

Sermon Text – Sunday, April 13, 2025 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: Isaiah 50:4-9; Philippians 2:5-11

Scripture for Message: Luke 23:1-49 “Even the Stones”

We started our service this morning reading about Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, but we cannot go directly from that triumph to the triumph of resurrection next week, all that transpired between these two events are at the core of our beliefs.

Consequently, we are focusing our message today on Jesus' trial, sentencing, and crucifixion. This message might be familiar to those of you who attend the Wednesday Bible Study because a lot of the information from that bible study is relevant to what I am saying here.

On the day Jesus rode into the city on the back of a young colt or mule, his words when the Pharisees asked him to rebuke his disciples were, “I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” Even the stones would proclaim Jesus as the one who comes in the name of the Lord – nothing could stop what was happening or what was about to happen. Like a train running out of control, or an avalanche of falling stones, there was no one to stop the events of that week. Jesus knew that.

A lot happened in the four days before the chief priests, officers of the temple guard, and the elders came to arrest Jesus. The teachers of the law and the chief priests looked for a way to arrest him, scrutinized everything he did – they were looking only for the bad and missed the good Jesus did for the people. Then came that opportune time that Satan waited patiently for – since tempting Jesus in the wilderness – Satan's opportunity appeared in the person of Judas Iscariot. Who, in his disillusionment, agreed to betray Jesus and turn him over to the temple authorities.

The trial starts at daybreak, according to Luke, with the council of Elders questioning Jesus. They ask, “Are you then the Son of God?” and Jesus responds, “You say that I am” (Luke 22:70). They hear this and regard it as a blasphemous statement, so they then rose to lead Jesus off to Pilate, the Roman governor. While in Pilate's presence, they accuse Jesus of subversion, forbidding his followers to pay taxes and claiming to be a king. Of course, we know this to be untrue – Jesus' response when asked about taxes to Caesar was “Then give

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back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Luke 20:25) In other words, pay what you owe the government.

Pilate asks a remarkably similar question, "Are you the king of the Jews?" and Jesus responds, "You have said so." In Pilate's viewpoint this is a non-answer and does not indicate guilt or innocence. Pilate does not care about blasphemy, he's not religious, he cares about keeping peace in a volatile region, he cares about keeping his job within the Roman Empire, he cares about keeping the status quo for Caesar. Pilate would recognize that the names applied to Jesus, such as Divine Son of God, God from God, savior, redeemer, and Lord were applied to Caesar before Jesus came along – of course Jesus would be considered a threat in that regard. However, Pilate considered Jesus non-answer when confronted with the question whether he was King of the Jews to be a denial of that claim. Pilate could find no guilt in Jesus. Looking to absolve himself of any responsibility regarding the "problem of Jesus" Pilate hears that Jesus is from Galilee and realizes that this could be Herod's problem not his. Pilate sent Jesus to Herod who was in Jerusalem at that time.

Even though we know that Herod too wanted to kill Jesus, Herod now decides to "toy" with him. Herod was excited to see what kind of performance Jesus would give, what sign would Herod get from Jesus. "He plied Jesus with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer" (V. 9). Jesus remained silent and said nothing in his own defense – maybe Herod tired of him and finding nothing to "execute" him for instead mocks him, dresses Jesus in royal robes and sends him back to Pilate.

No one really wanted Jesus' blood on their hands, the "assembly" who followed Jesus throughout this day wanted the Roman authorities to make the decision to dispose of the problem of Jesus so they wouldn't be responsible. The entire trial was unjust and against Torah laws and traditions, contrary to Roman Laws as well. Pilate himself couldn't find any guilt in Jesus and so sent him to Herod; Herod didn't want to have Jesus' death on his conscience. Throughout all the back and forth the "assembly" followed Jesus – anticipating what the "government" would do with Jesus, hoping that it wouldn't fall back into their laps to take care of. Pilate acknowledged that neither he nor Herod could find anything in

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Jesus to deserve death. Pilate places the responsibility of Jesus' fate back to the "assembly" washing his hands of the problem.

Three times Pilate addresses the assembly, telling them he could find no guilt in Jesus and expressing the desire to have Jesus flogged and then released. But three times the assembly shouted – Crucify him, release Barabbas for us. Pilate had no desire for an uprising and therefore relented. Barabbas was a known insurrectionist, a murderer but Barabbas was who the people chose. It's interesting to think about Barabbas being the one spared – the one whose name means "Son of a father" is the sinner in whose place Jesus died. It's interesting to think of this "son of a father" standing aside and witnessing the death of one who died in his place.

Where were the ones who could have stopped this? Herod knew, Pilate knew, even the thief who was crucified next to Jesus knew this man was guiltless. No one could declare Jesus guilty, but the avalanche had started, and no one could stop it – the assembly was caught up in something beyond their control.

We can think of the groups involved in this travesty of a trial as fulfilling Satan's purpose – that opportune time that Satan waited for after failing to tempt Jesus. But isn't all this God's ultimate purpose? Do you think God let Satan have control at this time – temporarily letting Satan have a brief taste of victory before tasting defeat when God's plan is fulfilled with Jesus' resurrection? I get this image of Satan relishing what was thought to be a victory over the forces of good, making God's ultimate victory even more powerful and sweet.

In that though there is a problem for a lot of us – this was God's plan and why would a father subject his only son to the suffering and humiliation of death on a cross. Yet we know Jesus went willingly, even asking forgiveness for those who participated in the mocking and the beating. Jesus knew that 'even the stones' would cry out and act to fulfill God's will. A lot of modern-day would-be scholars find this part of Jesus' story a stumbling block – was there no other way for God to restore creation to wholeness? What mechanism would you choose for reconciliation with God? Does the story of the cross leave you with a sense of God as harsh and punishing? How does all this fit with a God we know to be loving and faithful?

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But what greater love is there than the sacrifice of one's own self for others. God, in the person of Jesus, placed himself on that cross – taking on the punishment that was meant for all of us. Jesus entered the darkness so that we would be spared – just as Barabbas was spared. They knew he was innocent without guilt, yet God took all the guilt of the world and placed it on Jesus to bear the punishment for us. This happened while all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance as witnesses to these things. They couldn't have stopped it if they tried – even the stones would cry out!

We know this isn't the end of Jesus' story – we are entering the holiest of weeks with Jesus. The Christian world will turn its eyes toward Jerusalem as Jesus did on that fate filled day when he entered the city, humbly on the back of a colt. The religious leaders tried so hard to quiet the crowd's shouting hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord yet even the stones would cry out. The government leaders – Pilate and Herod – couldn't stop what was about to happen. Even the assembly of people that followed the proceedings of that day, going back and forth with Jesus three times in that trial – they couldn't have stopped things from progressing as they did.

We look back at all of this from our two-thousand-year perspective and know that if we had been there, we could not have stopped it either. This is God's doing, God's purpose – when we read Isaiah's words, we are seeing a blueprint of God's plan for the world and we realize what Jesus knew, nothing could stop what was happening. "I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. The Lord God helps me . . ."

God is our help and even the stones will cry out to further God's plan for creation.