

# “Hero Turns Criminal”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – March 27, 2022*

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent

Psalm 145:1-3, 10-13

Rev. John Wahl

John 18:28-40

Our journey through John’s Gospel, which moved rapidly in describing his healings and miraculous signs, now slows down – in these final weeks of Lent – to zoom in on the arrest, trail and crucifixion of Jesus. What this close look reveals is the contrast between the kingdom within which this story is set – a vassal province of the Roman Empire, ruled by its prefect, Pilate – and a different kind of kingdom that Jesus is offering; one based not on violence and oppressive power but hope for and testimony to the truth.

“What is truth?” Pilate asks Jesus. Jesus’ truth – his words, actions, and very person – are expressions of the divine love that he embodies and comes to reveal. “God so loved the world “that he sent his only Son, “full of grace and truth.” Unlike in the kingdoms of this world – that rely on political coercion, division, and misinformation– Jesus’ truth brings freedom, unity, and joy. The real question in John’s gospel is not *what*, but *who* is truth. It is not an abstract; the truth is incarnational, made into flesh. And so, his followers are called to embody the way of Jesus, to enact the relationship and inhabit the kingdom of truth.<sup>1</sup>

As prefect, Pilate was the highest-ranking representative of the Roman Empire in the region. His primary responsibilities were to safeguard the existing power structure and efficiently extractive economy that made the Roman Empire function. This meant maintaining public order through the decisive use of state violence and the disciplined collection of taxes. It also meant forcefully squelching any whiff of resistance or rebellion.

In the Roman legal system, Pilate also functioned as the highest judge in the province, swiftly deciding civil and criminal cases. Though ultimately responsible to his superiors (including the emperor), the prefect exercised day-to-day power with a fair amount of freedom. Pilate was the only person whose decision that Jesus was a criminal wasn’t a matter of opinion but legal judgment. If he said it was so, it was a fact. In the context of this kind of autocratic power, undergirded by the omnipresent threat of violence, truth is arbitrary; it is the property of the state.

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bible Worm Podcast*

Jerusalem would have been full of pilgrims who had traveled there for the Passover, and crowds can be unpredictable and volatile. This concern about crowd control is likely the reason Pilate himself is here; he probably preferred to be at his palace by the Caesarea seaside, a more modern and less superstitious place than Jerusalem with fewer zealots and less sacrificial blood.

So, when Jesus is presented at Pilate's doorstep on the morning of the Passover Day, he – in the interest of keeping order – pays attention. He steps outside to meet them, demonstrating respect for the Jewish religious leaders – who would have become defiled upon entering a gentile residence – and asks them what charge they bring.

Their response would be comical in any other setting: “If he had done nothing wrong,” if he were not a criminal, “we wouldn't have handed him over to you.” It's a lame answer to the question of accusation. This is the language of a lynch mob or a kangaroo court, and Pilate's first impulse seems to be avoiding involvement. *This sounds like your problem*, “Take him yourselves and judge him according to your Law.”

The Jewish leaders say they're not allowed to enact capital punishment, which isn't the full truth. Jewish law did allow death by stoning, provided there was unanimous agreement on the ruling council. Perhaps they didn't have the votes; maybe they were aware of the bad optics and internal divisions it would cause. For whatever reason, they preferred to hang the blame on Rome. Thus, they needed a favor from Pilate; they ask him to use the violent machinery of the empire to handle their problem.<sup>2</sup>

There is an important translation decision to consider here. While our text consistently describes this group backing, even insisting on, crucifying Jesus as the “Jewish leaders,” many translations simply call them the “Jews.” As we know, and as has become obvious over the last month as we've watched Putin lead his nation into war against its neighbor, Ukraine, no nation is a monolith; often times, the aims and interests of leaders are in direct contrast to those of some or even most of its citizens. Tragically, leaders will use any means available – lies, misinformation, coercion, and unholy alliance – even at unconscionable cost, to amass or maintain power.

