

During Lent we have been discussing Adam Hamilton's book *24 Hours That Changed the World*. So far, we have discussed the Last Supper, the betrayal, denial and desertion by the disciples, Jesus' prayer and arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, and His unlawful trial before the Sanhedrin. This morning, let's pick-up our journey through these final 24 hours in the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of Mark where Jesus is taken before Pontius Pilate for sentencing. I will be reading the first fifteen verses of Chapter 15.

Read Mark 15:1-15

As we discussed last Sunday, after Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane He was taken to the home of the High Priest for interrogation before the Sanhedrin. Now this trial was illegal for several reasons. First, the Sanhedrin could meet only in the daytime, never at night as they did that night. And also, they could only meet in the Temple. Long before this night, they had decided that Jesus was a threat to their way of life and that He must be killed. Out here in the West, we would call this a "lynch mob."

Now while the Sanhedrin was the supreme court of the Jews, and had complete oversight of all religious and theological matters of the Jewish people, they did not have the authority to execute anyone. Only the Roman government could make decisions on capital punishment. So, the Sanhedrin decided to take Jesus to Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor. This act by itself shows how desperate they were to get rid of Jesus. It was very unusual for the Jewish ruling council to bring an individual, especially a fellow Jew, before the Roman Governor for execution. They hated the Romans but here they were working with them to carry out their evil plan. The Sanhedrin realized that while they found Jesus guilty of blasphemy, claiming to be God, this charge would carry no weight with Pilate. So, they drummed up the charge that Jesus claimed to be a king and might lead an insurrection against the Roman Empire as other Jews had tried in the past.

The Gospel of John tells us that the place where Jesus was taken and tried was called the Stone Pavement. Did John include this tidbit of information to draw a connection to Psalm 118 where it states: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." Here at the Stone Pavement, the Jewish religious leaders and people rejected the "Stone" that will become the foundation for the Christian faith. Also remember that before the day is over, Jesus will be buried in a tomb with a large round stone placed at the entrance, which the religious leaders must have hoped would keep Him there.

When Jesus is brought before Pilate, Pilate begins his interrogation by asking: "Are you king of the Jews?" In other words, is what the religious leaders claim true? Now this is an interesting question. By asking it this way, Pilate is poking fun at the Jewish religious leaders; they would

never admit that Jesus was their king. Yet, He is the true King, but they didn't recognize it. Hopefully, we do!

Jesus replied: "If you say so." And then as He did at the trial before the Sanhedrin, Jesus remained silent and did not defend Himself. Pilate could not understand this. He knew that the Jewish leaders had drummed up these false charges out of fear and jealousy. He knew that they did not bring Jesus to him out of concern for the security of the Roman Empire. Jesus was becoming more popular than them, and their fear and insecurity drove their hatred. But if the charges were false, why wasn't Jesus defending Himself? Did He want to die?

The answer is yes; this was God's plan of salvation. This is the very reason that Jesus had come to live among us and to Jerusalem on this particular Passover. Jesus knew what was going to happen when He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Father, if possible, remove this cup of suffering from me; yet not what I want, but what you want." In the garden, Jesus had accepted His fate and now He stood in silence before the one man who could make it happen.

Now some see Jesus' silence as fulfillment of the prophesy of the "suffering servant" in Isaiah 53: "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter; and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth." When you think of Jesus standing silently before Pilate and His accusers, how do you picture Him? What was the expression on His face as He heard the charges? I picture dignity; confidence; no fear; in control and trusting that God would watch over Him. As I noted last Sunday, as you review the events of Holy Week, you quickly realize that no matter how bad things appeared on the surface, Jesus was in complete control of everything throughout this ordeal. He fulfilled the obedience of the Servant in Isaiah 50:7 – "He set His face like a flint."

Jesus was offering Himself as a sacrificial lamb for the sins of the world. This was no accident or mistake; it did not catch Jesus by surprise; He was not a victim. He chose to go to Jerusalem, anticipating and even predicting to His disciples His death. As Christians, we believe that it was through Jesus' death on the cross that God saved the world; that He gave us an opportunity for redemption. Going back to the "suffering servant" in Isaiah 53, you can see the fulfillment of the prophesy: "It was certainly our sickness that he carried, and our suffering that he bore, but we thought him afflicted, struck down by God and tormented. He was pierced because of our rebellions and crushed because of our crimes. He bore the punishment that made us whole; by his wounds we are healed."

At the Last Supper, Jesus said: "Take eat, this is my body." And then He said: "This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." Jesus understood that His death would bring about our salvation; that He was paying the price for our sins. Now the theological word for this is "Atonement," which basically describes how we can

be reconciled to God through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. Atonement refers to the forgiving and pardoning of sin in general and original sin in particular through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, enabling the reconciliation between God and His creation. Jesus suffered and died in our place. He bore the punishment that all of us deserve for our sins and in doing so now offers grace and pardon for each of us who will believe and accept it.

