

Sermon Title: Give Us Barabbas

Sermon Text: Matthew 27:1-2 and 11-26

Matt. 27:1 ¶ When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death.

Matt. 27:2 And they bound him and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate the governor.

Matt. 27:11 ¶ Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus said, “You have said so.”

Matt. 27:12 But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he gave no answer.

Matt. 27:13 Then Pilate said to him, “Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?”

Matt. 27:14 But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

Matt. 27:15 ¶ Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted.

Matt. 27:16 And they had then a notorious prisoner called Barabbas.

Matt. 27:17 So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, “Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?”

Matt. 27:18 For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up.

Matt. 27:19 Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, “Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream.”

Matt. 27:20 Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus.

Matt. 27:21 The governor again said to them, “Which of the two do you want me to release for you?” And they said, “Barabbas.”

Matt. 27:22 Pilate said to them, “Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?” They all said, “Let him be crucified!”

Matt. 27:23 And he said, “Why, What evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Let him be crucified!”

Matt. 27:24 ¶ So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, “I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves.”

Matt. 27:25 And all the people answered, “His blood be on us and on our children!”

Matt. 27:26 Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified.

Main Point: As sinners, we stand guilty for the truth we ignore, suppress, or reject; there is no way, apart from Christ, for us to remove that guilt.

Outline:

1. Guilt of Knowledge
2. Gods Exchanged
3. Guilt ‘Expunged’

Introduction

Pontius Pilate was... not a pleasant fellow. Nor was he well beloved. But he *was* the fifth Roman governor of Judea. He ruled for ten years, from 26 to 36 AD. He was a native of Italy, and even his name has been traced to the hills of south-central Italy. Pilate was the governor of Judea, the prefect, of Judea, and also the procurator of Judea. This meant that in every way, Pilate’s job was to enact the will of Rome by collecting taxes, and even overseeing any legal issues that might demand the death penalty since the Jews did not have the right under Rome to execute anyone.

Jesus is brought to Pilate today after the fishing expedition as we saw three weeks ago when Jesus was brought before the religious leaders. And we saw that they looked for any charges that could demand the death penalty.

Ultimately, the charge they settled on was insurrection: they would accuse Jesus of threatening to destroy the temple and set up his own government, with himself up as king, even over Caesar. Only a charge that serious could possibly be worthy of the death penalty in Rome's eyes.

One of the great ironies of this charge is that this accusation projects, in some ways, precisely the sort of leader that Jesus' disciples, and his followers wanted Jesus to be: a revolutionary who would politically overthrow Rome. This is what they wanted. And it's ironic that the one thing he refused to be for them ends up being the charge on which he is executed.

Now Pilate is here confronted with this question: what would a dog who is loyal to his master do? What is the loyal thing in this situation? how will it look if you let a man off, if the accusation is that he was going to try to overthrow Rome? What would Caesar think? And all of this episode forces us to confront the reality of guilt, and how we as sinners try to cope with it. And specifically how Pilate tries to cope with it today.

First, we will look at the guilt of knowledge. The more we know, the more guilt we bear. Second, the gods exchanged. Jesus is condemned even as Barabbas is released. And third, guilt expunged. Or at least attempted.

Pontius Pilate here today is a picture of a man who has all the information that he needs, and yet makes the wrong choice, and fools himself into thinking that he can wash that guilt away somehow. He has far more in common with people today than we might guess.

1. The Guilt of Knowledge

First today we see the guilt of knowledge.

I think we may think of Pilate here and think, "Poor guy. He's pulled in all these different directions. He needs to keep Caesar happy. He needs to keep the Jewish

leadership happy. And he seems to have a little bit of a conscience. What's a guy to do?"

But don't pity Pilate too much. We know from the records of history that he was remembered as a ruthless man, and not particularly sensitive. Not only that, but I especially want us to notice: Pilate has all the information that he needs to do the right thing here.

First of all, Jesus never says anything incriminating to him, and Pilate is never presented with evidence that Jesus is guilty of what he is accused of. In verse 23 he even asks the crowd, "What evil has he done?" At no point is any of this proven. Even there he is waiting to see the evidence.

Now, on its own, this should be enough reason to release Jesus. But Matthew tells us something else that is quite eye-opening. In verse 19, Pilate's wife sends word to him. Pilate was known to hold court early in the mornings, and so you can imagine his wife waking up, seeing that he is gone, and hurriedly composing this letter to him, and having a servant rush the message to him. He receives the message while he still has time to change course. And this is what the message says:

"Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream."

