

“John: Behold Your King”

Isaiah 53:1-7 • John 19:1-15

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX
Rev. Dr. Charles S. Blackshear • March 17, 2024

Every week in worship we stand and affirm the basics of our faith using the words of the Apostles' Creed. We do that for several reasons. First, it reminds us of the core of our faith. When we say it week after week it teaches children and new believers the basics of Christianity. Sometimes when people drift away from church or from their faith, when they find themselves in difficult circumstances God reminds them of the words of the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed. And oftentimes people with dementia and Alzheimer's, who can no longer remember the names of their family, can remember the words of the Creed.

The danger for us is that it becomes ritual and we stop thinking about what it means. I think that's especially true about the phrase "suffered under Pontius Pilate." Apart from Jesus, the Creed only references two other people by name: Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Pontius Pilate. In fact, the Apostles' Creed doesn't even mention any of Jesus' life and ministry, only his birth and his death. Why is that?

Well, for one thing the Creed is a reminder of the core truths of the Christian faith, the things that are most important. His birth is important because it's the incarnation, God coming into the world as one of us. His suffering and death are important because that's how we are saved. He took the punishment that each of us deserves for our sin. As we heard in our reading from Isaiah 53, written hundreds of years before Jesus was born, "he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

Pontius Pilate is mentioned in the Creed for two reasons. First, it places Jesus'

crucifixion in history. It really happened at a real time and real place. Pilate is known in history outside the Bible. Second, as John tells us, Jesus really did suffer. Our passage begins, "Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him." Pilate had offered to release Jesus but the crowd asked for Barabbas instead. So Pilate had the soldiers rough up Jesus a bit. Flogging was very painful, essentially being whipped with leather whips, along with other brutal abuse. The soldiers also insulted and mocked Jesus. They had a deep contempt for the Jewish people and took it out on the man who claimed to be their king. They made a crown of thorns and put it on Jesus' head, pushing it down. We don't know what kind of thorns they were but many scholars believe they were from the date palm trees, which have thorns up to a foot long. Some of the thorns would have been like rays coming out from the crown, similar to the crowns that some officials wore at the time. It's quite ironic that they would use palm thorns to insult and hurt Jesus just days after the crowds waved palm branches to declare Jesus the king!

The soldiers then put a purple robe or cloak on Jesus, a symbol of royalty, and they took turns pretending to worship him, saying, "hail, king of the Jews." Then they would hit him. Our world still holds God's people in contempt. Just look at the hatred for Jewish people that has bubbled up just in the last few months. Jesus is still mocked, with both words and actions, in movies and television, in universities and schools, and even in our own government.

When the soldiers were done, Pilate brought Jesus back out to the crowd, still wearing the crown of thorns and purple robe. He said, "See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him." In other words, I've beaten him and he's still not guilty. Since Pilate clearly wanted to release Jesus, perhaps he was trying to satisfy

the crowd's anger and also show them that Jesus, beaten and bloody, was not a threat to anyone. Pilate then says those words that echo down through history, "Behold the man!"

Indeed, behold the man. See what he suffered for you and for me. Behold how much God loves you. This is the man that God had promised throughout Scripture. When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, God promised to send a Savior who would be the offspring of the woman. In Deuteronomy 18, God told Moses, "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him." Later God told King David that the Messiah would "build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever."

Then in the book of Zechariah, from the time when the returning exiles were rebuilding the temple, God told Zechariah to make a crown woven with silver and gold and symbolically set it on the head of the high priest Joshua, which in Greek is rendered Jesus. "Once the crowned priest was seated on his throne, Zechariah was to point at him and cry out, 'Behold, the man.' God explained: 'It is he who shall build the temple of the Lord and shall bear royal honor, and shall sit and rule on his throne.'" All of this pointed to Jesus!

The chief priests and officers saw Jesus and cried out, "Crucify him, crucify him!" Pilate tried again to rid himself of Jesus but the Jewish leaders added a new charge. "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he made himself the Son of God." Verse 8 says that when Pilate heard this "he was even more afraid." The religion of the Romans involved a lot of superstition and the idea of one of the gods coming down as a human was common. At this point Pilate had already experienced that Jesus was different. So he goes back in and asks Jesus, "where are you from?" Jesus doesn't answer, fulfilling the prophecy in Isaiah 53: "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth;

like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth."

This really unnerves Pilate. He says to Jesus, "You will not speak to me? Don't you know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" From a legal standpoint, as the Roman governor he did have that authority. But there was something much bigger going on. Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin." As it turns out, Pilate really has no authority at all. He clearly and repeatedly tries to release Jesus, declaring him not guilty three times yet in the end gives the order for Jesus to be crucified. God had ordained the crucifixion of Jesus and nothing could stop it, not even Pilate. We need to remember that even when we find ourselves in difficult situations that God is in control. There are lots of things that happen that we can't understand. We wonder why God allows so much suffering. But we have to lean on the faith that for those that love God, all things together for good, for our salvation.

Again Pilate wants to release Jesus and so now the Jewish leaders resort to blackmail. "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar." More irony here. Pilate, Caesar's representative, hates the Jews but wants to release the man who claims to be their king. Meanwhile, the Jewish leaders, who are waiting for the Messiah, appeal to the Roman authorities to have their Savior executed. At this point Pilate is even more afraid. Tiberius Caesar was a paranoid recluse. Anyone he suspected of disloyalty was quickly removed from their position and often killed. The Jews had already sent complaints to Rome about Pilate and had caused problems for him by rioting. He knew that if this accusation made it to Caesar he was done for.

Pilate sits down on the judgement seat to make an official ruling. His ruling? "Behold your King!" The people cried out, "Away with him, crucify him!" They wanted Jesus dead because he was holy. When they came in contact with him they were reminded of their own sinfulness. Jesus was the only person ever to be sinless. The Jewish leaders knew it. Pilate knew it. Three times he declared Jesus was innocent. In God's instructions to Moses for the Passover, the lamb to be sacrificed was to be "without blemish." The crucifixion of Jesus took place at Passover. It fulfilled the Passover. Jesus, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, was the perfect sacrifice. In verse

14 John says that Jesus was tried on the day of Preparation of the Passover and he was condemned about the sixth hour, or about noon, which was the "very hour that the priests begin to slaughter the Passover lambs in the temple."

Barabbas was a notorious insurrectionist and murderer. He committed the crimes that Jesus was accused of. He deserved to be executed but Jesus took his place. You and I deserve the punishment of death for our sins but Jesus took our place as well. Friends, behold the man, behold your King!

Amen.