



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

Mocked
Mark 15:1-15

Very early in the morning, the leading priests, the elders, the teachers of the law, and all the Jewish council decided what to do with Jesus. They tied him, led him away, and turned him over to Pilate, the governor.

² Pilate asked Jesus, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

Jesus answered, “Those are your words.”

³ The leading priests accused Jesus of many things. ⁴ So Pilate asked Jesus another question, “You can see that they are accusing you of many things. Aren’t you going to answer?”

⁵ But Jesus still said nothing, so Pilate was very surprised.

⁶ Every year at the time of the Passover the governor would free one prisoner whom the people chose. ⁷ At that time, there was a man named Barabbas in prison who was a rebel and had committed murder during a riot. ⁸ The crowd came to Pilate and began to ask him to free a prisoner as he always did.

⁹ So Pilate asked them, “Do you want me to free the king of the Jews?”
¹⁰ Pilate knew that the leading priests had turned Jesus in to him because they were jealous. ¹¹ But the leading priests had persuaded the people to ask Pilate to free Barabbas, not Jesus.

¹² Then Pilate asked the crowd again, “So what should I do with this man you call the king of the Jews?”

¹³ They shouted, “Crucify him!”

¹⁴ Pilate asked, “Why? What wrong has he done?”

But they shouted even louder, “Crucify him!”

¹⁵ Pilate wanted to please the crowd, so he freed Barabbas for them. After having Jesus beaten with whips, he handed Jesus over to the soldiers to be crucified.

It was the day before Good Friday in the year 1300 when Dante, half-way through his life, found himself in a dark wood assailed by beasts he could not evade. He could not find the right way to salvation. He was falling into a deep place where the sun was silent, and at last he was rescued by the great Roman poet Virgil. The two of them took a journey into hell where people are punished for their sins.

At the gates of hell there was the inscription, “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.” Outside the gate, not quite in hell, but not out of hell, is a place for the uncommitted. It is the place for souls who did nothing for either good or evil. In this place Dante and Virgil found Pontius Pilate. Here is the place for those whose lives were wasted, those who could not make up their minds for good or evil, but their pursuit was for that which was expedient; they took the course of least resistance. These people were eternally damned to run after the banner of self-interest while being pursued by wasps and hornets, while maggots drank their blood and tears.

I cannot make a Biblical case to support Dante’s description of hell, but I know the world has suffered to an extreme because of those who had power, or who had gifts which could be used to relieve suffering and promote the good, but they did not have the fortitude to use their power for what is right.

Following Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin, he was taken to the Roman governor Pilate. The Jews had no legal right to execute Jesus, so they needed Rome to do their dirty work. Of course, like most Romans, Pilate couldn’t have cared less about a charge of blasphemy against a Jew by other Jews. Remember, Jesus was found guilty of blasphemy, but when Jesus was taken to Pilate the charge had changed to sedition. The leaders of the Sanhedran took Jesus before Pilate saying, “This man says he is the king of the Jews.”

I am sure Pilate had other pressing matters, and was not all that impressed with Jesus, that is, when he first saw Jesus.

He stood before Pilate accused, not of blasphemy, but that he claimed to be a king. It was one thing to be called the Jewish Messiah; it was quite another to be called a king in a world ruled by Caesar. And there Jesus stood before Pilate, bound, bleeding, spat upon. And with great sarcasm Pilate asked Jesus, “**Are you the King of the Jews?**” You don’t look like a king. You are a peasant from Galilee. Your clothes are not royal, but shabby. Are you a King?” And here Jesus said his final words before he began that walk up to Golgotha, “**Yes, it is as you say.**”

From this point on there is nothing but silence from Jesus. As John Buchanan wrote, “It is a holy, courageous silence, a silence that resists authority, a silence that Pilate has never heard before.” It was silence from one broken in body but not spirit.

Pilate expected to hear cries for mercy. “Your Excellency, I am innocent. These men have it in for me. I have done nothing wrong. I beg you to show mercy. Please, please don’t hand me over to the executioners. I promise I will not cause any more trouble. I will go back to my carpenter’s shop in Galilee.” Or maybe, if Jesus were bolder, Pilate expected to hear curses and words of contempt for both Rome and his accusers. But there was only silence.

As far as Roman governors go, I believe Pilate was basically a good man. He knew Jesus was innocent, and he tried to do the right thing. In order to appease the people, to give them a sense that though Rome occupied Jerusalem, Rome wanted a friendly relationship.

In order to please the Jews, there was a custom at Passover that the Jews could select a prisoner to be pardoned and released. They could choose anyone, but when Pilate put forward Jesus, the people cried out for Barabbas.

This put Pilate on the spot. He wanted to release Jesus whom he knew was innocent, and the crowd was asking for the release of a real criminal who was identified in the text as an insurrectionist and a murderer. Put those two together and you can guess that Barabbas had killed people who were sympathetic with Rome if not a Roman. On the other hand, I cannot imagine Pilate agreeing to release one who had killed a Roman. Do you see the irony here? Jesus was innocent and Barabbas was a cold blooded killer. Are you getting the picture that though Pilate wanted to do the right thing he did not have the backbone to do it?

Pilate asked the crowd, **“What then shall I do with the one you call the King of the Jews?” And the crowd cried out, “Crucify him!”** I think Pilate was in a panic. He knew the difference between right and wrong. He was a good man, but there are some trenches not worth dying in. This was not a great matter of state; it was not a threat to Rome. Pilate asked again, “Why should I crucify him? What real crime has he committed? He is not a king? Just look at him? Haven’t you already enjoyed your pound of flesh?” But the crowd was not swayed and they continued to cry out, “Crucify him!”

