

Sovereign in Life and Death¹
John 18:28-19:16a
First Presbyterian Church
March 28, 2021

Introduction to the Reading

All four of the New Testament gospels

 tell the story of Jesus' ministry, his arrest and trial,
 and his death and burial.

Yet, each tells the story in a different way.

Though I understand how these different tellings of the same story
 may throw some folks for a loop,

 I've come to appreciate this variety.

Each gospel is given to us by the inspiring Spirit,

 yet no one of them exhausts the meaning of Jesus.

It is as commentator Raymond Brown has said:

 "It is as if one walks around a large diamond
 to look at it from different angles.

A true picture of the whole emerges ONLY

 because the viewpoints are different."

In this Lenten series of sermons,

 we have been focusing on one side of that diamond –
 on John's telling of the story of Jesus.

¹ I draw heavily on the Frances Taylor Gench's work in Encounters With Jesus – Studies in the Gospel of John (WJKJ,2007), p.117-125.

We've watched as Jesus turned mere water
into massive quantities of choice wine...
we have listened in as Jesus discusses theology and life
with a Samaritan woman and a Pharisee named Nicodemus.
We have seen him heal a man who was born blind
and raise Lazarus from the dead.
We witnessed how on the night before Passover
he took hold of and washed his disciples' feet...
and finally, last week we heard the Lord promise
that he would not leave his followers orphaned,
but would send them the Holy Spirit to be with them forever.
Several times during his public ministry,
Jesus spoke of his "hour" - saying that his hour had not come.
Well, now his "hour" HAS come
as John moves to tell of Jesus' "passion" –
of his trial and suffering and death.
Before Easter Sunday (if you haven't already done so)
I encourage you to read John, chapters 18-19.
This morning we will focus on the part of that story
which tells of Jesus' dramatic
and rather lengthy encounter with Pilate.

Bible Reading

²⁸Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so

as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. ²⁹So Pilate went out to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this man?” ³⁰They answered, “If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.” ³¹Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.” The Jews replied, “We are not permitted to put anyone to death.” ³²(This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.) ³³Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” ³⁴Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” ³⁵Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?”

³⁶Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” ³⁷Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” ³⁸Pilate asked him, “What is truth?”

Reflection

It's sort of like Pilate is engaging “shuttle diplomacy”

as at the start of Jesus' trial he shuttles between Jesus

(who is INSIDE his headquarters)

and the Jews who are OUTSIDE in the courtyard.

Outside the Jews are making all kinds of accusations

hoping to make at least one of them stick.

He's a criminal, they say...

but Pilate's not convinced.

“We have a law that says he should die
for claiming to be the Son of God.”

And finally, they resort to blackmail
by threatening to tell Caesar

that Pilate was tolerating another king in his empire.

Inside, Pilate asks Jesus if he is, indeed, King of the Jews?

The Lord is clear – he is king...

but his kingdom is not of this world

in the way that Pilate's or Caesar's is.

It is IN this world and FOR this world,

but it is not OF this world.

And then, the Lord explains to Pilate what kind of king he is.

“You say that I am a king.

For this reason I was born,

and for this I came into the world,

to testify to the truth.”

Jesus' kingship tells the truth

about all he has seen and heard from his Father,

but the world does not recognize the truth.

Instead, the “world”

– that is represented INSIDE by Pilate

and OUTSIDE by the Jewish authorities –

the world believes it is independent from God...

doesn't need God... is not answerable to God.

Jesus says to Pilate, "Everyone who belongs to the truth

listens to my voice," and Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"

Well, truth is standing right there in front of him –

Jesus himself is the "fleshed-out truth" about God...

Jesus makes God known...

whoever has seen Jesus has already seen God.

And what Pilate inside doesn't know...

what the Jews outside don't know...

is that it's not Jesus who is on trial here. They are.

Bible Reading

After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, "I find no case against him. ³⁹But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" ⁴⁰They shouted in reply, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a bandit. Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged.

²And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. ³They kept coming up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and striking him on the face. ⁴Pilate went out again and said to them, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him." ⁵So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!" ⁶When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him." ⁷The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he

has claimed to be the Son of God.”⁸ Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever.⁹ He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, “Where are you from?” But Jesus gave him no answer.¹⁰ Pilate therefore said to him, “Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?”¹¹ Jesus answered him, “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.”¹² From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, “If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor.”

