Real People at Jesus’ Trial

Third in the series: “The Wonder of the Cross”

# Scripture: John 18

# Key Thought: The people at Jesus' trial help us to reflect on our own response to Jesus.

# Intro:

In film, in dramas, in books, we love real people. We can spot stereotypes and one-dimensional characters and we find them boring and artificial. That’s another thing so refreshing about our Bible. It does not varnish the stories of the disciples to make them always look perfect. When we read the Bible, we see real people like us going through real struggles. John chapter 18 that we read today is so real—so full of real people, people we can identify with still—people whose act-alike kin we can see in the world around us.

I’d like us this morning to look at the characters of this chapter and think about their situations and their actions. As we do, I believe it will help us to get perspective for our own lives and learn to be better disciples of Jesus.

# Judas the Traitor

## Judas’ inner life bears bitter fruit

One of the first characters we meet in the chapter is Judas, the traitor. In v. 5 we read, “And Judas the traitor was standing there with them…”-that is with the arresting party, not with the disciples where he should have been, but with the opposing side. The moment of shameful revelation for Judas – when his treachery would be evident to all- has come. This is not the beginning of the story about him. We know from the explanations of John that greed was in Judas heart. Like sin always does, it had now led Judas further than he may have ever thought it would. For a price, he had conspired with the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. Here in this chapter we learn that Judas knew the place where Jesus often went with his disciples and brought Christ’s enemies there. Luke tells us the ultimate irony–that Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss (Luke 22:48).

## Wolves among the flock today

Today, among the professing followers of Jesus in churches, there are still Judases–those who appear to be on his side, who talk about loving God, but they are allowing greed or lust or some other vice to erode their faith. In their private lives they are secretly working against the things they stand for on Sunday. Such people know the language of the church, they know how to look good, but their hearts are far away. Jesus called them “wolves” among the sheep (Matt. 7:14). One day their true colors will be revealed and unfortunately, when that happens, usually many newer or weaker followers of Jesus are offended and fall away because of a kind of betrayal. To such people, Jesus issued a stern warning.

"Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come! Mt. 18:7 NIV

# Peter, Conflicted Disciple

## Peter, zealous yet fearful

Another character in the chapter is the Apostle Peter. In contrast to Judas, Peter’s motives were good. He had declared in the upper room that he was willing to die with Jesus (John 13:37). His actions here in drawing the sword in the face of a delegation of soldiers, indicate that he fully intended to stick by Jesus to the death. If Jesus had let him die fighting among the apostles, he would have. But Jesus told him to put the sword away. Then life began to unfold much differently than Peter had anticipated. Jesus is arrested and Peter ends up isolated in an unfamiliar place, courageously trying to stay near to Jesus, yet afraid and very vulnerable. When the girl who opened the gate to the high priest’s courtyard asked him if he was one of Jesus’ disciples, he conveniently answered with a little white lie, “No.” Inside the courtyard, warming himself by the fire among the opposition, he was asked again about being one of Jesus followers. Again, he denied it. Then a relative of the man whose ear he had cut off in the garden spotted him. Maybe he gave him one of those uncomfortable, “Don’t I recognize you” stares. Then he sneered, “Didn’t I see you with him in the olive grove?” Now Peter felt genuinely in danger and alone and he denied knowing Jesus more vehemently than before. At once, the rooster began to crow, and Peter remembered Jesus words (John 13:38).

## Our denials

How many times have we seen ourselves in this story of Peter outside the house of Caiaphas? We talk a good line in church. We have high intentions. And we do well when we are among Christian friends and our circumstances are favorable to our confession. But then we end up in a situation where life doesn’t unfold quite as we had planned. We find ourselves isolated or among Jesus’ opposition. Then it’s different. It’s so easy to let a lying silence reign, to deflect suspicion about our faith with an irreverent comment, or even speak an outright denial much like Peter did. Our inner idea is to avoid the possibility of persecution. All we lack right then is the rooster crowing to remind us of the sadness of our betrayal of our Lord—to shock us back to reality and help us get perspective on we what we are really doing. Hopefully we also will respond with tears of remorse and quick repentance as Peter did. We are told in the Gospel of Luke that after the rooster crowed, he went out and wept bitterly (Luke 22:62). If we will also be repentant, then we will be on our way, by the Spirit’s help to be a bold witness at the next opportunity just as Peter was later at Pentecost.

