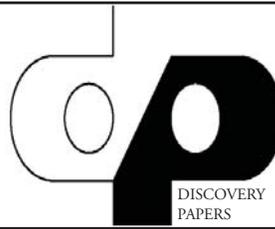


I, BARABBAS

SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK



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Mark 15:1-15
46th Message
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As a boy, I was troubled by the scene depicted in Mark 15:1-15. I hadn't read this part of Mark's gospel. In fact, I hadn't read the Bible at all—not one word of it. But I watched television, and at Easter time, I watched movies about Jesus. I was stunned that the crowd shouted for the crucifixion of Jesus. Wasn't he a good man? Why did they choose against him? Why did he have to die? Considering the scene in its historical and theological context will help us address these questions.

Members of the Sanhedrin, the supreme Jewish council in Jerusalem, determined that Jesus was a menace, and they wanted to do away with him. Having not the authority to carry out capital punishment, they called witnesses and questioned Jesus in order to gather evidence against him and present him to Pilate, the governor of the region of Judea, as a threat to Roman rule. Answering a question by the high priest, Jesus said he was the Christ, the ultimate Jewish king. The Jewish leaders hoped to use Jesus' claim against him as they took the next step.

Pilate questions Jesus

Mark 15:1-5:

¹Early in the morning the chief priests with the elders and scribes and the whole Council, immediately held a consultation; and binding Jesus, they led Him away and delivered Him to Pilate. ²Pilate questioned Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" And He answered him, "It is as you say." ³The chief priests began to accuse Him harshly. ⁴Then Pilate questioned Him again, saying, "Do You not answer? See how many charges they bring against You!" ⁵But Jesus made no further answer; so Pilate was amazed.¹

Members of the Sanhedrin, comprising chief priests, elders, and scribes, hand Jesus over to Pilate, a Gentile ruler, just as Jesus predicted they would (Mark 10:33). For Jews to hand Jesus, one of their own, over to the pagans means they hold him in special contempt. They bind him, sort of like a priest would bind a sacrificial lamb to the altar (Psalm 118:27). Unbeknownst to them, members of the Sanhedrin bind the new Passover lamb,

whose death will effect the new exodus: freedom not from Egypt or Rome but from Satan, sin, and death. They lead Jesus, the Servant of the Lord, away, "like a lamb that is led to slaughter." "By oppression and judgment He was taken away" (Isaiah 53:7-8).

If Jesus is the Son of God, as Mark says he is, where is God? In Psalm 2, the psalmist said the nations and their rulers "take counsel" against God and his Anointed, his Son, saying, "Let us tear their fetters apart / And cast away their cords from us." Now, the rulers of Israel hold a "consultation" to put the Christ to death. The psalmist said that God laughs and scoffs at those who plot against his Son and warns that God will terrify them in the fury of his anger (Psalm 2:1-5). Where is the God who promised to act on behalf of his Son? What kind of God allows his Son to be bound by enemies bent on tearing off and casting away divine fetters and cords? God gave Samson, an early—and seriously flawed—ruler in Israel, supernatural strength to break the bonds of his enemies (Judges 15:14; 16:9, 12). Jesus, the flawless Son, remains bound. Is the God of Jesus helpless? Non-existent? A heartless Father?

Charges that the Sanhedrin brought against Jesus inform Pilate's question to Jesus: "Are You the King of the Jews?" The Sanhedrin apparently translated Jesus' messianic claim into words that a Gentile would understand. If Jesus claimed to be the king of the Jews, then Pilate would assume that he's a threat to Roman rule. But Jesus, having been beaten and bound by the Jewish leaders, hardly looked like a king. Pilate's words can also be translated, "You are the king of the Jews?!" We might hear Pilate, no friend of the Jews, laughing barely underneath his breath. He's probably thinking something like, "You'd make a worthy king for such a sorry lot."

Although Jesus answered the Jewish high priest directly and claimed to be the Christ, he answers the Roman governor in an evasive manner. Literally, to the question concerning whether he is the king of the Jews, Jesus answers, "You say." By letting Pilate's words speak for themselves, he is saying, "Yes, I am king of the Jews, but you, Pilate, don't know what that means" (John 18:34-38).

