**King of the Jews**

Mark 15:1-20

September 6, 2020

Read Mark 15:1-20

This is the Word of the LORD.

Prayer of Invocation

Today, we talk about Jesus’ appearance before Pilate. It shows how Jesus – in human terms – was railroaded to crucifixion. That said, it also is essential we note that Jesus knew exactly where he was headed and knew why he was headed there. As awful as was this process, it was known to Jesus, it was predicted by Jesus, and it was obediently endured by Jesus – for us. Before I jump into our verses today, I want to make sure you see the meaning of these events in the multiple layers involved:

**First, there is the Upper Story**; God’s plan of creation, redemption, grace, and reconciliation played out through the atoning sacrifice Jesus made through his obedient walk to the cross. There is a lot to unpack in that sentence, I know. Through the events unfolding in our verses, God was drawing us back to himself while we were yet sinners. We may wonder if this should have been necessary or if it was the best way to accomplish his purpose; however, the important part is that this *is* the way God chose. Instead of skeptically assessing whether we approve of God’s approach, we need to marvel at God’s willingness, desire, and commitment to draw us back.

**Second, there is the expression of God’s sovereignty within the Lower Story**. In our verses today, we see *how* the world rebelled against God. From a human perspective Jesus’ mission was a total failure. Rejected by the religious leaders of his own nation, abandoned by his friends, physically abused, and denied any real justice, Jesus endured the worst the world could inflict upon him – suffering and even death, death on a cross. He was humiliated in the most agonizing way possible. Standing before Pilate, he looked powerless.

And yet.

Everything that happened occurred according to God’s plan. Jesus took the abuse and violence against him and – as we all know because we are witnesses of the resurrection – he turned it all around. His resurrection from the dead was greater than all the humiliation and proved him victorious. Jesus’ complete trust in the Father before his death revealed the power of God over all creation, including death and everything the Lower Story could muster against him.

**Third, we need to see the brokenness of humanity and the oppressive miscarriage of justice within the Lower Story.** In our verses today Jesus was brought to Pilate for the purpose of having Jesus sentenced to death. It was not about justice. It was not about truth. It was about politics and power. Even Pilate recognized that there was no merit justifying a death sentence, but he ended up ordering it anyway. Jesus had offended the wrong people and had disappointed the crowds by not performing as they expected. The frenzy with which they sought his demise demonstrated how true justice often is missing and is not dependable in the Lower Story. We do not know the difference between good and evil as well as we think. The brokenness from the original sin continues to manifest consequences – then and today.

It is important we see the complexity of God’s hand at work in multiple layers. If ever there were circumstances that suggested that God was *not* in control, it was these. As we look at the world around us today, we may have that same feeling. We may wonder if God is absent, indifferent, or incapable of making things right. If you are ever confronted with that thought or jolted by its possibility, let me encourage you: have faith. That is where faith steps up to hold fast and persevere. “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Having faith does not mean you are free from pain, sufferi9ng, injustice, and death. It means you have the hope assured in the one who knows your frame and can carry you through it all.

Friends, proclaiming the gospel is about revealing God – revealing God in the way he chose to reveal himself. We read the gospels and we remember: Jesus actually endured this arrest. Jesus actually endured this trial. Jesus actually endured the torture. And, Jesus actually was crucified on a cross. Our job is to see the Upper Story meaning of these events, realize with wonder and thanksgiving how the Upper Story was worked out in the midst of the Lower Story, and then to recognize how we are to respond in our own Lower Story experiences.

With that as an introduction, let’s go back to the text.

 **The Eternal in the Immediate**

Lost in our translation is an amazing little piece of Mark’s thematic writing: to make the transition into this episode, Mark uses “Immediately as day was dawning” – another way of translating what comes to us as “As soon as it was morning.” The reason why I draw your attention to this is because the Mark has been – all along – talking about the in-breaking of the kingdom of heaven. It is immediate; that is, it is taking place in time. It is in the midst of the now. Second, it is dawning. It is starting. It is morning of the advent of the kingdom of God. Mark was symbolically signaling readers that what was taking place was doing so according to the plan and purpose of God.

The chief priests, elders, and scribes convened briefly to plan their case before Pilate. They bound Jesus, led him away, and put him in the Roman’s custody. Their primary charge was that Jesus claimed to be king. We know this because Pilate’s opening questions was, “Are you King of the Jews?” Claiming to be king was an offense against Caesar and was punishable by death.

Let me digress for a moment to give a little background on Pilate. In recent years there has been a trend of scholars seeking to provide a more sympathetic perspective on Pilate. They try to re-cast his ruthless pragmatism as less than culpable; that is, he should not be held responsible for his part in Jesus’ suffering and death. Nonsense.

