

AN EVEN DARKER DAY

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Luke 22:66-23:25

Today's reading is that part of the gospel that we know as "The Trial of Jesus." If we look at this reading as if it were a play, we would see that it has four acts with a cast of characters. The play is set in Jerusalem on the day following the night of the Passover meal. On that night, Jesus celebrated that meal with his disciples. Following the meal, they left the city and returned to the Mount of Olives where Jesus instructed them to pray. Jesus, himself, also prayed, but the others dozed off. Judas arrived leading a crowd intent on arresting Jesus. They carry him back to Jerusalem to the house of the chief priest. Peter follows them but when he is identified he claims not to know Jesus. Jesus is mocked and beaten by the guards. Last Sunday I described this as the darkest night in the gospel because Jesus is left utterly alone—everyone around him fails him, betrays him, denies him, mocks him. Then daylight arrives and brings us to our reading.

In the first act of this play Jesus is brought before the Jewish leaders. In the second act he is taken before Pilate. In the third act he is interrogated by Herod, and in the fourth act, he again is brought to Pilate.

The characters in this play include Jesus—the prophet from Galilee. Then there are the members of the Jewish assembly—this includes the elders of the people, the chief priests, and scribes. This group makes up what was known as the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was like a cross between the city council and the church board. It was a religious body with secular authority. The Sanhedrin governed the day-to-day matters of the Jewish people in each town. They operated under the rule of the Roman government. The Jerusalem Sanhedrin would have been the most powerful of these groups.

The next character we meet is Pilate, or Pontius Pilate. He was the prefect (or governor) of the Roman province of Judea. He was appointed by Emperor Tiberius. Normally, he would have governed from the Roman city of Caesarea Maritima which was on the coast. That was Rome's administrative center. However, for the Jewish Passover festival, he would have relocated to Jerusalem.

Then there is Herod. The Herod in this story is Herod Antipas. His father was Herod the Great who we know from Matthew's gospel as the one who ordered the murder of all the boy children in Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth. Herod Antipas was the tetrarch of Galilee. He is also the one responsible for the death of John the Baptist. Antipas was appointed to his position by Emperor Augustus and he served under Pilate.

Rounding out the cast list are Herod's soldiers. They are likely Jewish, and not Roman.

In the first act of this drama, Jesus is brought before the Sanhedrin. Remember, he had been arrested a few hours earlier and brought to the home of the chief priest. Now that day has arrived, the council convenes and begins to interrogate Jesus. Their interrogation is of a theological nature. They are trying to determine if he has violated the Law of Moses by claiming to be divine. They ask, *If you are the Messiah, tell us*. His response to them is, *If I tell you, you won't believe; and if I ask you any questions, you will not answer*. Jesus knows how this plays out. He knows that their minds are made up and that they are simply looking for any excuse to have him killed, to get rid of him. It doesn't matter what he says and he knows they won't speak the truth to him.

Then he tells them, *But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God*. This statement combines images from the book of Daniel and the Psalms. In the book of Daniel, Daniel, in one of his visions, tells about the Son of Man who *came with the clouds of heaven* and who was given power by God (Dan 7:13). Psalm 110 opens with the words, *The Lord said to my lord, sit at my right hand*. When Jesus says, *the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God*, the implication is clear. The members of the council would recognize the imagery. So they ask him, *Are you, then, the Son of God?* And Jesus responds, *You say that I am*. This is not an answer to their question. Jesus is placing the responsibility for their actions back on them. Their conclusion is that he is indeed claiming to be the Messiah. *What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips*. Of course, Jesus did not confess to any of this.

To be clear, we call the events of this day "The Trial of Jesus," but clearly it is not a trial. It is more like a hearing. There are no witnesses or judges—just people in power asking questions.

In the second act Jesus is taken by the Sanhedrin to Pilate. The council intends that Jesus be executed but only the Romans have the authority to carry out capital punishment. Pilate can order an execution. The complaints that the council bring to Pilate are different than those we read in the first act. The Romans don't care about a Jewish Messiah so the council amends their complaints to something more political—something that will engage the Romans. They tell Pilate, *We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king*. Personally, I am glad that times have changed and that in our current political conversation we aren't fixated on morality, taxes, and which candidate can fix the world.

The Sanhedrin accuses Jesus of perverting the nation, forbidding people to pay their taxes, and thirdly, claiming to be a Messiah. Then to clarify, they add "a king."

The Romans would have no interest in a Messiah, but a self-proclaimed king would be a potential threat to Roman authority. That is a serious charge.

