the possibility of living life in community with other people who will love you and pray for you and care for you and be there when you need them to be.

And it's all because of what Jesus did 2,000 years ago. A day is coming when there will be no more pandemics or financial losses or environmental crises or military tragedies or marital breakups or political scandals, a day when you need never again fear losing a job or a child or your health, a day that when it begins will last forever, a day that will bring justice and truth and goodness and joy and celebration and the enjoyment of God to people who, were it not for God and his grace in Jesus Christ, ought to suffer endlessly. That's why we are taking so much time talking about it.

The Cast of Characters

The cast of characters who have played a role in the events of Holy Week is truly amazing. There was **Mary**, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, whose love for Jesus was seen in her defiance of the disciples and her indifference toward their criticism, as she broke open an alabaster vial and poured an incredibly costly perfume on Jesus, all in preparation for this burial. Then, of course, there is **Judas Iscariot**, one of the twelve, who betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver and later committed suicide for reasons we really don't understand. We can hardly leave out **Peter**: at one moment brash in his declaration of loyalty to Jesus, only later to wilt and wither away in cowardice when confronted by a young servant girl. Others have played a crucial role in our story, such as **Annas** and his son-in-law, **Caiaphas**, the high priest.

But today we meet three more characters: **Pontius Pilate**, Pilate's wife, **Claudia Procula**, and a man named **Barabbas**.

(1) Pilate arrived in Judea in a.d. 26, just about four years before Jesus began his public ministry. He had been appointed prefect by the emperor Tiberius, his father-in-law. He remained in office for some 10 years. Several secular authors refer to him in an unflattering way. Philo charged him with "corruptibility, violence, robberies, ill-

treatment of the people, grievances, continuous executions without even the form of a trial, endless and intolerable cruelties” (Leg., 301-02).

As soon as he arrived in Palestine he was at war with the Jews. Pilate, to put it bluntly, was utterly and bitterly *anti-Semitic*. He first provoked the Jewish population by bringing into Jerusalem Roman standards with embossed figures of the emperor, something the Jews regarded as blasphemous.

At another time he stole money from the Temple treasury to pay for the construction of an aqueduct. When the Jews protested, Pilate ordered his soldiers to dress as civilians and to mingle with the crowds. As the Jewish protest increased, Pilate gave a signal: the soldiers drew clubs from beneath their robes and began to savagely beat those in the crowd, killing many. Then, of course, there is the incident to which Jesus referred in Luke 13:1.

He was, quite simply, a bitter enemy of the Jews, a fact that will play itself out and explain much in the trial of Jesus that follows.

(2) Our second character is Pilate’s wife, Claudia Procula. She is not mentioned in either John’s gospel or Mark’s, but Matthew says this of her in Matthew 27:19 – “while he [Pilate] was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, ‘Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream.’” According to tradition, she later became a Christian, but we have no way of knowing this for sure. More on her later.

(3) Our third character is a man called Barabbas. The name “Bar Abba” means “son of Abba,” i.e., “son of the father.” It was a common name in rabbinic families and some have suggested that he might have been the son of a famous rabbi. It is oddly ironic that Barabbas, “son of the father” would be released but the one true “Son of the Father,” Jesus, would be crucified. There are actually a few Greek manuscripts that preserve his name as “*Jesus Barabbas*.” Matthew actually refers to our Lord as “Jesus, the one called Christ,” perhaps to differentiate him from “Jesus, the one called Barabbas.”

Matthew calls him a “notorious prisoner” (27:16), indicating that he was no ordinary crook. Mark tells us that Barabbas had “committed murder in the insurrection.” In other words, Barabbas was involved in the Jewish efforts to throw off Roman rule and was likely viewed as something of a political hero, a “Robin Hood” of sorts! Some even suggest that the two men who were crucified on either side of Jesus were involved with him in the insurrection, especially since the same word is used to describe them as is used of Barabbas.

The fact that three crosses had been prepared suggests that Pilate had already ordered the execution of Barabbas and his two cohorts. If so, then Jesus the Christ quite literally and physically dies in the place of Jesus Barabbas.

The Sanhedrin could only pronounce a death sentence but were prohibited from actually executing anyone. This is why they surrendered him over to the Roman authorities, portraying him as a political offender who was a threat to the peace of the empire.