Pilate, who had the authority to release a notorious criminal, I also had the power to release Jesus. He had the power to do the right thing, release a man he

knew was innocent, but you know how it is to face a crowd. You know how difficult it is to stand alone in your opinion.

“Crucify him!” the crowd said. And Pilate, the experienced politician, made his decision. Executing the prisoner was not right, but in Pilate’s mind it was the lesser of two wrongs, for releasing Jesus would threaten the peace of the city. So in one of history’s most dramatic and haunting gestures, he called for a bowl of water and washed his hands publicly. **“I am innocent of this man’s blood,”** as he turned Jesus over to a detail of soldiers for execution.

Consider these Roman soldiers for a moment. Most of them were on an assignment they did not want. They were far away from home. They watched over a population that hated them with a passion. They could never be sure who was a friend, or who was a zealot that would stab them in the back. Many of them were battle hardened. Some were in Jerusalem as punishment. Such soldiers could behave in less than professional ways. They could be downright mean. Now they had in their custody a Jew they did not know, except that he had caused quite a stir during the past week. This prisoner was convicted of sedition, a Jew who some claimed to be king. Well, what better way to treat a king than put a purple robe on him? Give him a crown, albeit a crown of thorns. Give him a reed as a scepter. Pilates’ mocking was simply verbal, but the mocking of the soldiers was cruel, as they slapped and punched Jesus, laughing out, “Hail him, King of the Jews.” As they spit on the prisoner, Jesus remained silent. And once the soldiers grew tired of their mocking and other cruelties, they removed the purple robe and led Jesus away to the place of execution.

There is an ancient legend that on foggy, misty nights the ghost of Pontius Pilate appears over the surface of a lake, high up in the Swiss Alps. He is washing his hands and saying over and over again, **“What shall I do with Jesus who is called the Christ?”**

No one can say for sure what happened to Pontius Pilate after that fateful day. History tells us that Pilate never understood the Jews, and his ignorance led to move violent incidents. He was eventually dismissed from his post. Some think he was recalled, reassigned, maybe retired early, perhaps as some say, he was sent into exile in the Alps, thus the legend.

I don’t think Pilate was a bad man; but he simply was not strong enough to be a good man. So he is one of two people remembered each Sunday when we recite the Apostles’ Creed. Of course, there is Mary, “Jesus was born of the virgin Mary,” and “he suffered under Pontius Pilate.”

Frederick Buechner wrote, “For Pilate, it was not so much the terrible thing he had done as the wonderful thing he had proved incapable of doing.”

Pilate’s story suggests that for all of us there are moments like that, decisions like that, choices like that. They can be costly. The late Robert McAfee Brown, Presbyterian theologian, wrote a little book, *Saying Yes and Saying No*, in which he argued that to say “yes” to Jesus Christ is to risk taking positions that are not always prudent and popular, and that sometimes are even dangerous.

Brown told about Pastor Martin Niemöller, who, when Adolph Hitler was turning Germany into a militaristic dictatorship, published a book of sermons, which would be titled in English *Christ Is My Führer*. It cost him seven years in Dachau.

Oscar Romero, standing up to the state in El Salvador, advocating for the poor, was gunned down while celebrating mass.

And Martin Luther King Jr., challenging centuries of racism, stirring up violent responses to his dream of racial equality and reconciliation, was assassinated.

And there are you and me, confronted daily—in the way we vote and spend our money and take our stands, which may not be popular with the boss, the people at the club, or our friends.

I remember a great hymn from the old maroon Hymnbook that did not make the cut for the blue Hymnbook, or the one currently use. I selected it as our final hymn, and I assume the sexism in the title is the reason why it did not make the cut. “Once to Every Man and Nation” – it’s a wonderful hymn. “Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide, in the strife of truth and falsehood, for the good or evil side. Some great cause, some new decision, offering each the bloom or blight, and the choice goes by forever ‘twixt that darkness and that light.”

Each moment comes only once and what will you decide in that moment, to be God’s man, God’s woman? It is not possible to remain neutral when it comes to being God’s person in the world. Theologian Hans Küng wrote, “In the long run it is impossible to be undecided. . . . Not to choose is itself a choice.”

The account of the final twenty-four hours in Jesus’ life is more than a story. It is, according to John Buchanan, a mirror held up to human life, life in the world where it is easy to compromise, to fail to do the right thing, to avoid conflict and controversy—a mirror held up to your life and mine.

And today it brings us to the question a Roman governor once asked publicly but which, in fact, is a deeply personal question to you and to me: “What shall I do with Jesus who is called the Christ?”

It was a tumultuous scene. There were religious leaders desperately trying to preserve their privilege; political leaders trying to maintain their authority; the police trying to keep public order; a crowd of people, so easily manipulated, becoming violent; soldiers, bored, doing their job, torturing their prisoner. And in the middle of all is that too familiar human reality, there is one quiet figure whose silent dignity rises above it all, and we begin to see the king, God’s man, the savior of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ.

On foggy nights over a lake in Switzerland a ghost hovers, washing his hands, over and over, saying, “What shall I do with Jesus who is called the Christ?”

Today that question is put to us. What shall we, you and I, do with Jesus?
Amen.