

Women: "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation."

Leader: But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them,

Men: "You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed."

Leader: So from that day on they planned to put Jesus to death.

Caiaphas Reflects on the Plot to Kill Jesus

I wish it had not come to this. As reports had come to us in Jerusalem about all that this Jesus was saying and doing up there in Galilee I had hoped that maybe he would get King Herod so upset like his cousin, John, had done that Herod would simply take care of this potentially explosive situation. If that did not happen, I had hoped that like so many revolutionaries this Jesus would get a band of followers together who would feel so powerful that they would start some small revolt against the Roman authorities and soon get crushed by the power of Rome and very quickly be forgotten.

But now here he was in Bethany, less than two miles away from Jerusalem, and performing that miracle that certainly none of my fellow priests or I could do as he raised Lazarus from the dead. You can see why people would want to follow him to see what he would do next and how he might be able to help them. As you remember that he was claiming to do all of this in the name of God, and in God's power you can see the threat we felt. As Chief Priest I was the defender of the faith. I should be the one who was determining what God was doing not this wandering teacher and miracle worker. When you remember that all of my

position and power, and that of my fellow priests, existed only because of the way in which we had worked out a deal for a measure of religious freedom from the Roman authorities you can see why we could not want to let this man who had no heritage like us priests upset our apple cart by saying or doing anything that would concern Rome and cause them to shut down the Temple and all of the livelihood that my fellow priests and I derived from it.

When we issued the orders to have this Jesus arrested we certainly did not anticipate that one of his own closest followers would help us. How grateful we were to Judas. I certainly am glad that our Council, the Sanhedrin, is the highest court of the land because I am not sure that all that we did in trying this Jesus was quite legal, meeting as we did so quickly and at night, and then I could not even get the witnesses we used against him to agree. In the midst of it all, though, there was certainly enough support from my fellow Council members to get rid of him so that we were ready to drag him before Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, who alone could pass the death sentence on him. You can imagine how anxious I got as Pilate seemed to find nothing wrong with him and certainly nothing worthy of death. I was afraid all of our work was going to be in vain. When he seemed to compromise by offering us a choice of Barabbas or Jesus I was pleased that there were so many of my supporters there rather than his. How terrible it would have been if the crowd had asked Pilate for Jesus rather than Barabbas. You can imagine my relief when I finally saw him hanging on that cross. I was pleased that we had overcome yet another threat to all of our positions and prestige. At least I was going to be able to sleep again at night without having to be lying awake trying to devise some plot to get rid of this Jesus of Nazareth.

I would invite you to think for a moment about how you would have felt if you had been Caiaphas, the High Priest, and saw Jesus hanging on the cross.

Now I would like to invite to think about how you would have felt just two or three months later if you had been Caiaphas as we read together the story that comes from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 4, after Peter and John have healed the man at the Gate Beautiful of the Temple in Jerusalem in the name of Jesus and have been preaching in Jerusalem about Jesus and have been arrested by the authorities and are now brought before the same court that had sentenced Jesus to death.

Peter and John Appear Before Caiaphas and the Council

Acts 4:1-22

Leader:

While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. But many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand. The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas, the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired,

Men: “By what power or by what name did you do this?”

Leader: Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them,

Women:

“Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you

in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is ‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone. There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.’

Leader: Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus. When they saw the man who had been cured standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. So they ordered them to leave the council while they discussed the matter with one another. They said,

Men: “What will we do with them? For it is obvious to all who live in Jerusalem that a notable sign has been done through them; we cannot deny it. But to keep it from spreading further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.”

Leader: So they called them and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered them,

Women: “Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

Leader: After threatening them again, they let them go, finding no way to punish them because of the people, for all of them praised God for what had happened. For the man on whom this sign of healing had been performed was more than forty years old.

Caiaphas Reflects on the Appearance of Peter and John before the Council

You can imagine how upset I was. I thought for sure that we had gotten rid of that Jesus of Nazareth forever. But now here were these men who had been his followers performing miracles in his name and proclaiming that like Lazarus God has raised this Jesus from the dead. It seemed indeed that they had an even greater following than Jesus himself had had. What amazed me about these men was what I had remembered about them. I had heard how when my officials had gone to arrest Jesus in that Garden of Gethsemane all of them had fled away. True a few of them may have come to the courtyard of my house but certainly none of them were ready to speak in his defense before the Sanhedrin or before Pilate. I am not sure how many of them even showed him enough loyalty to go to witness his death on the cross. But now they were filled with courage and boldness not just to preach in the Temple but stand up and speak before our high court. They had far more to say in their own defense than that Jesus ever had spoken in his. It was not that they were trained priests or counselors. These were uneducated fishermen who had the audacity and the courage to address us as if they were equals, and to do so even though they knew what we had done to the one they called their Master as we had arranged for his death on the cross.

The number of people who seemed to be following them as they spoke about Jesus being risen from the dead made us aware that we needed to try to shut them up, so we told them that by our orders they were no longer to speak or to teach in the name of Jesus. That was our judgment. The case was closed but before we could leave both Peter and John said, “Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than God you must judge, for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

I certainly did not like to hear those words. After all as the priests and religious leaders we were the ones who were supposed to know God's will and to do it. Their words are ones that have haunted me ever since. They have prompted me to think, "Was I doing God's will when I got rid of that Jesus, or was I standing in the way of God's will? Was the death of Jesus on the cross part of God's plan for this world in which I had a small part without really appreciating what I was doing?" I certainly do not find now that I am as sure and certain in all of my answers to those questions. Maybe only history will show whether I was right or wrong.

One thing of which I am certain is that it is so easy to allow one's jealousy and envy of another person and that person's popularity and the threat that that person might pose to one's security and well-being to really take over one's thinking and actions. It is easy when jealousy and envy are dominating one's feelings to say that the end justifies the means, and to forget about fairness and justice, and especially about love and grace and mercy.

As I reflect on how my jealousy and envy of this Jesus prompted me to have him hung a cross to die I would invite you to think about one person in your life of whom you are jealous and envious, and then to think about how you are treating that person.

Stepping out of the role of Caiaphas, I would invite you to think about that person of whom you feel jealous and envious and think about how you might look at that person if you were looking at him or her not with the green eyes of jealousy but with the eyes of Jesus.

I would like to invite you now to take just one minute and to pray for the person about whom you have thought as if you were looking at him or at her with the eyes of Jesus. (Silent Prayer.)

As we continue this Season of Lent I would like to invite you accept the challenge of Lent and for each of us during this week to spend just one minute a day praying for that person towards whom we feel jealousy and envy as if we were looking at him or her with the eyes of Jesus.

The Charge and Benediction from the Rev. Dr. Richard C. Halverson,
Presbyterian Pastor and former Chaplain to the United States Senate:

Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God has a purpose for your being there. Christ, who indwells you has something he wants to do through you where you are! Believe it, and go in his grace and peace. Amen.

Closing Hymn No. 1

“I Danced in the Morning”

Stanzas 2 and 3