Pilate asked him in John 18:33, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Clearly, the Jewish leaders knew that Pilate couldn’t have cared less about Jesus’ claim to be Messiah. So they politicized Jesus and portrayed him to Pilate as a man who claimed to be a “king” and thus a rival to Roman supremacy.

Pilate concludes from how Jesus responds that he is no threat, but according to Luke’s gospel (23:2) the Jewish leaders said, “We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king.”

“Well, what do you say to that, Jesus?” asks Pilate. “But Jesus made no further answer” (Mark 15:5). One cannot help but think of Isaiah 53:7 – “He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.”

What follows next is due not only to an ancient custom but also to the pragmatic ways of Pilate. Clearly Pilate did not believe Jesus was guilty, at least not of an offense that would call for the death penalty, so rather than pronouncing him innocent and incurring the wrath of the Jewish leaders he resorts to a course of action he thought safer and more politically expedient: *the paschal amnesty*.

There were two forms of amnesty available to Pilate: He could either simply dismiss the charges against a prisoner not yet condemned, or he could pardon a condemned prisoner who had not yet been executed. Since Jesus had not as yet been condemned to die, Pilate opted for the former of the two. His custom was to release one prisoner during the feast of Passover. Pilate probably thought, and secretly hoped, that they would ask for Jesus to be released.

[It's at this point in the story that we are introduced to the second character: Pilate's wife, known to tradition as Claudia Procula. I'm not going to say anything more about her here, but will come back to her at the close.]

Pilate wanted to release Jesus. He knew that Barabbas was more of a threat to Rome than this itinerant preacher. He figured out that the Jews weren't motivated by their concern for Rome or any loyalty they felt to the state. They were driven by envy (v. 10)! They were threatened by Jesus. They resented his popularity and influence with the people.

I think Pilate's desire to release Jesus was also motivated by his anti-Semitism. He loved nothing better than to resist the Sanhedrin at every stage. But he misinterpreted the mood of the crowd.

“Which Jesus do you want: the one called the Christ or Barabbas?”

The religious leaders were no doubt mingling all through the crowd, stirring up the people, poisoning their minds and perhaps threatening their lives: “Ask for Jesus Barabbas, not Jesus of Nazareth.”

Pilate's big mistake was asking the crowd for their opinion about what should be done with Jesus of Nazareth. Perhaps he thought they would ask that he be banished or something less severe than death.

“Crucify him!” *staurōson!*

“Why? What evil has he done?”

“Crucify him!” *staurōson!*

It wasn't simply death that they wanted for him, but the worst and most horrific punishment known to the ancient world: crucifixion. Pilate's response was three-fold.

First, he released Barabbas.

We have no way of knowing what happened to Barabbas. Some have speculated that out of curiosity he followed Jesus to the cross and watched him die. Some think he may have come to saving faith in the one who quite literally died in his place. We don't know.

In any case, it is fascinating to envision how he reacted when he got the news. Sitting in his cell, perhaps doodling in the dirt or contemplating his impending execution, someone burst in and shouted: “Barabbas! You are free to go! Jesus, who is called the Christ, is to be crucified in your place!”

For Barabbas it was only a means by which he was delivered from physical death. For those who know Jesus as Lord and Savior, it means far more, as the message comes to us: “Susan! John! Kyle! Kristie! You are free to go! Jesus, who is called the Christ, has been crucified in your place!”

Second, he had Jesus “scourged”.

Think about everything that has led up to this moment: the agony of Gethsemane, the arrest by military representatives of the Sanhedrin, his mock trial, his savage beating and humiliation at the hands of his enemies, up all night, dragged from religious trial to civil trial back to religious trial and yet again to a civil one. Exhaustion!

One hesitates to describe a Roman scourging. What was previously somewhat obscure to people living in the 21st century was made graphically and vividly known as a result of Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion*. When the film was released one of the loudest and most oft-heard criticisms was that something so gruesome and so sadistic had no place in a Christian film. The victim was stripped virtually naked and tied to a post or pillar. He was then beaten and flogged by the Roman guard until his flesh hung in bleeding shreds. The instrument was the notorious *flagellum*, a

whip of leather thongs plaited with sharp pieces of bone and lead. Unlike the Jews, who limited the number of blows to 39, there was no maximum prescribed by Roman law. It wasn't unusual for a man's internal organs and bones to be exposed.