Too many times, throughout history, this story of unholy alliance of particular people seeking to hold on to fragile power in the setting of empire has led to broad and brutal acts and attitudes of anti-Semitism. Just as not every person of German or Japanese heritage should have been held responsible for the actions of their nation's leaders in the Second World War; and just as not all, or even most, Russians today buy into the disinformation and lies that Putin promotes; not all Jews in Jesus' day

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<sup>2</sup> From *Worship-Well* weekly resources

sought or colluded in his death. To place blame there is to dismiss the wider human tendency to act on fear and ally with power.

When Pilate goes inside to question Jesus, he is looking for facts. He is not a Jew; while he is sensitive to the ritual request of the Jewish leaders, he is not trying to remain pure. Instead, he is performing a threat assessment to determine how much force he'll need to use to keep control of the situation. His questions to Jesus try to establish some baseline of information: "Are you a king?" "What have you done?"

Jesus has not claimed to be a king, but he responds to Pilate in terms that he might be able to understand. "My kingdom isn't from here," Jesus says. If it were, then his followers would be acting in the same way as those embedded in the Roman system; they would employ lies and coercion, they would seek and maintain power through the pervasive threat of violence. All their decisions would be based on calculations of fear and control.

In this world – the world of empire and unholy alliance – being a king/autocrat means there are people who will coerce, lie, and fight (commit violence) for you. The way of Jesus rejects the need for threats of violence. Jesus' kingdom – which he embodied in the act of washing the feet of his followers – is not from here. And even though Jesus introduced this different way of ruling in this world, and encouraged his followers to testify to its truth, it is hard for us humans to make this course correction; it can be dangerous, it can even get you killed.

This week's Lenten devotional focuses on Vincent Van Gogh's depiction of the Parable of the Sower from Luke, chapter 13. In this parable, Jesus describes God's kingdom as being like a farmer going out into the field to sow seed; scattering it liberally, seemingly without discretion, across the ground. During his brief career, Van Gogh depicted this story in his art more than thirty times, two of which we have to look at here today. In both, the field is lit by a low, bright sun – maybe it is dusk, maybe dawn. In the second, the sun appears like a halo, framing the bowed head of the Sower. The tree may well represent the cross upon which the planter, after finishing working with the soil, would be raised up.

Of course, the gospels are full of these images from farming; portraying a God that is planting, pruning, feeding, watering, and providing growth. God so loves the world – the earth and all its created things – that God cannot leave it alone. Instead, God becomes flesh and lives among us, teaching us how to love and serve each other, how to return and become restored in good relationship. In this different kingdom, the king comes not to be served, but to serve; not to maintain power through violence and lies, but to embody truth; not to steal and destroy from the flock, but to protect them, even laying down life for them.

Jesus' power plays on a different field than Pilate's. This turns out to be the main source of confusion and irritation for the Roman prefect throughout their exchange. When Pilate comes back out to meet the Jewish leaders, telling them that he has found no charge to make against Jesus, he is sharing with them culpability for what will happen. Neither party will be able to wash their hands of their choices.

Thus, Pilate presents the Jewish leaders with an option; according to their custom, on the Passover, one prisoner could be released. Here was a chance to receive Jesus and acknowledge his innocence. But, even before a choice is presented, they implore for the release of an outlaw, a bandit, named Barabbas. It was bandits, according to Jesus, that beat, rob, and leave a man by the road in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. It was bandits that Jesus warned would come to steal from the sheep-pen when he said, "I am the Good Shepherd." They have no regard for life, for lawfulness, for truth. They willingly engage in lies, destruction, thievery, and violence.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, this odd dance over power and jurisdiction continues. Pilate and the Jewish leaders do not trust or even like each other, they are not truthful with one another. Still, they operate in the same kingdom; where power is supported by misinformation and fear. They would rather see the bandit released, even at harm to the community, than for Jesus to challenge the status quo by scattering seeds of compassion, non-violence, and humility.

Jesus says that his kingdom is not of this world; it is not violent or deceptive; it does not depend on propaganda or misinformation; it does not favor the few at the expense of many. This kingdom, instead, rests on making God known in the world; it relies on Sowers bearing witness to the truth – scattering the truth liberally, even without discretion – and gathering those who will listen to the voice, and follow in the way, of truth and life. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Karoline Lewis, *John: Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries*