

March 18, 2018  
Fifth Sunday in Lent  
“Jesus and Barabbas”

This sermon is based on *24 Hours That Changed the World* by Adam Hamilton. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009. See chapter 4.

I will only be brushing the surface of this meaningful book. I heartily recommend it for anyone who seeks a better understanding of Jesus’ last day and all the significance it holds for Christians and the world.

Mark 15: 1-15, *Common English Bible*

At daybreak, the chief priests—with the elders, legal experts, and the whole Sanhedrin—formed a plan. They bound Jesus, led him away, and turned him over to Pilate. Pilate questioned him, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

Jesus replied, “That’s what you say.” The chief priests were accusing him of many things.

Pilate asked him again, “Aren’t you going to answer? What about all these accusations?” But Jesus gave no more answers, so that Pilate marveled.

During the festival, Pilate released one prisoner to them, whomever they requested. A man named Barabbas was locked up with the rebels who had committed murder during an uprising. The crowd pushed forward and asked Pilate to release someone, as he regularly did. Pilate answered them, “Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?” He knew that the chief priests had handed him over because of jealousy. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas to them instead. Pilate replied, “Then what do you want me to do with the one you call king of the Jews?”

They shouted back, “Crucify him!”

Pilate said to them, “Why? What wrong has he done?”

They shouted even louder, “Crucify him!”

Pilate wanted to satisfy the crowd, so he released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus whipped, then handed him over to be crucified.

Two weeks ago, we left Jesus standing before the Sanhedrin, the council of Jewish elders and scholars. They condemned him for blasphemy, and then beat and spit on him. As the sun rose, Jesus was bound again and led to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. The Sanhedrin had power over the Temple and religious life, but it was the Roman government that held political power, including the power to execute criminals. The Sanhedrin wanted Jesus destroyed, but they had to depend on Pilate to carry it out. They counted on the fact that a self-proclaimed “King of the Jews” would make Rome nervous, fearing he would start an insurrection.

So Jesus was taken to Antonia Fortress, the seat of Pilate’s power in the region. A crowd would have followed, including the Sanhedrin, other interested Jews, Jesus’ mother, his disciple John, and perhaps Peter. The gospel of John (19: 13) adds the detail that Jesus was tried at the place called the Stone Pavement. Is this meant to be a subtle irony? Jesus had quoted Psalm 118: 22 in reference to the opposition to his teaching, saying, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” (Matthew 21: 42) And now, indeed, “the stone” was being rejected on the Stone Pavement. And further, Jesus was about to be buried in a stone tomb blocked by another stone.

The Antonia Fortress was Pilate’s home, and also a military fort right in the center of town. It was next door to the Temple, which must have been a major irritant to the Jews. This morning, though, the Sanhedrin may have found it fortunate that they could get there quickly. It’s hard to imagine they didn’t know that Jesus had no intention of leading an armed insurrection against the Romans. But they had little to lose by insisting Pilate see Jesus. Either Jesus would have to deny he was the Messiah, or Pilate would be forced to execute him. Whichever way it fell, the Sanhedrin benefitted.

Pilate was surprised by Jesus’ silence—he must have been all too familiar with people pleading for their lives. And he knew the Sanhedrin was just acting out of fear that Jesus might become more powerful than them. What can we make of his silence? It probably points to his determination to die. He couldn’t defend himself, because that wasn’t part of God’s plan for him. He had no interest in trying to escape death—at this point, it was the goal of his ministry.

It was tradition that during the festival of the Passover, Pilate would release one prisoner to the Jews. Jesus seems the natural choice, since he had done nothing wrong, so Pilate offers to release Jesus or Barabbas.

Barabbas’ full name was Jesus Barabbas. Jesus means “Savior,” and Barabbas means “son of the Father.” So the choice between Jesus and Jesus Barabbas involves two Messiah figures. Barabbas was very different than Jesus, though. He was trying to lead an armed revolt against the Romans. He had apparently murdered Roman agents and maybe even Roman citizens. He was a thief, who used his stolen cash to fund the uprising. So, Barabbas’ plan was to lead through violence, depose the Romans, get into the treasury and give the people back their taxes, promote the wealth and prosperity of the Jews, and restore the glory of a Hebrew Jerusalem and kingdom.

But who did the people think Jesus was? When he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey just a few days previously, they thought that Jesus was there to do the same thing as Barabbas. What they were seeking in Jesus was a messiah, an “anointed one” to be a victorious king who would lead them in throwing off the oppression of the Romans. We can see this in the history of the time. Between Jesus’ birth and the Romans’ destruction of the Temple in the year 70 AD, there were at least 8 such people, and there may have been as many as thirteen. Each of these individuals either claimed to be a messiah or were hailed as one by others. A few were sincere about serving God, but others were robbers and killers. Some of them gathered followers, maybe just a few, but one man got together a fighting force of 6000. All of them tried to overthrow the Romans by force. And all of them ended up being executed.