# Pilate the Questioner

## The irony of Pilate judging Jesus

Another of the central characters of the chapter is Pilate the Roman governor. The Jewish leaders had to bring Jesus before Pilate because they wanted to put Jesus to death. While the Romans allowed, even expected, the local governments of conquered nations to administer justice and implement punishments for most crimes, the Romans reserved the right to impose the death penalty to themselves. So, Jesus was brought before Pilate. Pilate’s first questions have to do with whether Jesus is a king. Jesus subtly helps Pilate to understand that he is a king but not a secular, earthly one that Pilate fears. Then Jesus asserts, “Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” This brings from Pilate the retort, “What is truth?” Pilate becomes the proverbial skeptic, the intellectual who considers himself above all this stuff. His only practical concern is whether there is a kingly conspiracy behind all this. When it is obvious that there is not, Pilate considers Jesus harmless. But at the same time, Pilate is greatly unsettled by Jesus’ confident authority. Jesus’ truth-telling cut through his practical defenses. Pilate’s insecurities were obvious in the presence of one who was completely secure in the love of his heavenly Father and knew exactly what he was called to do.

## Our arrogant judging of Jesus

Many times, we put ourselves in Pilate’s place. We want to be the judge of Jesus. We want to ask the questions. We want to be the arbiter of truth. And it appears to us that Jesus has left himself in our hands just as he left himself in the hands of Pilate. We debate the Bible record. We argue over the details of theology. Meanwhile Jesus calls to us, “My kingdom is not of this place.” He reminds us in a sentence that all our questions, all our reasoning is completely earthbound and limited. He is the one who came down from heaven and who returned to heaven. He is the one who is coming back from there and who is inviting us to join him.

But we perceive ourselves as the authority. True–God has given us human perspective and wisdom. Then we make the same mistake as Adam and Eve, thinking we are the real arbiters of truth. We take the part of the questioner. Questions are not bad – we learn that way. But often we ask with a sort of arrogant insolence like Job – not with the humility of the creature asking from the Creator. We need the attitude of the jailor after the earthquake, “What must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30).

Many people today, also like Pilate, try to avoid making any decision about Jesus. It is not convenient for them to make a choice. They want to continue with their business as usual and not be bothered with the truth about Jesus. They try unsuccessfully to wash their hands of him. That is what Luke tells us that Pilate did (Luke 27:24).

People today rationalize, shrugging it off saying, “We don’t know all the answers!” They point to supposed conflicts in the story or hide behind someone else’s inconsistencies. They allow themselves to be distracted by other things. Much of America is this way. So, they in one way or another try to avoid dealing with Jesus. But just as Pilate’s charade of trying to wash his hands of Jesus was in fact a choice to turn Jesus over to be crucified. So is our charade of ignoring Jesus a choice to reject Jesus for every day that it goes on. You can’t remain neutral about Jesus.

# The Rejecting Crowd

## The wrong choice

The next people in the drama that I would like us to focus on are the chief priests and the crowd with them who rejected Jesus. Pilate had decided there was no real reason to detain or punish Jesus before he offered the Jews the choice of Jesus or Barabbas. I imagine that Pilate was hoping that he could get out of this dilemma easily by offering them a choice between one who he considered an unsavory criminal – Barabbas and this man Jesus who Pilate knew had committed no real crime. But Pilate had vastly underestimated the hatred and jealousy of the priests and their followers. They quickly shouted that they wanted Barabbas released.

Why did the Jewish leaders hate Jesus so? For starters, Jesus’ true righteousness that reflected real caring for people made their legalistic righteousness which was concerned only with the letter of the law look bad. For another, it was becoming obvious that Jesus spoke with an authority that the chief priests and teachers of the law never had, and the people listening had recognized it. Thirdly, they were just plain jealous of Jesus’ popularity. Crowds listened to him.

## When we choose the crowd

We would never admit to kinship with the crowd who chose Barabbas and then, when asked what to do with Jesus, yelled “Crucify him!” But when we reflect, we cringe to think that there have been times that we too have chosen evil companions because they made us feel less guilty while rejecting the friendship of someone we felt was a “goodie-two-shoes.” On one level, that’s what the crowd was doing when they asked for Barabbas. Give us Barabbas. We understand this rebel. Away with Jesus. We don’t want to hear any more of his truth talk, or his admonitions about loving your enemies or those who hate you. Jesus makes us uncomfortable with his talk about his Father in heaven who knows our deeds. We don’t want to hear from him anymore, but we feel like we are among our own kind with Barabbas around. We too have sometimes chosen the companionship of the crowd rather than the opportunity to make a lonely and unpopular defense of the truth.

It is an uncomfortable thing to admit.

# Jesus the King

Looking over the human characters and thinking about our own shortcomings leave us only too glad to look again to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. And Jesus in this story shines out.

