

## Sermon for Lent Mid-week #4

**Date:** March 27, 2019

**Location:** St. John's Lutheran Church, Austin, MN

**Old Testament:** Numbers 21:4-9

**Epistle Reading:** Ephesians 2:1-10

**Gospel Reading:** John 19:1-16



**Sermon Text:** John 19:1-16

**Sermon Title:** Pontius Pilate: The Thinker

**Introit:** Psalm 28:1–2, 6–9; antiphon: Psalm 28:8

### Hymns:

LSB 439 – O Dearest Jesus, What Law Hast Thou Broken (v.10-12)

LSB 571 – God Loved the World so that He Gave (v. 1–3, 6)

LSB 575 – My Hope is Built on Nothing Less  
Called to Remember (Tune 637)

LSB 422 – On My Heart Imprint your Image

LSB 918 – Guide me, O Thou Great Redeemer

### Liturgy:

Divine Service: Special



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**Text: John 19:1-16**

Pilate had Jesus taken away and whipped. The soldiers twisted some thorny branches into a crown, placed it on his head and put a purple cape on him. They went up to him, said, “Hail King of the Jews!” and slapped his face.

Pilate went outside again and told the Jews, “I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I do not find this man guilty of anything.” Jesus went outside. He was wearing the crown of thorns and the purple cape. Pilate said to the Jews, “Look, here is the man!”

When the chief priests and the guards saw Jesus, they shouted, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

Pilate told them, “You take him and crucify him. I do not find this man guilty of anything.”

The Jews answered Pilate, “We have a law and by that law he must die because he claimed to be the Son of God.”

When Pilate heard this he became even more afraid. He went into the palace again and asked Jesus, “Where are you from?” But Jesus didn’t answer him.

So Pilate said to Jesus, “Aren’t you going to answer me? Don’t you know that I have the authority to free you or to crucify you?”

Jesus answered Pilate, “You would not have any authority over me if it hadn’t been given to you from above. That is why the man who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.”

When Pilate heard what Jesus said he wanted to free him, but the Jews shouted, “If you free this man, you are not a friend of the emperor. Anyone who claims to be a king is defying the emperor.”

When Pilate heard what they said, he took Jesus outside and sat on the judge’s seat in a place called Stone Pavement. (In Hebrew it is called Gabbatha.) The time was about noon on the Friday of the Passover festival.

Pilate said to the Jews, “Look, here is your king!”

Then the Jews shouted, “Away with him! Take Him away! Crucify him!”

Pilate asked, “Should I crucify your king?”

The chief priests responded, “We have no king but Caesar!”

Then Pilate handed Jesus over to them to be crucified. So the soldiers took Jesus.

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Pronunciation for difficult words are contained in { }

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Grace to you in Jesus' holy name. Amen.

There is a man who appears in Jesus' last week of life that had a desperate desire to rise to great fame, and though he is very famous I'm sure it is not the kind of fame for which he was looking. Every Christian has, from nearly the very birth of the Holy Church, recited his name. The Apostle's Creed contains a phrase, "He suffered under Pontius Pilate." There is some striking irony in the fact that Pilate is so famous. That was his goal, but he wanted to be a political hero. He wanted nothing to do with Jesus. He tried to distance himself from Jesus over and over again. I'm sure there were many days, following his encounter with Jesus, that he wished he had never met Him.

You see when Pilate first took up his assigned position as governor of Judea, he was on the rise to true fame and fortune. He no doubt had his eyes on one day sitting in the great Roman Senate, or could he dare to dream it, perhaps the emperor's throne. He had high aspiration. The land of Judea had been a constant trial for Rome. It was a very difficult and challenging area to govern. Rome would not send some lackey to maintain peace in this region. Rome demanded peace. Pilate was sent to maintain the peace.

Pilate's path to greater power depended greatly upon his ability to succeed in Judea. The path to progressing his career depended upon his purposeful strides toward that goal. Pilate needed to be wise. He needed to carefully plan each step, and ensure only the best reports reached Rome.

The problem was the Jews. They were some of the most difficult people to govern because of their exclusive religion that would tolerate no other gods.<sup>1</sup> Rome was willing to be reasonable. You could worship any god you wanted, so long as Caesar was one of them. That generally didn't pose a problem throughout the rest of the world, but these Jews would not, could not, tolerate such a thing. It seemed they would rather die than worship just one more god. A thing that was a point of constant confusion for most Roman citizens. Pilate was calculating. He allowed the Jews to keep their Temple, and worship their God. So long as they stayed peaceful.

The Temple Authority was replaced with Roman appointees so that the Jewish people would be governed by their own. Though even that did not seem to satisfy them. Their religion even had rules about how to select their leaders. Ruling over Judea required a constant evaluation of strategy between the people, the appointed Temple Authority, and Rome's ever present demand to maintain peace.

1 Exodus 20:3

For this reason Pilate certainly knew all about this upstart, Jesus of Nazareth. You can be sure Pilate knew His name and His teachings. A strategizing, thinking, politician like Pilate would not allow someone like Jesus to escape his skillful governing eyes. The point is, whatever Pilate had heard about Jesus, he had deemed it of no real concern. He had dismissed Jesus' teachings as harmless to the state of peace, or the empire of Rome. This Jesus of Nazareth was little more than a minor curiosity in Pilate's affairs of governing Judea. Pilate never saw it coming. If he had he would have executed Jesus himself long before the day he first met Him.

Opposition to Jesus did not come from Rome. Rome ignored Jesus. The attacks came from the Temple Authority. Pilate had things under control. He had skillfully thought it all out; but he did not include in his calculations anything like the events that rose up without warning during that year's Passover Festival. The Temple Authority, who owed their position and power to Rome, would defy all logic and reason. They would act in a way that no normal thinking person would deem rational. Without warning, and without reason, the Jewish leaders arrested Jesus, during the festival, of all times. They ran Jesus through a trial that defied their own religious Law. They convicted Him of trumped-up charges and sentenced Him to death.

This was an irrational move at any time, but during the Passover Festival it was insanity. The goal was ever constant peace. Peace made Pilate happy, and if Pilate was happy then Temple Authority could be happy. So what would possess them to pull a stunt like this? For Pilate it was contrary to any rational thought.

The death sentence pronounced on Jesus could not be carried out. Though Rome was very tolerant of these Jews, there were some Roman laws that could not be compromised. One was execution. No one in the Roman empire could be executed without the consent of the Roman government. So, on that fateful Friday so very long ago, they brought Jesus to Pilate.

Now they knew Pilate would not support their religious reasons for executing this man that Pilate knew was no threat to Roman peace. So the Temple Authority had to concoct a secular, political, reason for Jesus' death. They did not come to Pilate with their own religious Law for Jesus' execution. They came to Pilate with accusations of subversion to the government, refusing to pay taxes, and claiming to be a king without Roman approval. These were very serious charges. People had been executed for far less. Still, Pilate already had his doubts, and he was not going to let the Jews slip anything past him.

Pilate was wise not to trust them. The Jewish people were willing to do almost anything to bring him down and kick Rome out. So instead of just ordering their

requested execution Pilate decided to retry the case. Though perhaps there are many reasons for that decision maybe one that came to the forefront of his thoughts was the fallout against Herod when he executed John the Baptist. The people turned against Herod with venom. Pilate did not want to be the next 'prophet killer.'

Pilate knew something was up. The Jews hated Rome so this stunt of accusing one of their own as a traitor to Rome was ludicrous. Add to that Jesus standing there in dignified silence did not paint a picture of a someone who was a dangerous leader. Still Pilate wanted to hear this case, and Jesus was called before this thinking, strategizing, politician. Certainly in the back of his mind was the thought to overturn the verdict of the unpopular appointed Temple Authority and set the popular prophet free. That might gain ground with the common people. Pilate was quickly formulating a means to use this opportunity for his purposes.

Pilate spoke with Jesus, no doubt expecting to be done with Him in very short order. Just hear what the man had to say, spin it to his own political benefit, and get on to more important matters. Pilate began his questioning. Jesus remain silent. Any prisoner sentenced to death, and given an opportunity to speak with the governor, would make every moment count. This was the last chance to be set free, or at least have the sentence reduced. Pilate waited for the excuses, the defense, the explanations. ...but none came. Jesus just stood there strangely silent.

When Jesus finally did speak, all He said was, "My kingdom is not of this world." He also said that He had come, "to testify to the truth."<sup>2</sup>

That comment caught Pilate's ear. "What is truth?"<sup>3</sup> Pilate sarcastically asked. Pilate believed truth was what you make it. You are the master of your own destiny. Truth is what you need truth to be. This only reinforced Pilate's notion that this Jesus of Nazareth was only an innocent philosopher that the people called a prophet. He was harmless. Pilate went out and told the Temple Authority, and the gathering crowd, that he found no fault or guilt in Jesus.

