

Jesus, Barabbas and Pilate

Prayer: Dear Jesus, this week I will read about Pilate and Herod, who treated you like a disposable peasant they could use in games of political intrigue. I will read about religious people who chose Jesus Barabbas' violent actions over your path of healing peace and love. Speak to my heart as I read. Strengthen me more and more to see through my cultural training and assumptions, to recognize your truth. As I see, help me to choose you. Amen.

A Choice Between Two Saviors

MONDAY Matthew 27:15-17

The other three gospels just call him "Barabbas." Matthew makes the choice more pointed by adding that the full name of the other man Pilate offered to release at Passover was "Jesus Barabbas." Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew Joshua ("God saves"), a fairly common man's name at that time.

- Matthew calls Jesus Barabbas a "well-known prisoner." Why well-known? Mark 15:7, Luke 23:19 and John 18:40 say he took part in an insurrection against the Romans. No doubt many saw him as a heroic freedom fighter defending their nation. To the Romans, he was a terrorist. Who gets your vote: Jesus Barabbas, the violent man willing to fight the bad guys, or Jesus of Nazareth, who taught us to love our enemies?
- Barabbas was sentenced to die, but Jesus died instead. We don't know if that did or did not affect Barabbas. In a much deeper sense, Jesus died instead of you, and you get to choose how that affects you. How do you respond to Jesus' self-giving love?

The Conscience of a Spouse

TUESDAY Matthew 27:19

Have you ever wondered how Matthew could have known this story? Pilate's wife may have told it. Pastor Hamilton's devotional mentions that early Christian traditions gave her a name—Procula. The Eastern Orthodox and Ethiopian churches honor her as a saint. If indeed she became a Christian, she probably shared this story.

- Many of us want "they lived happily ever after" in marriage to mean constant peace, with no challenges or growth for either spouse. Pastor Hamilton's devotional suggests God calls spouses to help each other do the right thing. How open are you to letting your spouse, family, or trusted friends help you discern God's path?
- In Matthew 1-3, God spoke to Jesus' human father Joseph (as to the patriarch Joseph) by dreams. God speaks in many ways—through the Bible, prayer, other people, inner Holy Spirit "nudges," and other ways. How do you usually "hear" God most clearly? Might God ever speak to you (as to Pilate) in a way you don't expect?

The Examination by Herod

WEDNESDAY Luke 23:7-11

There are several "Herods" to keep straight in the Bible. This was not Herod the Great, who killed infants in Bethlehem when Jesus was born. It was a son of his—Herod Antipas, who ruled just the province of Galilee, and executed John the Baptist. Pilate tried to duck the need to decide about the Galilean Jesus by sending him to Herod Antipas.

- "He was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard...he hoped to see him perform a sign of some sort." The ironic view of Herod in *Jesus Christ, Superstar* fits these verses well.

What kind of “performance” do you want from Jesus? What happens to your faith if you don’t get it?

- Verse 11 says when Jesus gave him no answers, “Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked him.” Jesus seemed helpless, in their power. What person(s) in your school, neighborhood, or workplace can you safely ridicule and mock? How can you treat people the way Jesus did, rather than the way Herod did?

What Is Truth?

THURSDAY

John 18:33-38

Jesus and Pilate were like two people “talking past each other.” Pilate was, literally, down-to-earth—“So you are a king?” he asked. “What have you done?” But this earth didn’t bind Jesus’ thinking. “I am a king,” he said, “but my kingdom is not of this world.” For Pilate, that was a baffling answer. He may have thought, “What other world than this is there?”

- Like many today, Pilate asked, “What is truth?” He implied that no one knows. Yet Jesus said, “The reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth.” Jesus knew clearly the limits of human insight. What do you believe was the core truth Jesus came to witness to? Can you believe it without pride or exclusivism?
- “I find no basis for a charge against him.” Pilate had treated the people of Jerusalem too harshly. Politically, he couldn’t offend them again. Jesus was not guilty, he knew, but he was expendable. When have you seen an innocent person harassed or abused? What, if anything, did you do? How do you want to act in such a case in the future?

The Shout of the Crowd

FRIDAY

Matthew 27:22-25

Pastor Hamilton’s book (pp. 118-119) points out that the “crowd” who shouted for Jesus’ death did not include most of the people of Jerusalem. Many worked for the priests and rulers (see verse 20). Others no doubt lost money when Jesus cleansed the Temple.

- Take some prayerful time to grapple with this searching question from p. 120 of Pastor Hamilton’s devotional book: “What darkness do you see in your own soul? Bigotry? Hatred? Anger when your sin is exposed? Frustration when others do not see eye to eye with you? Can you see yourself in the crowd?”
- For centuries, some have used verse 25 (“His blood is on us and on our children!”) to justify bias, persecution and cruelty against Jews. It’s one of the darkest stains on Christian history. As noted, that crowd was a small sample of the people in Jerusalem. Pilate and the Romans were just as guilty, despite Pilate’s showy hand washing. What prejudices get in the way of you loving your neighbor as yourself?

Wishing to Satisfy the Crowd

SATURDAY

Mark 15:15

Pontius Pilate asked, one last time, “What crime has he committed?” The crowd didn’t answer; they just roared, “Crucify him!” A weak man in a position of trust chose to allow a gross injustice rather than stand up to a crowd. This part of the story may be most disturbing, not because it is strange, but rather because it rings true to the human condition. If we’re honest, most of us find the seeds of Pilate’s choice in our own hearts.

- In today’s devotional reading, Pastor Hamilton asks us, “What happens when you are faced with doing something you believe is right but which will cause a large number of people to be upset with you, maybe even turn against you?...When have you said or done things aimed at satisfying the crowd?”

When have you remained silent when you should have spoken out?" (*40 Days of Reflection*, pp. 122-123)

Family Activity: Place a handful of coins in a container. As a family, take the coins with you to a nearby fountain. Sit together beside the fountain, and ask each person to take one or more coins. Explain that this is a time to tell God "I'm sorry" for any sins committed. In turn, ask each person to confess his or her sin to God by praying aloud or silently, "Lord, I am sorry I _____". Then toss a coin into the water. Repeat this process as many times as anyone feels the need. When everyone is finished, invite family members to dip their hands in the fountain for a quick washing. Finish your time by praying together, "Thank you, God, for your promise of forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Amen."