## The irony of Jesus’ trial is amazing.

Jesus is the one who has been appointed in heaven (Dan. 7:13,14). As Daniel wrote:

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. Dan 7:13-14 NIV

He is the one who came down from heaven and spoke the words he received from his Father among people.

These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me. John 14:24

Yet Jesus is falsely accused by those who are supposed to teachers and exemplars of God’s law.

This is the one who created heaven and earth by a word (John 1:3), yet he patiently waits while a puny puppet ruler in one small kingdom questions him and tries to figure out whether he is a king at all. He who has a right to ask for the submission of every person on earth submits to the chains of unjust earthly arrest. He who has authority to judge us all (John 5:27) stands before Pilate to be judged. The irony of it is overwhelming.

## We see so much here to admire and worship in Jesus

### We see Jesus taking charge and totally in charge even though he is not supposed to be the one in charge.

He comes out of the garden and asks the soldiers who they want twice. V. 4, 7

He tells them what to do with his followers. V. 8

Instead of Jesus being taken aback by their presence, they literally fall back because of the commanding power of his presence v. 6.

### Yet we also see him as the caring the shepherd even in his own time of distress

He was caring for his flock by protecting them. He focused the attention of the detachment of soldiers upon himself and not on his disciples.

One of the other gospels tells us he even reached out in compassion and healed the ear of the man that Peter struck.

### Before Pilate, Jesus’ answers amaze and baffle us.

He was confident, instructive, never pandering. His words were never calculated to get himself off. They are the picture of strength and confidence.

He continued to speak the same truths he had always taught. There were no changes because the heat was on.

### There is the resolute determination and ultimate commitment in Jesus

He shows absolute courage to face directly what it is that the Father had planned for him even though he knows it is painful.

This is most obvious when Peter takes the sword. Jesus tells him to put it back and says,

“Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?” John 18:11

Matthew 26:52 adds the comment that Jesus was aware that he had at his beck and call more than 12 legions of angels. Yet his will to do what his Father had given him to do was far stronger than his will to save his own life. Jesus was very up front about this commitment to his Father’s plan. In his prayer in John 17, Jesus prayed,

“I sanctify myself” (John 17:19).

By this he means, I set myself apart for the task. I dedicate myself to this work.

## We are reminded that he did it all for us

As Paul wrote about Jesus:

He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.
Titus 2:14 NRSV

# Barabbas, the Released

## Barabbas set free

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| For me, the surprise figure in this chapter is Barabbas. Who was Barabbas? According to the Gospel of Luke, Barabbas was insurrectionist, we might say a subversive, and Luke says he was a murderer. John tells us he was a robber. Barabbas was the kind of guy who would be held in jail permanently, until he received his just deserts, probably the death penalty. But in a twist of fate, Jesus, the innocent, is the one who dies, and Barabbas is set free. Barabbas did nothing to deserve this gift. But Barabbas receives a gift of life because of Jesus’ death. We can be set freeOne cannot help but be reminded of the pictures given in Scripture for what Jesus has done for us.  “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” 2 Cor 5:21 NIV |
| We are sinful. We may not have done things as bad as Barabbas, but we are all sinful. Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. As it is written: “There is no one righteous, not even one. Rom 3:9-10As a result, the sentence of spiritual death is hanging over our heads even now. “Whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.” John 3:18 NIVJesus died in our place. As Isaiah described it. He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. Isa 53:5-6 NIVBecause of what Jesus did, we all are offered life and release from our sentence of spiritual death. "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. John 5:24 NIVWe must actThe analogy of Barabbas is not a complete one as Scripture does not indicate that Barabbas had any reaction to what happened. He was legally released, and we know nothing more. There is no indication that his heart was changed at all. Whereas for us there is an added step that is essential. Jesus has made it possible for us to be forgiven and set free from our sin and the penalty of sin. But we will not in fact be released unless we respond to the grace offered to us. Our hearts must be cooperating with what God wants to do. And cooperating with what God seeks to do in our lives is easy.* First we believe in Jesus’ words and works on our behalf. As Paul told the Philippian jailer and his family,

Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved. Acts 16:31* Jesus helps us at the same time to turn from what we know is wrong and displeasing to God. We call this repentance.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:9* Then we open our hearts and minds to be receptive to the teaching and leadership of Jesus in our lives. We become disciples which means learners.

To those who received Him he gave the right to become children of God” John 1:12When God perceives this attitude in us, we are released from our penalty, as Barabbas was. But our freedom is so much greater than his. His release was only an earthly and temporary freedom and his heart was not changed. Our release is a spiritual freedom and it comes with a change of mind and heart. And our freedom is eternal! As Jesus said, If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed! John 8:36 NIV |