That would usually be the end of things. The Governor had spoken. The trial was done. The sentence was commuted, Jesus would be set free. Pilate never saw it coming. The Temple Authority incited the people to rise up against Pilate's decision by filling the crowd with operatives. The crowd called out for Jesus' death.

Pilate hesitated. This caught him off guard again. Only a week ago this Jesus

2 John 18:36-37

3 John 18:38

road into town with crowds cheering. Now, without any obvious reason or prompting, they are calling for His execution. Pilate's strategy was collapsing and he saw that. He needed to bring this situation back under control. Pilate tried every angle he could think of to get Jesus released without incident. He was stuck in a lose-lose situation and he needed a win.

Then he learned that Jesus was from Galilee. He saw his way out, and he leapt at it with vigor. Galilee was outside of his jurisdiction. In a masterful stroke of genius he sent Jesus to Herod. Jesus was out of his hands and out of his hair. Let that famed 'prophet killer' kill another prophet. Let the people hate Herod all the more. He never like Herod anyway.<sup>4</sup> Pilate retired to his house knowing he had once again subverted a challenging situation. He perhaps thought to himself, "I will be great in the Senate."

Not much later that scoundrel Herod sent Jesus back to him. Pilate never saw it coming. Now he was desperate. He need this situation fixed. He needed the crowd's sympathy. He had Jesus beaten and whipped. When the crowd saw Him their anger would be appeased and the matter would be done. The blood lust of the crowd only grew more intense.

Pilate had one move left. To win some favor with the people, he would release one person, of their choosing, each year at this time. There was in the prison a man named Barabbas. Barabbas was a murderer. A hardened criminal that was hated by Rome, the Temple Authority, and the people. He would let them choose between Barabbas and Jesus. The crowd would make their choice and he would be free of this political nightmare. Pilate never saw it coming. The fanatical Temple Authority enraged the crowd, and they shouted for Barabbas, and called all the louder for Jesus' death.

Finally, Pilate was at his end. He could not escape the mess. So he distanced himself as far as he could. He washed his hands before the people and stated that he would have no part of killing this innocent man.<sup>5</sup> Then he said the words that gave Jesus over to their craving, "Let Him be crucified." To the last, he presented Jesus as innocent, but there was no one there to sympathize or to listen. So, he confirmed the verdict.

We may wonder why Pilate gave in as he did, but we need to know that his political standing with Rome was shaky at this time. During the trial he had to weigh his actions against his own political welfare. In fact, what clinched the matter and made it impossible for Pilate to act independently to free Jesus was the

4 Luke 23:12

5 Matthew 27:24

threat by the Jews to appeal to Caesar. “If you let Jesus go,” they said, “you are not Caesar’s friend.”<sup>6</sup>”

That was a damaging charge. Pilate you see, wore a gold ring with the image of Caesar on it. That marked him as a member of the inner circle. He was part of an elite fraternity of high-ranking officials of Rome who enjoyed the favor of the emperor. If the Jews went over Pilate’s head to Caesar they might convince him that Pilate was not a friend. They would tell him that Pilate let a man who claimed to be king go free. Pilate’s position was on the line. In his mind it came down to a choice between Jesus or himself. He made his choice.

So what became of Pilate? His political career faltered and failed. His wife Procula, reportedly became a Christian, according to some traditions, and most certainly he thought long and often about the trial and execution—and rumored resurrection—of this Jesus.

What do you suppose this thinking man would think of Christians and Christianity today? Would he express surprise at how much like him we can be? We find ourselves doing something wrong, and we make excuses for it. How many times do we Christians say, “I know it’s wrong, but...”?

“I know it’s wrong to steal or cheat but in business it’s expected. It’s the only way to get ahead.” “I know it’s wrong to indulge myself in some kinds of entertainment but I don’t want to be a ‘stick in the mud.’” “I know I should be strong and say what I believe but I can’t. People will think I am a fanatic and I’ll lose my friends.” “I know it’s wrong, but...” That’s what Pilate said at Jesus’ trial.

Would Pilate think of why his wife believed and others like us believe and stay with Jesus? Did Pilate learn for example how Jesus had predicted His own death and resurrection? How He forgave all people’s sins by His death, even the sins we still commit? How He rose from the dead?

He certainly heard about the boundless love of God and that Jesus was the Son of God and that He will return one day, but did he ever believe? We don’t know, but we can thank God that by His Spirit we believe, and are saved.

Amen.