

# “Praising Turns Into Taunting”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – April 3, 2022*

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

Psalm 146

Rev. John Wahl

John 19:1-16a

## *Introduction*

Our passage today picks up the story of Jesus’ trial that we began last Sunday. We are at the Praetorium, Pilate’s palace in Jerusalem; Jesus has been taken inside while the Jewish leaders remain outside. Thus, Pilate keeps going back and forth, in and out, conversing with each party; until he finally brings Jesus out before them. When he appears, Jesus is mockingly dressed as a king – wearing a purple robe and a crown of thorns. As with last week, Pilate offers the Jews a choice; he is willing to release Jesus – their criminal, their king – into their hands. But again, they refuse, forcefully stating – in a clear violation of the first commandment – that they claim allegiance to none besides Caesar.

## *Read John 19:1-16a*

Unlike in the passion stories presented in the other gospels, there is no trial of Jesus, here, before the Jewish religious council. They have already decided that he is guilty and seek to convince the Romans carry out his sentence. Thus, only in John’s gospel are we given this extended exchange between Jesus and Pilate, the Roman prefect, who serves as judge and jury. After being flogged by the guards, mockingly dressed as a king, and questioned for a final time by Pilate, Jesus is brought outside the Praetorium. He is placed on the judging seat – the place Pilate normally would have sat – where Jesus listens to the prefect make one final appeal to the Jewish leaders to set him free.

In Greek, the word for judgment is, literally, “crisis.” The judgment scene in this trial portrays the crux and crisis of Christian faith. Either Jesus is a deluded and potentially dangerous blasphemer – as the Jewish leaders have accused – or Jesus is who he says he is; and John and the other gospel writers are reliable witnesses to that claim.<sup>1</sup>

By the close of this week’s reading, everyone is in crisis. Pilate doesn’t seem to know whether he is coming or going and his attempts to keep his hands clean have failed. The crowd outside the palace has failed to understand who Jesus is and

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<sup>1</sup> *Worship Well* sermon resources

claimed fealty only to the emperor. The disciples are scattered, scared and utterly absent – none are there to defend or stand beside Jesus at his trial. The only one who seems calm is the one whose fate is at stake.

We are familiar with crisis; while you could argue that the word is being over-used, we feel the effects of simultaneous crises in public and mental health, energy supplies, food prices, war, migration, and international politics. When they all come at us at once, it can be overwhelming.

But in John's gospel, judgment is what individuals bring upon themselves in reaction to Jesus' revelation. John does not describe a final judgment to come; it is a present reality. Some, like the Samaritan woman at the well, already understand who Jesus is and witness to it. Others, like Pilate, are not able to see Jesus for who he is; or understand where he has come from. And the Jewish leaders – afraid of who Jesus claims to be and how it would create a crisis within the current power structure – reject him outright, soliciting the Romans to be complicit in their plan to remove the threat Jesus poses.

We are told that, while this crisis point is coming to a head, Pilate becomes even more afraid. Like all bullies, who use intimidation tactics in order to keep people in line, Pilate fears that he will lose control of the situation. Unwittingly, this is precisely what happens when Jesus is dressed as a king and placed on the judging seat. The Jewish leaders are in no position to make demands; but end up getting from Pilate exactly what they ask for. Whether or not Pilate truly believes in his innocence, he ends up condemning Jesus to die.<sup>2</sup>

The way that John narrates this trial is intended to create a crisis within his readers, as well. We are left to imagine whether we, like the disciples, would have run away and hid; or whether, like the Jewish leaders, we would have joined the call for this troublemaker to be silenced; or whether, like Pilate, we would have acceded whatever power or influence we had to the cries of an angry mob. Though Jesus is placed on the judging seat, he does not act to condemn anyone involved; all the players in the story are instead judged by their own actions.

We, of course, have the distinct advantage of living on the other side of the resurrection. Unlike the disciples, we know that because Jesus rises again, death does not have the final say. We see stories of how followers like Mary Magdalene and Thomas and John are granted the grace to see that because Jesus lives, we can also live renewed lives; that we don't need to enter into unholy alliances or fear the

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<sup>2</sup> Craig Satterlee from *WorkingPreacher.com*

wrath of bullies. With the power of the Spirit, we – as individuals and the church – can stand up for what we believe and against the powers that corrupt.

Just imagine, as Easter people, we can choose to support the companies and organizations that share our values of compassion and justice. We can choose to speak out against bullies and their policies of intimidation and fear. We can choose to encourage statements and behaviors that offer welcome and acceptance. We can choose to step out on behalf of preventing violence and protecting the planet.

We can do these things, and – in many ways – we already do. Still, we know how easy it can be to participate – whether actively or through ignorance and indifference – in alliances that do harm rather than good. We could each cite examples where this is true on a global, national, state, and local levels. We form these alliances with how we manage our money, spend our time, place our energy, and direct our prayers.

Even when we see Jesus dressed in a purple robe and wearing a crown, we may still deny he is our king. We reject his claim for an alternate kingdom; where both friends and strangers are welcomed, where servants are known not by their violence, but by their love. Our words and actions still suggest that our first allegiance is to something or someone else; not to the king, the way, the truth and the life, or the fellowship of believers, but instead to some particular nation or party or faction or religious institution.<sup>3</sup>

But, on the other side of the resurrection, we have been given glimpses of the good news of God's grace. For, even when truth-telling love is flogged, mocked, and killed out of greed or ignorance or fear, that is never the end of the story. Jesus taught – and then showed – that the seed which dies goes on to bear much fruit.

The authorities of this world – and those who are complicit with them – can choose either to condemn or to set free; to rule by fear and intimidation or by grace. But, in both life and death, we do not belong to them; we belong to God. Nothing that we do – and nothing that can be done to us – will separate us from the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. We may imagine that we are alone; that we turned too far away from God or that God has turned away from us. We might even think that all the power in the world is held in the hands of the corrupt, the evil, or the indifferent.

But the good news is that even when we feel powerless, God in Christ cannot be held by the tombs of this world. Even when we find ourselves in the crux

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<sup>3</sup> Meda Stamper from *WorkingPreacher.com*

of crisis, when it seems that life has reached its end, new birth is possible. In the midst of the kingdoms of this world – with all their unholy alliances and violent ways – a new kingdom is being born.

And, before us, on the judging seat, is its king. We could run and hide, or we can mock or turn away because it doesn't match what we expected to see. Or, instead, we can band together as his followers to pray and practice in a way that longs for peace instead of power; we can seek to love God with all we have – heart, body, and mind – and love others in the same way. We can walk our way through crisis-filled Good Fridays – and every other day like it – with the sure and certain hope that Easter is coming.

As we come to the table today, know that God is here with us; God chose to be revealed to us through incarnation, in flesh and blood; to live and to die, only to live again. Let us therefore claim, as we take this bread and cup offered to us, who we are and whose we are. Amen.