

What To Do With Jesus  
Palm Sunday  
April 17, 2011  
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church  
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: Matthew 27:11-23

For each the last five weeks, we have taken this time in worship to consider one of the great Christian traditions that trace to the ways and habits and disciplines of Jesus Christ. We have been walking toward the cross that now is just ahead. But we have been making that walk by deepening our understanding of how Jesus has lived on, in a sense, in Christian traditions that range from social justice to evangelicalism to the life of prayer.

But here we are, with that cross in sight. This week we remember the passion of Christ, those last days when Jesus endured the worst that humanity could do. Holy Week brings both the highest highs and the lowest lows of the Christian life. We are called this week to dwell in all of it, the agony and the ecstasy, the solitude of Gethsemene and Golgotha, the quiet comfort of a last meal with close friends and the dark night of the church's soul after Christ's tomb was closed and sealed.

With all that before us, I want this morning to leave the last of the series of sermons on the great Christian traditions for another day. The last is the incarnational tradition. Appropriately, Veronica will help us explore it this Thursday night when we take communion and remember the full arc of the passion in our Tenebrae service.

For today, then, let us wave our palms, perhaps with mixed feelings, lifting our hearts to the promise of God's victory in Christ but knowing in our heads what the people did to Jesus before that victory was won. Holy Week causes us to dwell in dichotomy.

There seem to be two of everything, causing us to choose. Last year on Palm Sunday, we considered the fact that there were probably two parades that day in Jerusalem. As Jesus rode in on the colt on one side of town, the Roman army had its own procession on the other side of town, a show of strength to keep the people in line during Passover. Later, the week brought two trials, one by the Romans and the other by religious

leaders. At one of those trials, there were two Jesuses. All of these choices come to a head in two questions posed by the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate:

Which Jesus should be chosen?

And, once that choice is made, what is to be done with the Jesus that remains?

\* \* \*

First, a bit of context. In Matthew's account, at Jesus' first trial in front of the Jewish high priest Caiaphas, he is found guilty of blasphemy. The chief priests and elders then hand Jesus over to the Romans to execute the penalty by killing Jesus. The priests and elders knew what they wanted to happen to Jesus but they didn't want to be the ones who did it. So they pass the buck to the government.

But things don't go quite as they planned with Pilate. You don't get to be Pilate unless you are a shrewd government operative and a savvy politician. With the city population bulging because of Passover, he knows he doesn't want to allow any kind of ruckus. It would be bad public relations. Also, Pilate seems terribly conflicted personally about this man Jesus and whether he is, in fact, guilty of what the priests and elders say. He sees a way of pushing the decision off his desk and into the hands of the people, which brings us all to the first of our two critical questions: Which Jesus should he give over to the people? For the people, the question was: Which Jesus did they want?

It seems there was another prisoner named Barabbas already in custody. In Matthew's gospel Barabbas has a first name. He is called Jesus Barabbas, which only heightens the stakes of the decision the people at the trial must make. Do they want the unknown Jesus Barabbas to be released so that the other Jesus goes on to his execution? Do they really, really want to kill the other Jesus?

The implications of the choice isn't lost on Pilate. Listen to his careful choice of words when he asks the question:

"Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is *called* the Messiah?"

For us, the question cuts in a different direction. Which do we choose? Which Jesus do we say we will follow? Which do we say we want as our guide, our inspiration, our Lord?

If we pick Jesus Barabbas, that doesn't change our life much. He represents the safe way out. A notorious criminal gets off for all the wrong reasons. That's the way of the world, all right.

On the other hand, if we choose Jesus who *calls* himself the messiah, well, that gets very messy very fast. That puts us in a situation that, at the very least, is awkward. What if he IS the messiah, even if he doesn't look or act or say the things we would expect from the messiah?

Remember all that stuff this Jesus said in that Sermon on the Mount? It would change everything! Hmmm. This IS tricky.

And that's not all. If we pick Jesus of Nazareth, well, then they might come for us next. Earlier in Matthew, if we've been following the story, we know Jesus told his disciples that if they followed him, they could expect to be "delivered ... up to councils ... and .... dragged before governors and kings" for Christ's sake, "to bear testimony before them" and others (10:17-18). Jesus said persecution would first come to him but, next, to "members of his household" (10:24-25).

Let's slow down and ask ourselves here, what would Pilate do?

\* \* \*

As with any shrewd operator, he uses the tried and true tool of all of those who want no accountability for making a decision. He answers the question with another question.

The crowd at the trial, the people, have told Pilate to release Jesus Barabbas. But that still leaves him with a dilemma. What to do with Jesus?

And, there, is our second question on this Palm Sunday. What do we do with Jesus? As for Pilate, he's not about to make an executive decision here. If things go badly and word gets back to Rome, well, the emperor would be none too happy.

But the question of what to do with Jesus isn't one that comes to rest just on Pilate. It rests on all of us.

Personally, I am reminded at least once a week that I suffer from a serious and life-altering condition. I am a guy. So my first instinct is to handle things like guys do. We *act*. We *do*. So I can relate to Pilate in that sense. Something must be done with Jesus. We guys want the ball. In our faith, we tend to want to act, to do. Don't tell us that doing nothing is the answer. Don't tell us to slow down. Don't tell us to get our emotions involved when our head is all we really need.

What to do with Jesus?

At the trial that day, we see two ways to go. Pilate, such a smooth guy, does something. But, given that he is Pilate, it's as close to doing nothing as it gets. He washes his hands of the matter. "That's it," he says. "That is my action. That's what I'm doing. I'm out."

That's certainly one way to go.

As for the people at the trial, they are more than eager themselves to act. And they aren't about to slow down and feel, or even think. In their zeal, after saying "Let him be crucified," (27:22) they add, "(and) His blood be upon us and our children" (27:25)

So, friends, what do we do with Jesus? Or, said with slightly different emphasis, what *do* we do with Jesus?

In all that he said and did, in all the Christian disciplines we've been talking about for the last five weeks, Jesus the Christ made it pretty clear how we can choose him and his ways ... or not. In our lives, our relationships, our words and our actions. How we spend our money. How we treat people who are different or with whom we disagree. How we share our abundance when we have it. How we love God by working for justice. How we walk with the wounded, the suffering, the dying. How we share the news of God's extravagant love with others. How we draw near to God early and often and use prayer to frame our lives. We answer the question of what to do with Jesus in how we answer all of those questions and so many more.

What to do with Jesus. That's a question worth keeping close this week. As you rise in the morning and rest at night, as you work, as you come and as you go. We all can keep that question in our hearts as the days of the passion proceed to the cross and the tomb.

If we tell ourselves that the events of the passion, including the drama of Jesus' trial before Pilate, are to be bound by time, dismissed as a unique circumstance experienced by people and a place that has nothing to do with us, we should think again. The questions the actors ask in that scene could hardly be more relevant, more real, more life-changing for us.

As Veronica Miles of Wake Forest University says about today's lesson:

“(T)hose who orchestrated Jesus' death were so preoccupied with power and fearful of change that they missed the possibility of a world in which love and compassion could become a reality.”<sup>1</sup>

Preoccupied with power. Feaful of change. Missing a world where love and compassion could be reality.

As a prophet and teacher from Nazareth once said, “let those who have ears hear.”

Amen

---

<sup>1</sup> Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2., p. 180