

**Sermon: Which Jesus for Us?**

**Scripture: Luke 27:11-23**

**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**

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For the first time in 22 years of ministry and 4 years of seminary and decades of growing up in the church before that, I read someone speaking about this moment in the story of Jesus inviting me to see, I mean really see a figure that was at most a passing foil to Jesus, and that is the figure of Barabbas. It was the same black man who taught me about the racist history of my own Baptist church in Richmond, VA that some of you heard me speak of a few weeks ago. His name is Dr. Drew Hart and he's a public theologian and professor of Theology at Messiah College. It shouldn't be surprising to us that when black scholars begin reading and interpreting the scriptures and when women theologians begin reading and interpreting the scripture and when indigenous people begin reading and interpreting the scriptures, the scriptures are going to sound different from when white men in power are reading and interpreting the scriptures. That's why the church for so long only had (and certain churches still do have) exclusively men as ministers and priests in power, to protect their power and privilege, a practice that Jesus minced no words in condemning.

So thanks to Dr. Hart I'd like to invite you to look at this with me for a moment, this significant trial scene in the story of Jesus' passion. First of all, we note that there aren't that many moments in the passion story that are attested to by all 4 Gospels. The Gospels have varying accounts and stories of what happened during Jesus' passion – they all agree that he suffered emotionally and physically, had a last meal with his disciples before they abandoned him, that he was put on trial, found guilty, was crucified and buried and eventually resurrected but the

other details vary among the various Gospels, except this little moment too when before the crowd is placed 2 Jesuses.

You might have missed it, but on trial before Pilate and the crowd are 2 Jesuses. It's only in the Gospel of Matthew that Barabbas is referred to as Jesus Barabbas – would you rather me release this Jesus Barabbas, Pilate says, or Jesus known as the Christ? Do you want this Jesus or this Jesus released? There is this invitation, this insistence that a choice is being made between the two men, the two Jesuses and what they represent and it's important enough of a moment to be in all 4 Gospels. The primary question then what is the choice that the crowd is making when they choose Jesus Barabbas over Jesus the Christ?

First I'll give you the traditional, you might call it the white-man-in-power interpretation of the moment, which most all of us are familiar with and assume is the point. Then I'll share with you Drew Hart's unpacking of it. So Barabbas in traditional understanding is a guilty foil to the innocent Jesus. He's referred to as a bandit and a murderer and he represents sinful fallen humanity, rebelling against God, a brutish barbarian, evil in purpose and intent who like the rest of humanity is guilty and deserves death but instead Jesus is punished in his stead. The framing of the story this way is a theory called the penal substitutionary atonement theory, which basically means that Jesus took our place on the cross as a substitute and through his own blood atones for our sins and provides personal spiritual salvation from God's justice and wrath. Many think of it as just THE CHRISTIAN explanation but it is only one of various possible theories about what Jesus death meant. And with the lenses of that theory coloring everything we read in the Gospels of course the guilty Barabbas is the symbol of fallen sinful humanity that we chose instead of the innocent Jesus so he can suffer and die in our place.

But one can argue that that reading is an inadequate interpretation of what the text actually says and this is exactly what Dr. Hart explains. He says that such an

understanding of who Barabbas was ignores, and quite intentionally one might argue, the sociopolitical context of the situation. What we might call “the white-man-in-power” interpretation of the Gospel that white-washes the more radical, revolutionary and political nature of Jesus’ words and actions, a white-washing of Jesus as an apolitical, spiritualized Mr. Nice Guy. So yeah, then Barabbas is the apolitical, spiritualized Mr. Bad Guy who gets off.

But consider who Jesus Barabbas actually is. Barabbas was a revolutionary who was willing and apparently did use violence to try to throw off the yoke of the oppressive Roman Empire from the neck of the Jews. That’s who he was, a part of a first century Jewish resistance group fighting Rome. If you are comfortable and even celebrating Ukrainians who are taking up arms to resist the violence of Russia against them then you too might very well have appreciated who Barabbas was and what he was fighting for because he was fighting for justice against the injustices of Rome. Barabbas was a freedom fighter.