Two words: "You say." Beyond that, Jesus says nothing, despite the litany of charges brought against him.

He didn't defend himself against the false and inconsistent testimony before the Jewish council. Neither does he answer the charges the Jewish council brings against him before Pilate. In each case, both before the Sanhedrin and before Pilate, he only speaks regarding his identity. He will go to his death as the Christ. He has, from his perspective, said all that needs to be said. His silence is that of a confident king. Again, Jesus sees himself as the Servant of the Lord, who, "like a sheep that is silent before its shearers," gives his life "a ransom for many" (Isaiah 53:7, Mark 10:45). He doesn't speak because he knows that the bitter cup is his to drink and that the awful hour has come.

In that Jesus only speaks of his identity, he simplifies things for us. His sole contention, under intense pressure, is simply this: he is the Christ. Those of us who hear the claim, then, simply have to respond to it. True or not?

Well, the Roman governor isn't accustomed to such silence. Defendants either profess their innocence or defiantly assert the righteousness of their cause. Jesus does neither, so that Pilate is amazed. Isaiah, though, wouldn't have been surprised.

How will Pilate decide?

The plot thickens

Mark 15:6-8:

⁶Now at the feast he used to release for them any one prisoner whom they requested. ⁷The man named Barabbas had been imprisoned with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the insurrection. ⁸The crowd went up and began asking him to do as he had been accustomed to do for them.

The derivation of Pilate's customary release of a Jewish prisoner in commemoration of the Passover is unknown. Jews, however, would be reminded of what the Passover commemorates: the release not simply of an individual but of an entire nation. Many Jews longed for God to rescue them again, not from Egypt this time but from Rome. Literally, Pilate would release a prisoner for whom the Jews "interceded." Isaiah, on the other hand, said that God would reward the Servant of the Lord because he "interceded for the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:12).

Having introduced us to Pilate's custom, Mark introduces us to Barabbas, who so longed for the freedom of his people that he took up arms against Rome. Jesus

disappointed many people by failing to lead the kind of revolution for which Barabbas would gladly shed his blood. To many Jews, Barabbas was a freedom fighter. To the Romans, he was a terrorist. As is often the case in every age, one country's freedom fighter is another country's terrorist.

The name Barabbas means "Son of the father." With such a name, he symbolizes his people. When Israel was enslaved to Egypt, God told Moses to inform Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, "Israel is My son" (Exodus 4:22). Israel was God's son, the son of the Father. Barabbas, imprisoned by Rome, personifies Israel. In Barabbas, Israel can see itself. As the son of the Father, Israel as a whole wants to cast off the fetters of Rome. On the other hand, Mark has identified Jesus, another Jew, as the Son of God. Jesus too is Israel personified—not from Israel's perspective but from God's. Jesus, the Son of God, is all that God wanted Israel to be. As Jesus was bound by the Sanhedrin, Barabbas literally was "bound" by Rome.

The crowd asks Pilate to release the prisoner of its choice, as was his custom. Up to this point, crowds in Jerusalem have responded favorably to Jesus (Mark 11:18; 12:12, 37; 14:1-2). Has the crowd approached Pilate to ask him to release Jesus? Pilate seems to think so.

The choice

Mark 14:9-15:

⁹Pilate answered them, saying, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" ¹⁰For he was aware that the chief priests had handed Him over because of envy. ¹¹But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to ask him to release Barabbas for them instead. ¹²Answering again, Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Him whom you call the King of the Jews?" ¹³They shouted back, "Crucify Him!" ¹⁴But Pilate said to them, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify Him!" ¹⁵Wishing to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas for them, and after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified.

Pilate has examined Jesus and determined that he posed little or no threat to Roman rule. Even if Jesus claimed to be king of the Jews, Pilate could tell that he wasn't the kind to take up arms. He knew what revolutionaries looked and sounded like. Someone who doesn't defend himself or spout revolutionary slogans? No, unlike

Barabbas, Jesus wasn't a revolutionary—at least not that kind of revolutionary.