Pilate’s contemporaries did not hold a similar sympathetic view of his character. “Philo of Alexandria described the governor of Judea as a ‘man of an inflexible, stubborn, and cruel disposition,’ adding that ‘briberies, insults, robberies, outrages, wanton injuries, executions without trial, and endless and supremely grievous cruelty’ marked his administration (*Embassy* 38 §§301–2).”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Pilate was the governor; the chief official of the Roman empire for the region. Jesus was brought before Pilate on the charge of sedition – treason – against the emperor. The picture we get from Mark’s description is that Pilate’s actions had more to do with his own amusement and crowd control than a substantive engagement with the power of God.

For example, the phrasing of Pilate’s first question, “Are you King of the Jews?” demonstrated the Roman perspective; he did not ask, “Are you King of Israel?” Specifically, Pilate did not consider Israel as a country, nation, or anything outside the scope of the power and control of Rome. He was asking if Jesus was trying to coalesce a rebellion against Rome.

Jesus’ response was really not evasive. He was making a point. The modern equivalent of Jesus’ response here is, “You said it” or “You have said so.” As we talked about last week, we need to hear this in a calm voice; not a sarcastic, not an insolent, not an agitated voice. Jesus’ point was that even the Romans – representing all nations – will confess that he is king.

Pilate took Jesus’ response as a non-answer; but he ultimately did not care about anything other than a direct admission. Pilate would have expected something different from an insurrectionist. He would have anticipated hostility or haughty self-righteous indignation or fear. He got none of those. Jesus’ response went over Pilate’s head because Jesus was affirming his eternal identity; not expressing an earthly ambition. Because there were no co-conspirators, no reports of violence or other armed supporters, I am sure it was at this point that Pilate recognized the jealousy of the chief priests.

You can almost see Pilate turning his gaze from Jesus back to the chief priests with a quizzical expression, “Why are you bothering me with this?”

 **The Brokenness of Exerting Worldly Power**

Seeing their case dissolving, the chief priests accused Jesus of many things. The timing is significant. Pilate did not get the answer they all expected – again, Jesus did not match the expectations of the chief priests. Thus, in order to get the result they sought, they looked to bolster their case with other accusations. This parallels the role of the crowd of false testifiers from the night before. Pilate was not a sympathetic judge, but even he was able to suss out the reality that the chief priests were making up stuff. There was a lot of urgency and energy behind their accusations, but there was not any substance to any of it. Pilate turned to Jesus and asked him, “What’s the deal? Why are you not defending yourself?” Pilate was amazed when Jesus – again, like the night before – did not waste any energy chasing falsehoods.

This is key for us to see in these days. Friends, we are surrounded and inundated with invitations to chase down and rebut falsehoods. Let me give you one simple illustration: fact checking has become a full-time occupation.

Let me say that again: our culture has made fact checking an occupation. It is a job. We have “fact-checkers” responding simultaneously during political speeches; so prevalent has rhetoric taken flight from reality that the need for fact-checking has become commonly accepted – although, now we have fact checkers checking the fact checkers. It has become almost cliché to make reference to George Orwell’s *1984*, but the reality is that we are spending more time debunking fake news, identifying falsehoods, and casting accusations of lying against one another, than we are spending pursuing truth. There is no foundation of trust – of our elected officials, of our institutions, or of each other – and, frankly, no expectation that people will be truthful. As a culture we are looking for angles to get over one another rather than spending time pursuing our “better angels” of building up.

*Pilate asked him again, “Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.”* ***5*** *But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.*

There are so many falsehoods and so many peddling falsehoods these days that we are tempted to pull out and ignore the world. Again, look at Jesus, whom we are called to follow as disciples. Jesus did not answer or debate or refute every falsehood; rather, he was present. He lived his life in truth. He lived his life in obedience to God’s call and command. He was being revolutionary in the larger, most important, facet of life: he was bringing in the kingdom of God and reconciling sinners to the holy God.

Friends, we are living in an extraordinary time where there are vast swaths of our population struggling with day-to-day realities of pandemic existence: lost jobs, uncertain future, health on the brink, and on and on. Add to that the anxiety generated by wildfires, hurricanes, and other kinds of disruptive natural events. It is overwhelming. That’s the truth. If the pandemic were to disappear today miraculously, it is still going to be a long time before we see full recovery; and, if what we have seen thus far is any indication, absent a miracle, we are going to be dealing with some form of restrictions for quite some time. It does not take a prophet to see that our continued internal uncivil war is making the situation more dire and distressing for many. Although we cannot snap our fingers and make everything better, we can look with eyes of compassion to see, “where did we see you, Lord, when you were hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick or in prison?” In other words, we can live into the truth of the kingdom of God without spending all our energy rebutting every falsehood out there.