We need to remember that REVOLUTION was in the air of first century Palestine, was surrounding Jesus and all his followers, because Rome could be a brutally oppressive empire that was occupying their lands. Have you heard of the Maccabees? During Jesus’ time the Macabees were larger-than-life legends for the Jews – they were the George Washingtons and Abraham Lincolns, the fighters in the Revolutionary War to throw off the yoke of England - to the Jewish people. In 164 BCE the Jews were under the oppressive rule of Syria and the Macabees stirred up religious and political resistance and revolt to cast out the Syrian Oppressors. Again, think Ukraine against Russia. The Macabees were victorious in this freedom struggle ushered in the Hasmonean Dynasty which is where the creation of a new Jewish Holiday celebrating their freedom and independence known as Hanukkah came from and this dynasty would last until just about 50 years before Jesus’ birth when Rome became the new oppressor taking over Israel.

But the impact that the Macabees left upon the Jewish political imagination was significant and encouraged in the coming decades a loyalty to the Torah that involved willingness to accept martyrdom and resist foreign powers and take up arms to claim or maintain Jewish rule and identity. As Hart explains it, there was a significant movement within Jewish circles that “sought to participate in God’s liberation as demonstrated through the Maccabees as well as the Exodus. Salvation for them had a thicker and more holistic meaning than most western theologies that make it exclusively otherworldy.”

When Rome defeated the Hasmonean Dynasty and became the occupying power of Israel there was mass poverty and economic exploitation that was widespread such that revolutionary groups arose to fight Rome. The Zealots were one of those groups – a group that people have surmised Judas was a part of and there were groups of bandits referred to as the Istaiei or the Sicarii, translated Dagger Men who became a serious Jewish resistance movement seeking liberation from Rome through stealth violence. And this is what some scholars believe is what the Gospels are suggesting Jesus Barabbas was when they refer to him as a bandit and a murderer. Again from the words of Dr. Hart – “Revolution was in the air long before Jesus and Barabbas lived; it repeatedly occurred while they lived; and those moments would coalesce into a much larger war with Rome after their lifetimes,” (p. 79) namely in 70CE when the temple and much of Jerusalem was destroyed. This terrible war and destruction of Jerusalem by Rome is what we assume Jesus was referring to when he weeps over Jerusalem and saying:

“Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. <sup>43</sup> For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side <sup>44</sup> and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you.

And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation." (Luke 19:41-44)

And here we get to the crux of it, the choice that the crowd is making between Jesus Barabbas, the revolutionary assassin seeking to throw off the yoke of Rome and Jesus the Christ who also was a revolutionary but represented a nonviolent approach but no less revolutionary...obviously or why would the authorities have been so eager to eliminate and execute him, not because he was just so loving and nice to everyone, but because he was revolutionary in his love and called for justice and making right to the last, the least, the lost, calling to task the power-holders, the privileged, and the principals. The choice of the crowd there on that day before Jesus' execution was between someone who sought justice by nonviolent means, through the love-force and someone who sought justice by way of taking up arms and violence. If we were in the crowd and there were two Jesus' in Ukraine right now concerned about the violence and oppression of the people, who would we cry out for?

WHICH Jesus for us? Which Jesus is FOR us? There's a violent revolutionary Jesus who seeks justice by fighting evil and oppression on its own grounds and returns hate for hate and eyes for eyes. And there's the nonviolent Jesus who is equally concerned for the injustices he witnesses around him, equally willing to get his hands dirty in the politics of the day but just unwilling to take up arms and be violent about it, unwilling to hate the adversary and seek his destruction but looks to convert hearts. Or there's a third Jesus, I guess, who basically stays above the fray of it all, who just edifies and comforts us with care and good advice and leaves all that political stuff at the door, who is only concerned with the state of our souls, not really our bodies and our communities. Which Jesus for us? Which Jesus is FOR us?

When Jesus came towards Jerusalem on that day when coats and branches were strewn in his path and cheers of “save us, save us!!” were heard through the crowd, there was a fervor of revolution in the air, the Jews were so weary of being under the yoke of the oppressor. And as Jesus came to the gates of the city, he wept. He didn’t just have a tear trickle down his cheek, apparently, he wept for he just had this sense that the divisions and the divides among the people were so great and the power holders were too entrenched in their own power and privilege, he just had a sense that violence was right under the surface ready to boil over and scald even the most innocent among them.

Jesus WEPT for they knew not what would bring peace. Are we any closer to knowing it now?

*\*Sermon based upon research and writing of Dr. Drew Hart in his book “Who Will Be a Witness: Igniting Activism for God’s Justice, Love and Deliverance”, Herald Press, 2020.*