Pilate, like the governor at the end of a gladiatorial contest, gives the crowd a choice. He knew that the chief priests were envious of Jesus, and he assumes that the crowd will choose him. He calls Jesus the king of the Jews to persuade the Jewish crowd to choose him. First, Pilate wants the crowd to choose Jesus because if it selects someone else, it will probably choose someone such as Barabbas—someone who posed a more overt threat to Roman rule. And second, Pilate wants the crowd to choose Jesus because he wanted to snub the Jewish leaders. He always wanted to snub the Jewish leaders. Whatever the Sanhedrin wanted, Pilate wanted the opposite.

The Jewish leaders, though, are one step ahead of Pilate. They had already put their heads together and made a plan in the house of the high priest before taking Jesus to Pilate. They infiltrated the crowd and campaigned for Barabbas. Although Jesus was popular with crowds in Jerusalem earlier in the week, Barabbas was the kind of leader many people preferred. Furthermore, Jesus was a northerner, an outsider, a newcomer. Members of the Sanhedrin probably used the blasphemy charge against Jesus and reminded the crowd that he spoke against the temple. Also, new intelligence has been gathered on Jesus: he has claimed to be the Christ. That claim comes off as ridiculous now that Jesus is in chains. Jesus doesn't fit the job description. Fire-breathing Barabbas, in fact, was a better fit. Jesus has not only fallen from favor, he now poses a threat to national aspirations. The crowd makes its choice: Barabbas.

Oops. Pilate got himself outmaneuvered. He's already positioned Jesus as a prisoner, so he can't release him without losing face. Apparently, he still holds out hope that the crowd will change its mind and choose Jesus. Therefore, he approaches the question from a different angle. He asks the crowd what he should do with Jesus, whom "you call" the king of the Jews. If the crowd calls Jesus its king, surely the crowd must want its king. So Pilate thinks. The crowd, however, demands that Pilate crucify Jesus.²

Oops again. Mark, just as he doesn't explicitly say how the Jewish leaders managed to persuade the crowd to choose Barabbas, doesn't explicitly say why the crowd demanded the crucifixion of Jesus. Pilate himself wants to know the reason: "Why, what evil has He done?" The members of the crowd don't answer Pilate's question. They can't answer the question—or at least they can't answer it if they want to stay in Pilate's good graces. They want

Jesus crucified not for the evil that he has done, but for the evil that he hasn't done: he hasn't taken up a sword against Rome. He's claimed to be the Christ, but he hasn't endorsed nationalist ambitions. The crowd can't tell Pilate, "We want you to crucify him because he won't take up a sword against you."

Pilate hoped to win over the crowd by calling Jesus the king of the Jews. Instead, he incites it, because Jesus is a disappointment as the king of the Jews. The crowd wants a winner. Jesus, from its perspective, is a loser. How would you feel if someone, in an effort to ingratiate himself to you, referred to someone else who undermines everything you stand for as your king, the king you want? You might, at the least, raise your voice. The crowd "shouted" and then "shouted all the more" for Pilate to crucify Jesus. In contrast, Jesus was silent before Pilate. Again, Pilate gets himself outmaneuvered. He plays right into the hands of the Jewish leaders, who worked the crowd to perfection.

Pilate can't keep events from spinning out of control. Jesus, or at least the uproar caused by his arrest, has become a threat to Pilate. Wishing to avoid a riot, he pushes justice aside and satisfies the crowd. He releases Barabbas and orders the scourging and crucifixion of Jesus. Checkmate. The Sanhedrin wins—that is, if you call the crucifixion of the Son of God winning.³ Barabbas the murderer, "Son of the father," goes free. Jesus the innocent, the Son of God, goes to the cross. Jesus takes the place of Barabbas. He takes the place of Israel. He takes the place of us all so that we might fulfill our destinies as sons and daughters of the Father.

Where is God? Why does he allow his Son to be treated in such a way? He's doing something much deeper, much larger, and much better than anyone could have imagined. Again, we hear from Isaiah 53:4-6:

"Surely our griefs He Himself bore,
And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten of God, and afflicted.
But He was pierced through for our transgressions,
The chastening of our well-being fell upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed.
All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way,
But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all
To fall on Him."