Fascinating. Pilate's wife had a dream about a man her husband would execute. She even identifies him as righteous. Romans were notoriously superstitious and certainly believed that dreams were omens from the gods. Tradition tells us that Pilate's wife's name was Procla. Procla is concerned – seemingly even frightened by the position her husband is in. Something in this dream told her that Jesus should not be condemned and did not deserve to be condemned. This dream is just the sort of thing that should get through to him.

This isn't the only time God seems to speak to people through dreams in the New Testament. He speaks to Joseph in a dream about Mary's pregnancy; he speaks to Joseph again about the need to flee to Egypt, and again about the timing of returning from Egypt. And so in the gospels it seems that God does, from time to time speak through dreams in urgent situations.

Now, here is a question: God knows that Pilate will condemn Jesus. Ultimately from a providential perspective, this is happening. So why send this warning at all? Why bother Pilate's wife with this dream? I cannot give the whole answer. That belongs to God. But let me mention one thing: we know from Scripture that human guilt and culpability correlates with our knowledge.

In other words, we're guilty for the things we know, not for the things we don't know.

For example, in John 9:41 Jesus says to the Pharisees, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains." So do you see the principle Jesus is laying out? The idea here is that when we see and know and then act against what we know, our guilt is confirmed. When we act in full knowledge, we are accountable for what we know. Jesus says in John 15:22, "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin."

In other words, increased knowledge means increases guilt. If someone lacks knowledge, then in Jesus' words, they have an "excuse." In this case Pilate has been warned by his wife's dream and by his own inability to find guilt in Jesus. What happens when he is warned? His guilt increases. His guilt becomes clearer. God wants all of us to know that even Pilate is not a victim of circumstance. He is a willing participant who knows better.

Pilate has not only the information to do the right thing, he also has an external pressure from his own wife to do the right thing. From his perspective as a Roman it's like the gods are telling him not to condemn this man.

And we know that Pilate feels some guilt over the decision because of his performative hand washing that he will do near the end of our reading. I don't want to jump too far ahead, so we'll save that for later.

But here is the truth: all human beings know God and suppress the truth about him, according to Romans 1. Paul wants us to know, for example, that there are no true atheists. Everyone knows God is there, and that he is not silent. And yet we suppress that truth.

But we should also know that some of us will have even greater guilt if we refuse to come to Christ and surrender to him. And that is the case if we have grown up with the gospel, if we've heard the truth about Jesus, and still reject him. We will answer to God for what we know, but ignore. For what we know but resist. For what we know but flee from.

If we know the truth and then resist or flee, we're like Pilate here.

2. The Gods Exchanged

Second today, we see the gods exchanged.

Matthew tells us that it is customary for Pilate to do a prisoner exchange as a sign of good will during this particular time of year. As Craig Keener says, "Roman officials were generally not inclined to execute those they saw as harmless fools." This festival release was an opportunity for Pilate to release someone who perhaps fit this category, and also to show good will toward the Jews whom he was supposed to govern and keep happy. Releasing them is a way of pacifying them.

And yet when Pilate offers the crowd an opportunity to choose between Jesus and this murderer Barabbas, the crowd is convinced to cry for Barabbas, and so they do. In this situation, *someone* here was going to be condemned, and someone here was going to be released.

They do not care about Barabbas, but it's important to the leadership that the crowds reject Jesus. The crowds today keep this up. They also reject Jesus.

And if you ask modern secular humanists, they will say, "Look. We rejected Zeus and Odin and Baal and Chemosh and the other gods. It just that we also reject one more: we reject Jesus as well." The claim is, "we just believe in one less God than you do." And the story that we're told is that as human beings liberate themselves from God, then we find out who we really are. All we are left with, without the gods is to be governed by collective human desires, and these become the basis of modern humanism. And the story we're told is that in this subtraction of the gods we find freedom that we never knew before. See, the myth here is that cut off from the creator, we finally have true freedom.

The sociologist Charles Taylor calls this a “subtraction story.” You could even call it a myth. Taylor says the reason it’s a myth is that rejecting God is *never* a simple subtraction story, but is instead a story of exchanging one ultimate value for another. When you reject God, you accept *something*. You make something ultimate. It might be yourself. It might be college professors or journalists, but you make someone ultimate. It turns out, no human civilization can just reject God and live with the gaping hole that is left behind in his absence. We reject one thing and we always replace it with another.

