

Midweek 6
Hands of Self-Preservation (Pilate)
Sermon Text: Matthew 27:15-26

Let's begin by going ahead in time several weeks after the events related in our sermon text. Several weeks after Good Friday, after Jesus' death and resurrection, after his ascension into heaven, and after Pentecost, the apostle Peter came to the temple in Jerusalem and preached a sermon to the crowd. In his sermon Peter said these words: **"The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go"** (Ac 3:13).

It wasn't the main theme or even a major point of Peter's sermon that day, but tonight these words make us stop and take notice. Peter and John were on their way to the temple to pray when they were stopped by a man who had been lame from birth. He was looking for money, but Peter gave him something much better. In the name of Jesus, he commanded the man to walk. And when the lame man got up to his feet, he did more than just walk. He couldn't stop running and jumping and praising God.

All this commotion got people's attention, and a crowd came together outside the temple in Solomon's Colonnade. Peter addressed them, and as he spoke, it didn't take long for him to start accusing them. He said: "You are guilty of killing the one who made this miracle possible. You disowned Jesus. You abandoned Jesus. You handed Jesus over to Pilate to be crucified, **though he had decided to let him go**" (Ac 3:13). Were you aware of that? Are you surprised, even shocked, that Peter would say something like that? You didn't hear wrong. Peter's testimony could not be clearer. Pilate had decided in his mind to release Jesus.

If you are familiar with the events surrounding Jesus' Passion, then you are familiar with Pontius Pilate. We will soon see that Pilate did many different things on Good Friday, but there is one thing he didn't do. He didn't do what he had decided to do. Instead of letting Jesus go, he let the enemies of Jesus have their way. And Pilate will forever be remembered as the man who sentenced the author of life to death.

So what happened? What made Pilate change his mind? Where did he go wrong, and what can we learn from his tragic story so that we don't go down the same path? If you are looking for some new insights, if you are hoping that I will be sharing the results of my expert psychological analysis, I am sorry to disappoint you. I can only guess what Pilate was thinking. Only God knows what was in his heart.

You and I can't read minds, but we can read and review and learn from the Bible's Spirit-inspired words. All four gospels share details about the interaction between the King of the Jews and the governor of Judea, but only Matthew mentions something Pilate did before he handed Jesus over to be crucified. To protect his position, to proclaim his innocence, Pilate washed his . . .

Hands of Self-Preservation

What is so sad is that it didn't have to end this way. In fact, Pilate had been given a long list of reasons to release Jesus. When Pilate first met him, Jesus said nothing. The chief priest and elders were accusing him of anything and everything, but Jesus said nothing. He didn't protest

his innocence. He didn't plead for mercy. He didn't say a word in his own defense, and Pilate was amazed.

Jesus did open up when the two men were alone, and the things he said made an even deeper impression on Pilate. **"My kingdom is not of this world. . . . the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. . . . you would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above"** (Jn 18:36,37; 19:11). No one spoke to the Roman governor like that. Come to think of it, no normal person ever spoke like that. And Pilate was beginning to realize that this man was no ordinary human being.

If Pilate found those statements a bit unsettling, imagine how he felt when he received that message from his wife. She couldn't wait for him to come home. She didn't need anyone to interpret her dream because the meaning was clear. Don't get involved with that man. Don't have anything to do with that righteous man (if he did, he would regret it).

Pilate was no dummy. Pilate didn't get to his position by being naïve and easy to manipulate. He could see what the Jewish leaders were trying to do. He knew that they were jealous of what Jesus had become. And Pilate was convinced (we know it because he said it more than once) that Jesus was no criminal.

After weighing all the testimony, after examining all the evidence, it should have been an open-and-shut case. Pilate should have set Jesus free and sent the Jewish leaders home. But he didn't. Pilate didn't want to touch this political hot potato, so he tried to pass the buck. First, he told the chief priests to judge Jesus according to their own law. That didn't work. Then he sent Jesus to Herod, hoping that a Jewish court would handle the case. That didn't work either.

Pilate was running out of options, at least any options that would allow him to protect the innocent and protect his position at the same time. His last and best chance was a Passover custom to release a prisoner chosen by the people. To make the choice obvious, Pilate proposed two men: Jesus and a notorious prisoner named Barabbas. Barabbas was a criminal, guilty of rebellion and murder. He was so bad that he would make anyone else look good. At least that's what Pilate was hoping. But Pilate's plan backfired when the chief priests and elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas' release.

