

If you are at all familiar with the events surrounding Jesus' Passion, then you are familiar with Pontius Pilate, this Roman official who will forever be remembered as the man who sentenced the author of life to death.

As we talked about last week, Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent as Jesus stood before him in his court that day. And yet, Pilate willingly handed Jesus over to those hands of brutality – the Roman soldiers – in a vain attempt to quiet the Jewish mob, curry their favor, and release Jesus. It didn't work.

And while all four gospels share details about the interaction between the King of the Jews and the governor of Judea, only Matthew mentions Pilate's final act 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. Pilate 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. The Apostle Peter would later testify before the temple crowd in the Book of Acts, *The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and disowned in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release [Jesus].*

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. Oh, he tried to pass the buck, as we saw last week. 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. And now, Pilate was running out of options, at least options

that would allow him to protect both the innocent and protect his own 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: Innocent Jesus and a notorious, famously guilty 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 was so stunned at the crowd, he must have struggled to find the right words. So desperate was the situation that, finally, he asked the *crowd* for a solution, "***What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?***" (v. 22). The crowds immediately called for Jesus' crucifixion. And when Pilate tried to reason with them...well, it was too late. They kept shouting, "***Crucify him!***" (v. 23). Crucify him! Crucify him! Crucify him!

Pilate, the ruler responsible for keeping the peace, in his attempts to free Jesus, had started a riot. Pilate 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 and tried to shift the blame to the riotous crowd, "***[Pilate] 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).

In some ways it seems shocking how spineless and self-serving Pilate was. And yet, it probably should come as no surprise. I mean, Pilate wasn't a Christian. He didn't consider himself subject or accountable to any divine authority. He was accountable only to himself. But then, take you and me. We are Christians. We are subject and accountable to our divine authority, our heavenly Father. So let me ask, what is more surprising: a pagan like Pilate acting like a pagan, or believers like you and me following pagan Pilate's example?

“Wait a second! I’m no Pontius Pilate,” you might say. And yet, how many times haven’t we tried to claim our “innocence” to the ungodly, all while trying to save face, save our own skin, or wash our hands in the name of self-preservation? I mean, 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, isn’t it?

Now I’m not talking about picking fights, injecting yourself into arguments, or pushing buttons to cause conflict. But what about all of those times when a coworker turns to you and says, “You’re a Christian. What do you think?” Or when the family gets together and discussion turns to a cousin’s life choices and they turn to you and ask, “where do you stand on this?” Or when a group of friends, or a special friend, is pressuring you to act against your faith and conscience and they tempt, “C’mon, it’ll be fun.”

Oh, 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.”

But Jesus is very clear on this. He declares, “**Whoever denies me before others, I will also deny before my Father who is in heaven**” (Mt 10:33 EHV). A threat, to be sure. But don’t think that Jesus doesn’t understand what we go through. Even as he calls on us to speak up and speak out, so he did the opposite...for you and your salvation.

Jesus could have come to his own defense. Jesus could have called down

legions of angels to destroy his enemies. Jesus could have put his full glory on display. But he didn’t. It was more important to him that he claim you as his own before his Father in heaven as the Father’s very own redeemed, restored, and forgiven children.

Yes, it is because of his sacrifice, his work that his love is in our hearts and his name is on our lips. Not a name to be denied in the name of self-preservation, but a name to be praised for all that he for you and me. 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 and then took it up again so that we will live in his presence forever. Praise God! As you remember everything Jesus didn’t do, and everything he allowed others to do to him, all to save you; as you share what you remember with those around you; as you make this gospel remembrance a part of your homes and your relationships; you praise him! This is why has claimed you as his own, **that you may declare the praise of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.** (1 Peter 2:9) More to come on “praise” this Sunday. For now, let’s pray...

Give us caring hearts, O Lord, to love and seek the lost. Overcome our fears and grant us the courage to share our hope of salvation with those who have no hope. Make us faithful in our daily lives so that all we say and do may give praise to your name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

ⁱ Adapted from *Hands of the Passion* Lenten resource for 2021. © 2020 Northwestern Publishing House.

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