Some have tried to exonerate Pilate and suggest that his having Jesus scourged was an act of mercy. Perhaps Pilate hoped the Jews would take note of the severity of the punishment and consider it sufficient and let Jesus live. Or maybe Pilate hoped that Jesus would die from the scourging and be spared the agony and horror of death on a cross. But this is giving Pilate too much credit. His decision was likely the expression of his own cruelty and indifference toward Jesus.

Third, "he delivered him to be crucified". For this we must be patient until we reach John 19:17ff.

In closing, I'd like to cite the words of my friend, Jon Bloom, concerning what might have happened in the household of Pilate in the days following the crucifixion of Jesus. Imagine a conversation over breakfast between Pilate and his wife, Procula, on the Sunday morning following Jesus' crucifixion.

"You're quiet again this morning, Procula. Still brooding over the Galilean" asks Pilate?

"I can't shake this ominous feeling that something is going to happen because he was executed. My dream was so disturbing, so vivid."

"Well, I can't govern by the superstitious dreams of women," said Pilate to his wife.

"He was a righteous man," Procula shouts back. "You should not have sentenced him to death."

"I didn't sentence him! The Sanhedrin sentenced him!"

"You pronounced the judgment."

"Yes, and I didn't have a choice, Procula! We've been over this. He broke a Jewish blasphemy law, they wanted him dead, they used me to do it. I did everything in my power to release him!"

Procula was soft-spoken in her persistence. "It was in your power to release him."

Pilate pressed his palm against his forehead and clenched his jaw, suppressing his volatile temper.

"You know what I mean! I told them three times that I found no guilt in him. I tried to pass him off to Herod. I tried scourging him to pacify them. Nothing. They were dead set. I even gave the crowd a choice between releasing a convicted murderer or Jesus, and whom did they choose? The murderer!"

Looking up at his wife Pilate said with exasperation, "What did you expect me to do?"

"I expect you not to condemn the righteous. Aren't you supposed to administer justice from Rome's tribunal?"

"No! *I'm* supposed to make sure that Judea poses no problems for Tiberius!"

"Even if that means ignoring the truth?"

"Truth," Pilate scoffed. "Whose truth, Procula? The Sanhedrin's? Tiberius'? Your dream's? The Galilean's? Truth is what got the Galilean killed. I gave him every chance to refute the accusations, but you know what he said to me? 'For this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth.' And you know what his truth was? That he was a king of some kingdom outside of this world. Well, apparently the Sanhedrin seemed to think that his truth was a dangerous lie."

"Do you think he was dangerous?"

Pilate sighed and sipped his wine. "I don't know. He wasn't like the Zionist zealots. There was no diatribe against Rome. He hardly said anything. He didn't even seem angry. If he threatened anyone I think it was the Sanhedrin. I

know a set-up when I see one. A midnight trial, a demand for immediate crucifixion. This wasn't about their holy law. It was about power. Caiaphas was getting rid of a problem."

"Were you getting rid of a problem," asked Procula?

Pilate's eyes flashed with anger. "Believe me, Procula, I have bigger problems than Jesus to worry about. My problem is Caesar. That mob would have turned into a riot if I had released Jesus. Riots in Jerusalem always lead to some Jew getting killed and I can't risk any more Jewish blood on my hands right now without inviting Tiberius' inquiry. And then I had the chief priests suddenly feigning loyalty to Caesar and publicly questioning mine. If I had released him, can you imagine their glee at reporting to Tiberius that I was unwilling to deal with a rival to Caesar? When all was said and done, my choice was between Caesar and a delusional Galilean. That choice was obvious to me."

At that moment a servant stepped into the room. "What is it?" Pilate asked.

"Marcus Antonius is requesting to see you, sir."

"Marcus? This early in the morning? That can't be good. Send him in."

The young officer strode in.

"What is it, Marcus?"

"Uh. Well. Uh. The Galilean, sir. The one called Jesus, the Christ. He's disappeared."

Conclusion

Pilate turned to the crowd and asked the all-important question: "What, then, shall I do with the man called the Christ?"

May I rephrase the question and pose it to you today: "What, then, shall **you** do with the man called the Christ?"