¹³When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge’s bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha.

Reflection

“... he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge’s bench at a place called The Stone Pavement...”

I don’t know how many times I have read that line,

but I do know that every time I did

I assumed it was Pilate who sat on the judge’s bench.

That’s what the English translation seems to say.

What I learned this week (and what to me makes more sense)

is that this verse can just as accurately be understood

to say that Pilate “seated him (Jesus) on the judge’s bench” –

that it was Jesus, not Pilate,

who sat there before them... as judge.

You see, judgment in John's gospel

was not some "way off in the future thing" –

it was not delayed to the "end of the world"

or the Second Coming of Christ...

judgment happened with Jesus' "first coming."

"And this is the judgment," John writes,

"that the light has come into the world,

and people loved darkness rather than light." (3:19)

Though Pilate thinks HE is the judge,

he is, in fact, being judged by the One

who is "the way, and the truth, and the life." (14:6)

He asks the question, "What is truth?"

when the truth is standing right there with him.

Ironically... as the trial continues...

both the soldiers and Pilate testify to who Jesus truly is –

though they aren't aware they are doing so.

The soldiers dress him up in a purple robe...

they put a crown of thorns on his head...

they mock him as "King of the Jews"

- which, of course, HE IS.

Pilate then takes Jesus outside

and presents him to the crowd in full royal garb declaring,

Behold, the man!” Here is the man!

Which of course, HE IS!

Here is the man who is the true reflection of God.

“Look at him,” Pilate says,

“and you’ll see your living, loving,

bruised and bleeding God.”

Bible Reading

¹⁴Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, “Here is your King!” ¹⁵They cried out, “Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!” Pilate asked them, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but the emperor.”

¹⁶Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

Reflection

The experience of being denied and rejected “by his own people”

was an especially bitter pill for Jesus to swallow.

It was for John as well.

We know this because he mentions it

at the very beginning of his gospel when he writes:

“He came to his own home,

and his own people did not accept him.” (1:11)

As Jesus’ trial unfolds,

this repudiation by his own people continues

as one hypocrisy is piled on top of another.

First, the religious leaders feign true piety
by refusing to enter Pilate's headquarters
so as not to defile themselves before the Passover –
even as they hand over the Lamb of God
who takes away the sin of the world. (18:28)

Then, because they know
the Torah prohibits them from putting anyone to death,
they conspire to have the Romans do the deed. (18:31)

Then, they choose a thief and insurrectionist, Barabbas, over Jesus –
preferring the one who threatens the sheep
over the One who is the Good Shepherd himself.

And perhaps most hurtful of all...
though Pilate eventually bends to their blackmail,
he exacts a very high price in return.

In what is the most devastating moment in the whole Gospel –
the official leaders of the Jewish people
renounce their covenant with God.

The very bedrock of Jewish faith is the confession:

“We have no king, but God.”

Yet, so threatened were they by Jesus

- so ready to be rid of Jesus -

in exchange for his death, they now proclaim,

“We have no king but Caesar.”

“Shall I crucify your King?” Pilate shouts...

and the chief priests answer,

“We have no king but the emperor.”

And having gained this betrayal,

Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified.

Which raises again the question that has been asked many times before:

If Jesus came to Hickory...

and if he stuck around long enough

to move from preachin' to meddlin' (as it were) ...

Where would we be? What would we do?

Would we receive him?

Believe in him?

Obey him?

Risk following him?

From a relatively safe distance of two-thousand years,

it's easy for us to spot the complicity

of the Jewish leadership and this Roman governor

in Jesus' trial and suffering and execution.

We can even imagine Jesus seated on the "judge's bench"

– a king who is IN this world

and being "judged" by the rulers of this world -

but whose kingdom is not really OF this world.

We can see that Jesus' very presence is a judgment...

and forces Pilate and the Jewish leaders to make a decision –
who is their king? Jesus or Caesar?

What is far less easy is to spot our own complicity...

to judge ourselves honestly enough

to know how far might allow him to go

before we, too, grew tired of him...

afraid of him...

wished he was out of the picture...

before we, too, called for his death.

The only way we can dare judge ourselves THAT honestly, my friends,

is by remembering what we have been told –

that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son”...

that “God did not send the Son into the world

to condemn the world,

but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

That from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace,

and that to all who receive him, who believe in his name,

he will give power to become children of God.

And so we are!