Let me give an example: significance. How did human beings formerly find their significance – the thing that defined their life and told them why they existed, and what they were worth?

Well, they found their ultimate significance in transcendent meaning. They found it somewhere other than themselves – they found it in God. Adam and Eve are valuable. Why? Because they are created in the image of God. And so they and their children find their purpose, meaning, value, and identity in the creator whose image they are patterned after.

Cain, in murdering Abel, is actually attacking God himself, because Abel bore God’s image. Cain in some sense is a murderer of God, as he lashes out at his creator’s image, seen in his brother’s face. But even the murderer Cain has moral value because he bears the image and mark of God. Even as a murderer, Cain has significance that isn’t contingent on himself or his action. It turns out, human beings have intrinsic value that transcends even their actions or value to the community. And this is true of all people. Whether they are unborn or have committed a crime, or whether they are catatonic and unable to move... they still have value because they bear the image of God.

And that is where human beings have found their significance prior to the rise of secular humanism and naturalistic darwinian views of mankind’s origin.

But if we reject God, where do we find our significance now? Do we just stop looking for significance altogether? No. Human beings have not done that.

Instead, we stop looking up. We instead look around: when we deny God, we still need significance and purpose, but now we’ll try to find our significance in the

eyes of others down here with us. And in the short term, in an ideal situation, that might work. Perhaps even for a long season. And as long as we are young and beautiful, or strong and productive, we might find that finding our significance in ourselves works for us, for a time. The result, at least in 2024, has been a rat race among people for public views, for subscribers, for followers. A recent Wall Street Journal article indicated that in the race for significance and income, even the young and energetic are starting to burn out of the social media race.

But it's not just social media: without seeing others as image bearers of God, we will judge by what they produce for us, or give to us. People become a utility instead of image bearers of God. This is a thin significance, and it is frail and easily lost.

As long as our family is in tact, we might keep feeling like we are important or significant. But what if we have an injury or an accident, or are maimed? What if we can no longer produce, or no longer have the looks we once did? Eventually the ravages of time will have its way with us even as we fight to be significant in the eyes of others.

The late Tim Keller wrote a book, *Making Sense of God* (which I'm reading with the Senior class at St. Stephen's), and in that book, Keller talks about the different answers people pursue. And without God, we will look for other gods. We'll make our family into god. But then we'll crush our spouses or parents or children with our needs and expectations. We'll try to wring everything out of them that we can, and probably send them fleeing. Or we'll make romance or sex our god, and yet that won't deliver, either; eventually that pursuit runs out, too. We'll make money or work our god, but even if we do really well for ourselves we will be left empty handed by it.

What we need is a *thick* significance, a deep significance and meaning, a robust significance that doesn't shift with the crowds. God provides every human being with a value and significance that that doesn't hang by a thread, or that isn't thin and weak, and doesn't change with life circumstances.

You are important, period, because you bear the creator's image.

And it's not just *significance* that God provides. This is just me dwelling on just one example. Run through the laundry list of questions that God answers, and know this: because we are made in his image, when we reject him, the gaping holes that God leaves behind in our lives don't just fill themselves in, and we aren't big enough to fill them. Those holes will be filled by something; something smaller, cheaper, more frivolous, and thinner. If we reject God, then like Jesus and Barabbas we replace him with something. In this case, we don't just condemn Jesus, we *will* have Barabbas in his place. Now a murderer walks among us. A very deficient exchange.

There is an exchange that takes place in the rejection of God. If we will not have God, we should understand, that is not the end of the story. We don't just step in and take his place. What will we get in his place? The shortest answer is that we will get ourselves, or we will get the crowd, or we will get some other finicky and fleeting idol that disappoints and doesn't last.

None of us is up to bearing the weight of God on our own shoulders.

3. The Guilt 'Expunged'

Third today, we see the guilt "expunged."

Now, I'm putting "expunged" in scare quotes precisely because this removal of guilt is cheap and not really effective. Let me explain what I mean.

Pilate tries to remove his own guilt here in a few ways.