So Pilate asks Jesus, *Are you the king of the Jews?* And Jesus answers as he did to the council, *You say so.* But unlike the council, Pilate interprets this in the negative and declares to them, *I find no basis for an accusation against this man.*

The Sanhedrin persists adding a fourth complaint saying, *He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.* Now, that Jesus is from Galilee is news to Pilate. And he seizes the opportunity to pass this sticky matter to someone else. Pilate sends Jesus to Herod who is the tetrarch of Galilee. Galilee is Herod's jurisdiction. Let him handle this matter. Conveniently, Herod just happened to be in Jerusalem for the festival.

The third act of our play takes place in the presence of Herod. Herod was already aware of Jesus from his ministry in Galilee and was anxious to meet him. Herod was hoping to see Jesus perform one of his famous miracles. For Herod, Jesus is not a threat, merely a curiosity. He interrogates Jesus but Jesus never responds. The council continues to make loud accusations against Jesus but even Herod can find no indictment against him. Nonetheless, he allows his soldiers to mock Jesus. They even dress him up in a fancy robe as if he really were king. Herod hands the matter back to Pilate.

In the fourth and final act of this drama, Pilate calls the Sanhedrin before him and reviews the charges against Jesus. He declares that neither he nor Herod find him guilty of any of the charges. As Pilate says, *Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death.* Pilate proposes having Jesus flogged and released. The councils erupts in fury. And instead, they demand that Barabbas be set free.

Who was Barabbas? Barabbas was a jailed insurrectionary—no doubt a participant in one of the Jewish uprisings against Rome. He is also labeled a murderer. As we read in the other gospels, there was a Passover tradition that the Romans would release a prisoner for the festival. This year, the people called for Barabbas. What is interesting to note about Barabbas is his name. In Aramaic (the language of Judea), it would be bar abba, or literally "son of the father." It is ironic that the crowd is demanding that the son of God be released, and that Jesus be crucified.

The crowd shouts at Pilate, *Crucify, crucify him.* Pilate, seemingly exasperated by the entire matter, repeats that he has found Jesus guilty of no crime. But the crowd keeps shouting and finally Pilate relents and orders that Barabbas be set free and Jesus be crucified.

I have to honest. I have struggled with this passage this week. Understanding the sequence of events was fairly straightforward. But when I applied the question

I've been asking each week, "What is Luke teaching his people?" I came up short. There are no lessons here, no teachings, no parables or signs. It is just events, facts, as Luke presents them. We could look at Jesus' non-specific "You say so's". Or we could explore Jesus' future claim of power at God's right hand. That is indeed part of the promise of the kingdom.

I believe that what we find here is part of Luke's chronicle of Jesus. As he states right at the beginning of the gospel, *I decided... to write an orderly account for you.* Today's reading is a report of this pivotal moment in Jesus' life—the trial that led to his crucifixion. In teaching his congregation about Jesus, Luke can't avoid this day. Because more than his teaching, and preaching, and signs, and miracles, Jesus is the one who was sacrificed, he is the Passover Lamb. And the lesson that Luke offers his people is that it happened—that despite God's commandment against killing, an innocent man was purposely executed to fulfill the agenda of those in power.

Many states in the U.S. have abolished the death penalty. Most notably among them is Illinois whose lawmakers voted in 2011 to abolish capital punishment. Ten years earlier, the governor imposed a moratorium on executions after the courts discovered that 13 men on death row had been wrongly accused. Currently, 30 states permit capital punishment, including Tennessee. And we have to remember this each time the state carries out an execution. We have to ask, 'are we sure that person is guilty, are we absolutely sure?' Once we kill someone, they are not coming back. A life is lost. You can't undo an execution.

Today, we continually hear of people who have been on death row who are released because DNA testing shows that the blood/hair/skin samples found at the crime scene—the evidence that convicted them—was wrong. Innocent persons have been executed for crimes they did not commit.¹

What would the world be like if Jesus had been allowed to continue his ministry? What if the council and the people, instead of demanding his death, had embraced his message? Would we be living in the kingdom today? I don't know. We'll never know. When Jesus was killed, we lost the chance to find out. When a person is executed, we lose the opportunity to see what they can bring to the world.

For me, the lesson from this is that an innocent man was wrongly convicted and executed. Maybe in Jesus' case that is how it had to be. Maybe it is God's plan. But I do know that once he was killed, despite the resurrection, the deed was done, we could never go back and this world lost something precious.

¹ <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/05/yes-america-we-have-executed-an-innocent-man/257106/>