So the people thought Jesus was another of the type. They probably had especially high hopes for him because of the rumors about all the miracles he had done; but, he turned into a huge disappointment. He refused to use a sword. He said nothing about defeating the Romans. He talked about loving your enemies and praying for those who persecuted you. He named as blessed those who were meek, who suffered, who acted as peacemakers. He told his followers that if a Roman soldier told you to carry a burden one mile, you should carry it two miles. If a Roman struck you on the cheek, you should give him the other cheek.

This wasn’t what Jews were hoping for. Jesus went against most of what they believed in. He had a countercultural message, saying in effect:

“It is not by the power of the sword but by the power of the cross that you will be free. It’s not going to be by raising up an army to fight the Romans. Rather, it will be by demonstrating sacrificial love.”  
Hamilton, p. 71-72

Jesus knew that the Hebrews had no chance militarily against the mighty Roman Empire. Their victory would come by the power of love. He knew that Roman hearts would be changed by God lived out in love in the lives of the people. After his death and resurrection, Christianity began to spread among the lowest in society. The story of love and sacrifice even started to appeal to some in the higher classes. And in 313 AD, the Roman Empire officially became Christian—defeated not by a sword, but by the cross.

But on that Friday in Jerusalem, the people had a choice between a man who said he could give them back their money, land and dignity, and Jesus, who said to love your enemy. Is it any wonder they chose Barabbas?

So Jesus offered himself, like a sacrificial lamb, to die on a cross. Some saw this as a revolutionary getting what he deserved. Others saw it as a tragedy of Roman occupation. Even others saw it as the disappointing defeat of one they thought was the messiah.

But Christians began to look at it differently. They came to believe that Jesus’ death had meaning for our salvation. They looked to the prophecies of Isaiah, and reinterpreted them in the light of Jesus’ sacrifice:

Surely he took up our pain  
 and bore our suffering,  
 yet we considered him punished by God,  
 stricken by him, and afflicted.  
 But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
 he was crushed for our iniquities;  
 the punishment that brought us peace was on him,  
 and by his wounds we are healed.

Isaiah 53: 4-5, *New International Version*

At his last meal with his disciples, Jesus picked up the bread and said, "Take and eat; this is my body." (Matthew 26: 26) Then he took a cup and told them, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matthew 26: 27-28) From this we understand that Jesus was clear that his death would lead to our salvation.

This idea, that Jesus died for our salvation, is called atonement. Theologians have wrestled for centuries with exactly what this means and how it comes about. They have come up with many theories, none of them perfect, but most of them enlightening. One concept of atonement is that Jesus died in place of humanity. We all deserve punishment for our sins, and Jesus took that punishment for us, earning forgiveness for us. This is called the substitutionary theory of atonement. Here's how Hamilton describes it:

Every one of us has sinned, and in our sin we have been alienated from God. Justice calls for punishment for the collective weight of that sin; the Bible says that "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6: 23) and eternal separation from God. But God, who loves us like parents love their children, does not desire us to be eternally separated. God wishes us to receive grace. An ordinary person could not die for all humankind; but Jesus, being God in the flesh, could die for the sins of the entire world. He paid a price he did not owe, giving us a gift of grace we did not deserve. This is what we see in Barabbas walking away free from the prison and Jesus hanging on a cross.

p. 67

This theory might be confusing to many today, because we tend to think we aren't all that bad—it's not really necessary for Jesus to die for us. Or, that sin doesn't really call for an atonement. But I think most of us, certainly me and maybe you, have at some point in our lives done something so awful, and our shame is so deep, that we know we can never make up for it on our own. Or, we have just tried so hard for so long to do right, and failed so many times, that we recognize our helplessness to ever be sinless under our own power. At those moments, it is a powerful balm to look at the cross and know that our punishment has already been borne, and not by us.

A man I once knew had married young. It was soon apparent that he and his wife would never be able to get along, but they had a child together. He was naïve and foolish. She was angry and vindictive. She made it difficult for him to be a father, and so he just gave up. He was in his 70's when I knew him, and he hadn't seen his son since the boy was just a year old. He had regretted his decision most of his life. After being in a happy marriage later and raising children, he knew that he had left a terrible burden on his abandoned son. He told me that his guilt and self-blame were nearly overwhelming at times. They would have been overwhelming, if it wasn't for the fact that Jesus had already taken his punishment. With tears in his eyes, I heard him thank Jesus for bearing the penalty for his sin, because that was the only way he could live with what he had done, the only way he had peace.

Jesus' substitution for us, his bearing of our sin on the cross for our salvation, points toward the costliness of grace. Our forgiveness isn't dispensed like candy at a parade—it was bought with the agony and blood of a Savior, and the anguish and pain of God whose plan that was. As we look at Christ's cross, we should see God's profound love for us, and how precious and expensive his grace of forgiveness is. That should change our hearts, so that we serve God in humble gratitude, and do our best to never sin again.

But we know we will. We all, like sheep, have gone and will go astray. Each of us will turn again to our own way. And God has laid on Jesus the sin of us all. (Isaiah 53: 6) We all, like Barabbas, will walk away free because of the death and suffering of an innocent man.