One way he tries to do it is through blame shifting. Blame-shifting is an old human technique for trying to deal with sin. In fact, the first thing Adam does after being found out in the garden is to say, "This woman you gave me offered me fruit." There Adam blame shifted to the woman. And then he blame shifted to God. "Not only was it really her, but you know, you gave her to me." We are a blaming people. It's in our blood.

Pilate follows Adam's lead. *He* blame shifts by offering the crowds a way to set Jesus free, which they do not take. If they did take him up on it, then from his

perspective, great – Jesus doesn't get condemned, his conscience gets relieved, and his wife is happy. If they don't take him up on it, then it's now their fault that Jesus gets condemned. The blame is shifted to them.

But all of that is an illusion. It is still Pilate's decision, and no shifting of the blame can remove his guilt here. At the end of the day, Pilate is accountable, and God the almighty all knowing Lord can see through any shallow attempts to escape blame.

We live in an era of blame shifting. "It's my parents. It's my siblings. It's my friends. It's the people on the internet. It's my boss. It's my job. It's my emotions." Just keep going.

But the one thing that is so rare in our day is the person who will just say, "It was my choice, and I was wrong." Christians, of all people, must be those who will not follow Adam's lead and look for others to blame. We are accountable. We did it.

Not only that, but we cannot repent of a sin we will not own. We must acknowledge our sin. What does the Psalmist say? "I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity." We cover our iniquity when we try to pass it to someone else.

Another way Pilate tries to remove the guilt is through ceremony.

In verse 24 after he has tried his other efforts, Matthew says that Pilate "took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.'"

There are two things here: he doesn't wash his hands privately before God alone. Instead, he is seeking to remove his guilt in the eyes of the people, not God. For Pilate, this crowd is his god. For Pilate, this crowd is what matters most. They control him. He answers to them.

And so this hand washing is performative. It's all about changing the opinion of the crowd.

If you practice your religion to be seen before people, those people become the gods that you serve. And we've seen that crowds can be deeply finicky. If that is

who we serve, then we will have a thin value that easily comes and goes. Nothing has really changed with crowds since Jesus' time.

Let me make a second broader point here: returning to the idea of secular humanism again. In 2008, atheists in Britain put on a famous bus campaign. And across busses all over Britain were written these words: "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying, and enjoy your life." Besides the fact that the word "probably" is doing an awful lot of heavy lifting in that sentence, it makes you think about what people were promised that the death of God would finally mean for them. Clearly these atheists thought it meant freedom. Specifically freedom from guilt and worrying.

The promise of a secular age was that now we could live our lives without guilt, without gods, without anyone to tell us what life is supposed to be like. Now we could really be free.

That was more than a decade ago. But people are not less guilty in a secular age. People still feel tons of guilt. In fact, maybe more than when people were regularly attending church.

They feel guilty for not recycling.

They feel guilty for driving a car that runs on fossil fuels.

They feel guilty for being a man. They feel guilty for not being a man.

They feel guilty for their skin color.

They feel guilty for what they eat.

They feel guilty for what they don't eat.

They feel guilty for where they eat.

They feel guilty for the clothes they wear.

They feel guilty for where they buy their clothes.

They feel guilty for what they watch.

They feel guilty for what they don't watch.

Secular humanism has not kept its promises. It has not freed us from guilt or obligation or subjugation. It's only shifted those things to the whims of finicky thin crowds and thought leaders who give and take away as the tides and moods ebb and flow.

Instead of feeling guilty for important things, now we feel guilty for trivial things. We are not freer as a people when we exchange God for something cheaper. We've just exchanged one kind of guilt for another.

The crowds cannot remove our guilt. They can only condemn, and they will never forgive.

Pilate may believe that innocence is easily achieved. Like Pilate, we may make the mistake of thinking that forgiveness is as easy as a ceremony or a gesture, or a social media post, or finding someone else to point to.

But Scripture give us a different way. When it comes to our sin, we have to own it. We have to own our role in it, we have to accept our responsibility for it, and only by coming to God with all that we have done can we ever find true peace with Him.

Unlike the crowds, Christ forgives those who come to him, with empty hands, trusting in him to cleanse and remove our shame. And he promises he will do it.

Unlike the crowds, Christ does what is necessary to forgive. He doesn't just offer an empty gesture of forgiveness or promise something that he will one day take back. Instead, he achieves the real thing and holds it out for any who will place their trust in him.

Let's pray.