Pilate must have been stunned as he watched his foolproof plan fall apart. Pilate must have been at a loss for words when these desperate words came out of his mouth, **"What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?"** (v. 22). The crowds immediately called for his crucifixion. And when Pilate tried to reason with them, it was too late. They kept shouting, **"Crucify him!"** (v. 23). Crucify him! Crucify him! Crucify him!

Pilate was responsible for keeping the peace, but his attempts to free Jesus had started a riot. He needed to do something. He needed to decide: "Do I do what I know is right or do I do what I think is best for me?" In the end, Pilate chose himself over Jesus. He sentenced the world's only truly innocent man to die, while maintaining his own supposed innocence in the process. **"He took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. 'I am innocent of this man's blood,' he said. 'It is your responsibility!'"** (v. 24).

Pilate was the law of the land. Pilate was the only person who could authorize Jesus' execution. In spite of his claims to the contrary, Pilate was responsible, and history has held him responsible. Two thousand years later our creeds still confess that Jesus "suffered and was

crucified under Pontius Pilate.” And no amount of water or ritual washings will ever make those guilty hands clean.

It was bad enough that Pilate condemned an innocent man. What made his actions even worse was that he condemned the sinless Son of God. It was bad enough that Pilate the judge blatantly disregarded justice. What made his actions even worse was that he was too much of a coward to admit his own cowardice. It doesn’t get any worse than that, or does it?

Pilate wasn’t a Christian. He was a pagan, and his actions prove that protecting his power and authority was more important to him than anything else. In the final analysis, an unbeliever acted like an unbeliever. We shouldn’t be surprised by that. In fact, we should probably expect that. What is surprising (and much more troubling) is when people who know better, people who know Jesus, people who call themselves Christians, follow Pilate’s example.

In the safety of this sanctuary, surrounded by the saints, it is so easy to sing God’s praises, but out there it’s a different story. When I’m with my coworkers or my classmates, when I get together with a group of my friends, not all of them are Christians. And some of them can be pretty outspoken. They know what I believe. They aren’t afraid to question what I believe. Sometimes they even make fun of me for what I believe.

When you and I find ourselves in those situations, we know we should say something. But how often have we said nothing? And after the opportunity has passed, when we have time to think about it, when we are feeling guilty about it, we might try to come up with excuses for our silence: “It wasn’t the right time . . . I didn’t want to get into an argument . . . I don’t want to lose my friends . . . I don’t want to lose my job.”

On the Last Day, Pontius Pilate will have to answer for choosing himself over Jesus, but we need to remember that he didn’t believe in Jesus. I suppose you could say that was his excuse. We are Christians. We claim to be followers of Jesus. So what’s our excuse? We have no excuse. And when Jesus declares, **“Whoever denies me before others, I will also deny before my Father who is in heaven”** (Mt 10:33 EHV), we have to shudder when we realize that those condemning (or heaven’s-gates-slamming) words are aimed at us.

Pilate didn’t do what he could have (and should have) done on Good Friday, but he wasn’t the only person on the Stone Pavement who was in a position to take action. Jesus could have come to his own defense. Jesus could have called down legions of angels to destroy his enemies. Jesus possessed the divine power to do everything Pilate failed to do and more, but he chose not to use it.

It is good and right for Christians to praise our Savior God for everything he has done to save us, but this evening let’s refocus those praises just a bit. Let’s remember everything Jesus didn’t do and everything he allowed others to do to him to save us. He allowed his enemies to arrest him. Praise God! He allowed the soldiers to mistreat him and humiliate him. Praise God! He allowed a crooked court to convict him and a weak judge to wash his hands of him. Praise God! He allowed himself to be numbered among the transgressors to fulfill prophecy and to pay for the world’s sins. Praise God! Jesus allowed his own life to be taken from him so that we might live in his presence forever. Praise God!

Tonight we have been talking about all the things Pontius Pilate didn’t do, but he did do one thing on Good Friday that could be considered positive. When Jesus was crucified, Pilate had a

notice fastened to the top of his cross that read “**THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS**” (Mt 27:37). We don’t know exactly what Pilate meant by that or if there was a part of Pilate that wanted to believe that, but it doesn’t matter because you and I do believe. We believe that Jesus is a King. We believe that Jesus is our King.

Our King’s rule extends all around the world, and yet his kingdom is not of this world. His rule is primarily spiritual. He claimed us to be his own through the washing of rebirth. He rules in our hearts through the faith he created on the day of our baptism. And the gracious way Jesus loves us and leads us moves us. As his humble, grateful subjects, we want to follow him. We eagerly seek out opportunities to serve him. And as we pray for his kingdom to come and his will to be done on earth, we look forward to the day when we will reign with him in heaven. Amen.