The struggle for power and freedom

In Mark's narrative, the Sanhedrin, Pilate, and the crowd all decide against Jesus. Therefore, they are all implicated in the death of Jesus. Perhaps, though, as we connect with the narrative, we see something of ourselves in the leaders, Pilate, and the crowd. To the Sanhedrin, Jesus was a menace, a threat to their tenuous hold on power. To Pilate, Jesus was a nuisance, but in the end, Jesus also threatened even Pilate's more secure hold on power. To the crowd, Jesus was an option, as long as they could project their dreams of liberation onto him. We may not think of Jesus as a menace, a nuisance, or an option, but think again.

Make no mistake: Jesus threatens your hold on power, whether it is tenuous, like that of the leaders, or (apparently) more secure, like that of Pilate. And, well, anyone who threatens our hold on power—our fierce determination to control our own lives—is either a menace or a nuisance, depending on how severe we perceive the threat to be. We either want to cast off divine fetters, in the manner of the Sanhedrin, or laugh them off, in the manner of Pilate. Whether you manipulate the crowd, like the leaders, or satisfy the crowd, like Pilate, you're trying to stay in control. Whether you abuse justice, like the Sanhedrin, or push justice aside, like Pilate, you're trying to stay in control. When you try to stay in control, you dispatch with the Lord.

Furthermore, like the crowd, all of us have conceived of Jesus simply as an option. At times we have chosen either for him, when he seemed to endorse our dreams, or against him, when he failed to endorse those dreams. Amazingly, God gives us a choice. In the end, we choose not the Son of God, who from our perspective sits on his hands, but someone like Barabbas, a man of action, who promises to improve our lot. We choose a man or a woman who we think will meet our needs better than Jesus.

The leaders and Pilate struggle for power. The crowd dreams of freedom. It's an old story, going back not simply to Mark 15 but to Genesis 3. The first humans struggled with God for power. They dreamed of freedom. They reached for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It was a power grab for the fruit of freedom. Their story gets played out in every generation, as men and women fight, whether consciously or not, to cast off divine fetters and win their freedom from God. The old story is the human story. It's our story.

Why did Jesus die? From one angle, he died be-

cause the Sanhedrin, Pilate, and the crowd wanted him dead. From another angle, if we see ourselves in the Sanhedrin, Pilate, or the crowd, he died because we wanted him dead. We wanted the Son of God dead so that we could stay in control, so that we could be free to do as we choose.

Eugene Peterson puts it this way:

Post-Eden Adams and Eves are willing to pay their respects to God, but they don't want him invading their turf.⁴

Ostensibly, many of us pay our respects. In reality, because God has invaded our turf, we sent his Son to the cross. Film star Mel Gibson, who has by all appearances made a mess of his life, got at least one thing right when filming *The Passion of the Christ*: in the crucifixion scene, he held, with his own hand, the first nail that was driven through the hand of Jesus.

So, we're in control. So, we're free. Or, maybe not. If you think about it, your hold on life is pretty shaky. Pretty much anything and everything you value can slip through your fingers at any moment. Sure, you're free to do what you want, but the more you do what you want, the more you become enslaved to doing what you want, the less you enjoy doing what you want, and the more doing what you want destroys you. In our power struggle, in our lust for freedom, we unwittingly traded our loving God for a malevolent tyrant, sin, which rewards us for our service with death. Sin made us its prisoner and sentenced us to death. Personal control and personal freedom have imprisoned us. Pascal observes:

Human beings are peculiar in that they pursue ends they know will bring them no satisfaction, gorge themselves with food that cannot nourish and with pleasures that cannot please.

We are Barabbas.

We go free

Like Barabbas, we are sons (or daughters) of the Father, created in his image: God's representatives on earth. Barabbas was a rebel, and so are we. Instead of delighting in God and in his delight of us, we turned away from him, gave our lives to sin, and became prisoners of sin. Sin distorts humanity. It mangles us. It twists you. If you want a visual image of what sin does to us, picture a man hanging on a cross. By the time the cross gets through with you, you're barely human. That's us: sinners and rebels, mangled

and twisted—barely human. That’s what we chose. That’s what we deserve.

