

Voice 1: Then Pilate had Jesus taken and whipped. The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and dressed him in a purple robe. Over and over they went up to him and said, "Greetings, king of the Jews!" And they slapped him in the face. Pilate came out of the palace again and said to the Jewish leaders,

Voice 2: "Look! I'm bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no grounds for a charge against him."

Voice 1: When Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them,

Voice 2: "Here's the man."

Voice 1: Then the chief priests and their deputies saw him, they shouted out,

Congregation: "Crucify, crucify!"

Voice 2: "You take him and crucify him. I don't find any grounds for a charge against him."

Voice 1: The Jewish leaders replied,

Congregation: "We have a Law, and according to this Law he ought to die because he made himself out to be God's Son."

Voice 1: When Pilate heard this word, he was even more afraid. He went back into the residence and spoke to Jesus,

Voice 2: "Where are you from?"

Voice 1: Jesus didn't answer. So Pilate said,

Voice 2: "You won't speak to me? Don't you know that I have authority to release you and also to crucify you?"

Voice 3: "You would have no authority over me if it had not been given to you from above. That's why the one who handed me over to you has the greater sin."

Voice 1: From that moment on, Pilate wanted to release Jesus. However, the Jewish leaders cried out, saying,

Congregation: "If you release this man, you aren't a friend of the emperor! Anyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes the emperor!"

Voice 1: When Pilate heard these words, he led Jesus out and seated him on the judge's bench at the place called Stone Pavement (in Aramaic, Gabbatha). It was about noon on the Preparation Day for the Passover. Pilate said to the Jewish leaders,

Voice 2: "Here's your king."

Voice 1: The Jewish leaders cried out,

Congregation: "Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!"

Voice 2: "What? Do you want me to crucify your king?"

Congregation: "We have no king except the emperor,"

Voice 1: the chief priests answered. Then Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified.

(Common English Bible)

Did any of you see Mel Gibson's portrayal of the Passion of the Christ? I was in my first call when that came out and attended it at our town theater with several parishioners. What unfolded on the screen was exceedingly gory, brutal, bloody... some might even say it was gratuitously excessive... My father's comment about it was, "Well, now I understand why he died so quickly, if he lost that much blood before he ever got on the cross, that would do it." Ordinarily crucifixion was a torturously slow way to kill someone; scientists theorize that in some cases people died from thirst or exposure after days of hanging, suffering, a spectacle for all to see. But Jesus died in just a few hours.

While my father may have found something edifying in the Passion film, my mother refused to see it. She has said that she doesn't need to attend films that visually represent the events of Jesus' last week because just reading the Gospels, or listening to the Gospels read aloud, shakes her and brings her to tears every time. Did that happen for you today? Even a little bit? I found several aspects of this week's reading jarring, not least its very beginning: "Then Pilate had Jesus taken and whipped." Whipped, such brutal punishment— portrayed in excess in the Passion of Christ film. By the time we reach the passion story in each of the Gospels the reading or listening becomes heavy and painful. And have you noticed that everything seems bigger or longer, perhaps even more intense, in the Gospel of John? Consider just the portion of the story we've covered the past two weeks in this series. Whereas other Gospels play out Jesus' interactions with Pilate in three simple scenes, John offers us a long, complex set of interactions, in which Pilate shuffles back and forth between the Jewish religious and political leaders and Jesus- covering two chapters and lots of verses- so much so that we're considering it over two separate weeks.

The tale John tells of Pilate and Jesus is an intriguing one. If we take it at surface value it would seem that Pilate did not want to crucify our Lord, but gave in under the pressure of those accusing Jesus. However, historical records suggest that Pilate was ruthless and this weak and

fearful portrayal seems inconsistent with the picture history paints. Is it possible to hear sarcasm in his voice? Might he be playing with them? Inciting them? In particular, it seems that he might have been seizing this opportunity to gain loyalty to Rome.

Perhaps it seems a stretch to suggest this, but consider the last words out of the Jewish religious authorities' mouths, the chief priests no less, "We have no king, but the emperor." Whoa. Perhaps you missed the weight of this. Here they were, in Jerusalem, a day before the Passover was to begin, rapidly approaching the hour when the lambs for that festival would be ritually slaughtered, and among the chants of faithful Jews in passover celebrations? "We have no king but Yahweh." We have no king but the God revealed to Moses. We have no king but God. For Jewish religious leaders to claim the emperor as their sole king, on this day of all days, is shocking. My stomach sank when I read it. When those words left their lips, that was a great betrayal of their deep loyalty to their God.

And it sure seems to me that they were taunted and set-up and led to this betrayal. In how many ways was Jesus, this troublesome teacher, this disappointing leader, this passive and weak victim, pranced before the people and called their king? How distressing must it have been for this occupied people to see a bloodied body wrapped in purple and crowned in thorns and called their king! It surely seems that the Romans were making a mockery of the Jews in this moment and that all this talk of kings pushed them to their radical and distressing betrayal.

That said, our painful Gospel stories suggest that the crowds that cheered for Jesus upon his triumphal entry into Jerusalem called for his death not a week later. It seems that just about everyone who crossed his path played a part in his undoing, and the betrayal that the religious authorities ultimately make gives us pause and offers us an invitation to self-examination. As we consider the willingness of the chief priests to forsake their radical allegiance to God alone, we are invited to consider to whom we pay allegiance, in whom we trust, or in what. Can we say that God alone is our king? Or is cash our king? Or a particular political party or candidate? Or your ego? Or a cause? Or any person here on earth? On whom or what do you rely? In particular, do you rely on the God revealed in Jesus Christ, that king who was self-sacrificing and vulnerable, that king who associated with the least of these and brought scandal

to the elite, that king who ruled by love and justice, that king who gave his life for us? Or do you tend to imagine a warrior God, an invulnerable, all powerful, conquering king who looks little like Jesus?

In the first letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul wrote, "For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." Even still today we can turn away from the cross of Christ, not seeing there the strength and honor we believe the one on whom we rely should possess. But our king is enthroned on a cross. Our king made known his power through ultimate weakness. Our king's glory was revealed in this most unusual way.

When I was just beginning to think about becoming a pastor, a fellow college student also discerning a call to ministry prayed for me, prayed over me, that I might get in touch with the crucified Christ. I found this prayer offensive. I preferred to reflect on the resurrected Christ—or Christ the teacher and healer... Why should I dwell on his unjust, brutal death? The cross, it seems, was a stumbling block for me. I feel differently now. This is part of Jesus' story, one of the only parts of Jesus' story that all the Gospels agree on. And it is the part of Jesus' story that suggests to us that God understands, from the inside, the depths of suffering, pain, and God-Forsakenness human beings can experience. God is not a stranger to our pain. And God does not let the story end with pain. Resurrection means so much more after crucifixion.

Often we confine the story of Jesus' death to Good Friday, or perhaps we read it on Palm Sunday... but this year we've been letting it unfold slowly throughout the Lenten Season. We'll revisit portions of it and finish our complete reading of it during our Holy Week services—I hope you will plan to join us next Sunday, Thursday, and Friday so to see the story all the way through so that you might truly connect with the crucified Christ and be ready to rejoice in his resurrection.

As time continues to slip into the future, may you find a way to connect with the crucified Christ and may that allow you to, in these final days of your Lenten journey, forsake your loyalty to all the emperors of this world, and renew your commitment to the crucified and risen Christ lifted up, your only King and Lord.

Please note: actual sermon content may vary from this manuscript at time of delivery.