

Through Lent we have been reading through the passion narrative, the events leading up to and including the death of Christ. Today is when we move into the real tragedy of the story. The pain and torment. I will be honest and say that I want to avoid this part of the story. Who wants to read about a group of people wanting to crucify someone. But because it is Jesus' story it is our story. This story is a real tragedy. But tragedies serve a purpose in our lives. Tragedies lead us into self-reflection.

In the story we are going to read, there are two trials. The first trial we read some from last week. This first trial is before the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin is the Jewish religious council. These religious leaders are threatened by the authority that Jesus seems to be claiming. If he ascends in power as "King of the Jews" then as religious leaders their power may be taken away. Jesus is a rioter in their mind and must be stopped.

So they have a trial, they bring in false witnesses, and they convict Jesus of leading an insurrection against them. But the Sanhedrin do not have the power to sentence someone to the death penalty. They need the government to do that. The Roman Empire controlled the area. The Romans had governors who exercised authority in different regions. The governor for the area including Jerusalem was Pontius Pilate. For the Sanhedrin to get Jesus crucified, they needed the government to step in. They needed Pontius Pilate.

Read Mark 15:1-20

In the Apostle's Creed, we recite the words, "suffered under Pontius Pilate." At this time of the year we are invited to read the story of Jesus appearing before Pontius Pilate. But who was Pontius Pilate?

Pontius Pilate was governor for ten years from the years 26-36. During this time, the Jews carried out several riots against Rome. The Jews hated the Romans. They hated the Roman taxes. They hated the Roman insensitivities to their religion. The Jews of that time were constantly on the edge of rioting, especially the Galileans.

Let me tell you about one of these riots which come from some sources outside of the Bible. Jerusalem had a water problem. They did not have enough water to take care of the needs of the city residents. So Pilate wanted to undertake a major government works project to build an aqueduct to the city. He figured that raising taxes would not give him enough money to carry out his project. Pilate saw the wealth of the Jewish religious authorities and decided to take money from the temple treasury in order to build a pipeline to bring water into the city of Jerusalem.

When the Jews realized that Pilate was taking money from the temple treasury, the Jewish people began to riot. Pilate responded to the riots by ordering his soldiers to dress up as plain-clothes men, secretly to arm themselves and mingle with the rioting mobs. As the signal was given, these Roman soldiers, dressed as civilians, bludgeoned the Jews with their weapons, clubbing and stabbing the Jews to death. You can only imagine how much the Jews hated Pilate and what kind of ruler he was. Even the neighboring Roman governors started sending letters to Emperor Tiberius in Rome complaining about Pilate's brutality in handling the riots.

Pilate was a person who was sick of rioting. It is with this awareness of Pilate and his riots that we begin to more clearly understand what happened to Jesus on that Friday morning in Jerusalem.

Pilate had already arrived in Jerusalem with his wife and 600 troops. The soldiers had come prepared; they were well armed and trained to exercise control if another riot erupted. Normally, Pilate lived in Caesarea on the Coast, but Pilate would come to the capital city, Jerusalem, whenever the city was jammed with potentially rebellious pilgrims.

It was Passover time on that particular Thursday and Friday, and there were two-three million people jammed into Jerusalem. So Pilate came from Caesarea by the Sea, his home residence, to Jerusalem with 600 troops and 600 horses.

Thursday night, nothing happened. It was calm that Thursday night, but Friday morning, all hell breaks loose. The Sanhedrin leaders bring their charges against Jesus, telling Pilate that Jesus claims to be king of the Jews.

Pilate then questions Jesus but finds no guilt in him. Pilate wants to dismiss the whole affair as a nuisance, but the religious leaders incite the crowds and they begin rioting. In order to avoid this riot, Pilate condemns Jesus to death. He condemns him to death because he wants to avoid a riot. And Pilate hates riots.

Pilate has an opportunity to stand up to the crowd and tell the truth. Pilate has an opportunity to be different than the crowd who had been riled up to demand a crucifixion of an innocent person. But Pilate doesn't do that. Pilate is more concerned with preventing a riot than he is in standing up for what is right.

I have been reading the book, "Faithful Disagreement: Wrestling with Scripture in the Midst of Church Conflict." I attended a workshop a couple of weeks ago with several pastors and lay people led by the author. In reading this book I have come to realize how much of Scripture is written to people of faith who are in conflict with one another and who can't get along with one another. This week I read these words which jumped out to me as I was trying to understand Pilate and how he relates to us.

The author states: "A church that embodies the social, ethnic, cultural, and political divisions of the surrounding world is no real challenge to the Caesars of the world. It is only when representatives of many nations worship the world's one true Lord in unity that Caesar might get the hint that there is after all another king"

Pilate comes to represent business as usual. Of course, Pilate is more concerned with preventing a riot than standing for truth. He is a politician concerned mostly with protecting his power. He has no desire to do anything different.

But as Christians we follow a different king than the king that Pilate follows. As Christians we follow a different king than the one that the Sanhedrin followed. We follow Jesus Christ. And that should mean something. It should mean that we follow a king who laid down his life for all of humanity. We follow a king who is a servant. We follow a king who sacrificed so that others may live. We follow a king that challenges us as Christians to be different than the world around us.

Are you any different than people who are not active in their Christian faith? Is this church different than the world around us? Do we impact the world or does the world impact us? The reality is that the answer is not easy. Sometimes we are faithful and impact the world and at other times we are overly concerned with acting as the world acts.

Jesus Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate. He suffered under Pontius Pilate because Pilate refused to be different. Pilate acted just like the culture around him.

Are we like everyone else?

Or does our faithfulness to Christ make us different in any way? AMEN.

-Markquart, Edward, *Sermons from Seattle*,

http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_b_the_passion_story_GA_p3.htm

-Gench, Frances Taylor, *Faithful Disagreement: Wrestling with Scripture in the midst of Church Conflict*, WJKP, 2009

-Given: March 25, 2012 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)

Confession: The Psalmist reminds us that the earth is the Lord's and all who live in it. But we are too quick to seek to take control of the world and make it our own. Rather than being led to Christ to seek to transform the world we are too quick to allow the world to transform us. Give us courage to be different than the Pilates of the world. Give us courage to be courageous and faithful.

Prayers of the People: We come before you as people who are seeking to be faithful to you. We celebrate the times we act in such ways that you are pleased. We thank you for the folks from this congregation who have impacted others in positive ways in this community. Some of us have been in situations at school and at work when we have acted in such a way that we have brought others closer to you. Some of us have volunteered in this community and brought your love to those who are hurting and in need. Some of us have volunteered at this church in a way that has furthered the ministry of this church so that lives are touched and people are moved closer to you. We ask that you bless our best efforts and forgive us when we fall short.