By the time Pilate had finished his initial examination of Jesus, he had learned that the kingdom Jesus sought to establish was not of this world. Jesus was not interested in an earthly kingdom, but instead the reign of God within the hearts and lives of God's people. Perhaps Pilate had heard that Jesus taught His followers to love their enemies, to turn the other cheek. If Pilate learned nothing else from his examination of Jesus, it was that the only revolt Jesus led was against the religious authorities and that was why they were demanding Jesus' death. Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent, and he tried over and over again to release Him.

Now Pilate had a practice of releasing one prisoner chosen by the people every year at Passover. It was timed to coincide with the Jews' celebration of their release from bondage in Egypt. His objective was to maintain peace in Jerusalem. The choice this year was between two men – a notorious criminal, a murderer and thug named Barabbas who had sought to lead a revolt against Rome, and Jesus of Nazareth who multitudes had welcomed with open arms into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Both had been charged with leading insurrections and wishing to be king of the Jews.

Pilate turned to the people and said: "Which of these two do you want me to release to you?" Would it be Barabbas, who had robbed and murdered, or Jesus, who had done nothing wrong – the Jesus who loved lost people, taught them about the kingdom of God, healed the sick, and blessed many? Pilate apparently thought that the crowd would choose Jesus and that would get him out of a difficult situation. However, incited by the religious leaders, they instead insisted that Barabbas be released. Here is an interesting point; did you know that Barabbas would be the first sinner for whom Jesus died?

Remember the doctrine of Atonement; here Jesus takes the place of a condemned murderer on the cross. In the same way, we, like Barabbas, have been spared, with Jesus suffering the punishment that we justly deserve. Every one of us has sinned, and in our sin we have been alienated from God. But like a parent, God loves us and wants to re-establish the broken relationship between us. So, He sent His Son Jesus to become one of us and die for the sins of the entire world. Jesus paid a price He did not owe, giving us a gift of grace that we do not deserve. This is what we see in Barabbas walking away free from the prison and Jesus hanging on a cross.

Led by the religious leaders, the crowd insisted on the release of a known criminal, one who had led a revolt against the Romans. Then Pilate asked them: "What do you want me to do with the one you call king of the Jews?" Then the mob shouted back: "Crucify Him, crucify Him!" Did you hear that, crucify your own king? Why? On Palm Sunday these same people went out to see Jesus ride into Jerusalem on a donkey; they cut palm branches and waved them shouting: "Hosanna, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." What changed the shouts from "Hosanna" to "Crucify Him" in just a few days?

To understand this, we need to review Jewish history. A similar event had happened 190 years earlier, when another government oppressed the Jewish people. The Greeks had gained control of Judah and set about turning it into a Greek state, forcing the adoption of the Greek culture and practices. In an attempt to eliminate the Jewish religion, they banned all Jewish practices, Sabbaths, and feasts; they burned the Torah; outlawed circumcision; and set up an altar to Zeus in the Jewish Temple and even slaughtered pigs on the altar. You may remember that pigs were considered unclean by the Jewish people.

Then, in 165 B.C., the Maccabees led a revolt and forced the Greeks out of Jerusalem and the Holy Land. They cleansed the Temple. Today, Jews mark this event by the celebration of Hanukkah. When Simon Maccabee returned to Jerusalem, he was hailed as a great deliverer; and the people waved palm branches as a sign of victory. "You have freed us from the Greeks," the people shouted.

So, when the Jewish people waved the palm branches as Jesus rode down from the Mount of Olives on Palm Sunday, they were saying: "Jesus, be our deliverer. Save us from the Romans as Simon saved our ancestors from the Greeks." They misunderstood who the Messiah was to be; they assumed that He would be a warrior king and restore the Jewish nation to the past glory of King David and King Solomon. However, Jesus came teaching love and forgiveness instead of war and hatred; this was not what the crowd wanted to hear. For them, the only way for freedom was by the sword. But God had a different plan; the freedom that He offers does not come by the power of the sword, but by the power of the cross.

On that Friday morning the crowd made their choice: Barabbas. They asked Pilate to free a notorious criminal who had demonstrated his willingness to take up arms against the Romans. Since that day over two thousand years ago, we as human beings have been faced again and again with the choice between violence and love. Unfortunately, today as we see on TV and other news outlets, we have found it easier to resort to violence than to love our enemies.

Like the crowd on the Stone Pavement that Friday morning, we have a choice. We can shout and resort to acts of violence or we can stand with Jesus and try to love our neighbors. Unfortunately, today, many people have chosen to follow the way of Barabbas. Either they

have never been taught the values of the Sermon on the Mount or they have forgotten. Now we cannot change the world overnight, but we can change how we act and those around us by following Jesus' command to love our neighbors as ourselves.

One of our hymns states: "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me." Let there be love, and let it begin with each one of us. Remember what Jesus said and we sang earlier, they will know we are His disciples by our love for one another. During this season of Lent spread the love of Jesus Christ wherever you go, and see the difference it will make in your life and those around you. Amen