They scourged Jesus, ripping his flesh to pieces. They handed him over to be crucified. Didn’t Jesus say, “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13)? The Son of God lays down his life for us: his friends, his brothers and sisters, the sons and daughters of God. He intercedes for us. He takes our place. We go free, truly free, deeply free: free to be human, free to serve God. Amazingly, though our sin was responsible for the death of Jesus, we benefit from the death of Jesus. The stunning response of God to our sin, which sent his Son to the cross, is to liberate us from our sin. We are guilty no more: “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). We are prisoners no more: “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death” (Romans 8:2).

The apostle Paul tells us how to live in freedom in Romans 6-8. Faith in Christ unites us with Christ and transfers us from the realm of sin to the kingdom of God. We are no longer servants of sin but servants of God. Therefore, Paul says, offer yourselves up to your new master, God, who is so powerful and so tender that we can, by the Holy Spirit, cry out to him the way Jesus cried out to him in Gethsemane, with intimacy and trust, “Abba! Father!” Therefore, as a free man or woman, offer yourself up to your heavenly Father. During my regular prayer times, I include “oblation,” a moment in which I offer myself up for God. Often, I find myself overwhelmed that God actually wants me, broken as I am, and that he wants my offering, broken as it is. You may want to consider starting your day, as you wake up or as you get out of bed, by simply, briefly, and consciously offering yourself up to the Lord and giving your day to him. Be free!

Why did Jesus die? As a boy glued to the television set, I didn’t know. Now, I have an answer. He died because I am the Sanhedrin, I am Pilate, and I am the crowd. Thank God, though, that I am also Barabbas, that Jesus takes my place and I go free.

The mystery of Barabbas

In Mark’s narrative, Barabbas never says a word. In the other gospels also, Barabbas is silent. There is no

record of any interaction between Barabbas and Jesus. The New Testament doesn’t tell us what became of Barabbas. If you are Barabbas, then the mystery of Barabbas means this: you decide. What will you do with Jesus? What will you say to him? How will you live, now that he has won your freedom?

In the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, Red, a prisoner for more than thirty years, is finally released. He’s an old man, but he boards a bus with hope for the future:

I find I’m so excited I can barely sit still or hold a thought in my head. I think it’s the excitement only a free man can feel—a free man at the start of a long journey whose conclusion is uncertain.⁵

No matter how far along you are in your journey, remember: the way of the Lord stretches out forever. You’re just beginning.

NOTES

¹Literary structure:

- A Sanhedrin “delivered” Jesus to Pilate (1)
- B Pilate: “Are You the King of the Jews” (2a)
- B’ Jesus: Literally, “You say” (2b-3)
- C Pilate: “Do You not answer? See how many charges ...” (4)
- C’ Jesus: No further answer (5)
- X Possible choice: Barabbas, who committed murder in the resurrection (6-8)
- D Pilate: “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?” (9-10)
- D’ Crowd: Asked for Barabbas.
- E Pilate: What about the king of the Jews? (12)
- E’ Crowd: “Crucify Him,” shouting all the more (13-14)

A’ Pilate: Literally “delivered” Jesus to be crucified (15)

²Crucifixion was a Roman form of execution. It said to the Jews in stark, brutal terms, “We’re in charge here, and you’re not.”

³The verb often translated “do” (*poieō*) features prominently in the narrative and highlights the contrasting behavior of the characters:

- 1) What Barabbas “committed” (*poieō*): murder.
- 2) What the crowd wanted Pilate to “do” (*poieō*): release a prisoner (Barabbas).
- 3) What Jesus has “done” (*poieō*): no evil.
- 4) What Pilate wished literally to “do” (*poieō*): satisfy the crowd.

⁴Eugene Petersen, *The Contemplative Pastor* (Grand Rapids, Mich. 1989), 31-32.

⁵*The Shawshank Redemption* (Castle Rock, 1994).