Back to our narrative: Mark made it clear that Pilate did not believe that Jesus was an insurrectionist. Pilate’s question to the crowd – twice ironically and accurately proclaiming him as “King of the Jews” – functions more as a ridicule of the chief priests and scribes and the crowd itself. If Jesus had been an insurrectionist, if he *had* declared himself to be king of this region against Rome, Pilate would not have hesitated to order the crucifixion right then and there. Instead, Pilate’s approach and demeanor was to mock the leaders of the people and the people themselves.

For Pilate this was an opportunity to demonstrate his power to this subordinate culture. Jesus was clearly no threat. Thus, he became a pawn in Pilate’s performance; mocking, despising, and taunting those whom he governed.

The whole Barabbas dialogue was fascinating. There are no extra-biblical accounts of Pilate having such a custom, but it would not have been outside of his known character to use this as both a balm and a barb at the same time. He could mock the crowd and diffuse some of their anger at the same time.

Here, by God’s providence, Mark identified the choice as between Barabbas – whose name meant literally, son of his father – and Jesus – whose was the son of the Father and whose name means literally, Yahweh saves. Mark described Barabbas as more like the messiah the chief priests, scribes, elders and people anticipated. He had literally taken up arms against Rome. He had sought to re-establish the kingdom of Israel by overthrowing Rome. In contrast, Jesus had not made any threats or motions against Rome. He had lived according to the covenant that the chief priests, elders, scribes and people knew – and he fulfilled it. He was ushering in a kingdom; just not one they were anticipating or eager to receive.

For Mark, Pilate represented the world at large: mostly disinterested, mildly engaged, and more focused on how his decision would impact his day today. Pilate was in Jerusalem to keep the peace – no more, no less. For Pilate, this Jesus kerfuffle was a sidebar; at worst, a headache. Mark portrayed Pilate as toying with the crowd until such time as it was expedient to simply do what they asked: go ahead and kill this guy, it makes no difference to me. He did not do anything, but if you want to be savages, it’s no skin off my nose.

It was a barb and a balm. Ironically – or tragically – Pilate’s objectivity resulted in Barabbas – an actual insurrectionist – being released into the general public while Jesus, who was innocent, was condemned to die. Most of all, it showed how Pilate; the chief priests, elders, and scribes; and the crowd all shared a lack of regard for life.

 **The Depth of God’s Love**

That is where our Old Testament passage fits in. Contrasted to the disinterest, indifference, and callous disregard for life manifest by the world lined up against Jesus; in Genesis 22 we get a fore-shadowing of God’s passionate commitment *for* the life of his children. Abraham was ready to sacrifice Isaac – this long-promised heir, this one and only beloved son – Abraham was ready to sacrifice Isaac consistent with the disregard for life of the religions and cultures around that practiced child sacrifice. Instead, God stepped in, showed he was different, and provided the substitute. (Genesis 22 is an incredibly thick passage, but I want you to see where and how God has consistently acted differently than the world and in favor of redeeming and restoring life for his children.)

“By myself I have sworn, says the LORD: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. …And by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.”

**Communion**

Here, there was no substitute. There was no alternative. Here was the offspring of Abraham by whom all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves. Here was the one and only beloved son offered as an atoning sacrifice for sin. Friends, we know this is the case because Jesus told us it is the case. It is the promise and the hope we proclaim as we gather around this table. Here is my body broken for you. Here is my blood, shed for you.

As we look at this confrontation of ruler versus ruler – Pilate versus Jesus – we see the startling contrast between following the power of the world versus trusting in the power of God. We are faced with that choice every day. On the face of it, it would seem that Pilate was strong and Jesus was weak. So often we look out and it seems like the world is strong and God is weak. However, take note: whether wittingly or unwittingly, everyone will declare that Jesus is king of the Jews. Every knee will bow, every tongue will confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Choose this day whom you will serve. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.

Amen.

Invitation to the table

Questions:

1. What powers do you see competing for authority in your life today? Who sets the agenda for your attention and energy?
2. As we have journeyed through the gospel of Mark, has your understanding of Jesus changed in any way? Has your relationship been any different? How would you describe the significance, meaning, and importance of Jesus to someone who is not a Christian?
3. What action steps could you take this week to exercise your calling as a disciple? For whom are you praying – either for conviction to receive Jesus as Lord and Savior – or – for encouragement that their walk would be renewed and strengthened?
1. Craig A. Evans, Word Biblical Commentary, *Mark*, volume 34B, p. 477. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)