

First Presbyterian Church Marianna, Florida

Lenten Luncheon: Tuesday, April 12, 2011

Welcome and Thanks to Circle 1 for the Luncheon

Unison Prayer:

Gracious God, we thank you again for this Season of Lent. We praise you for the opportunity it provides for us to share in these times of fellowship and food together, and most of all, to reflect on what the death of Jesus upon the cross means in each of our lives. Grant us, we pray, the courage to use this season of the year to examine our own lives in the assurance of the love and the grace which you have shown for us, and for the whole world, in the life, the suffering, the death on the cross, the burial in the tomb, and the glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ your Son, for it is in his name that we pray. Amen.

Opening Hymn No. 32

“This is My Father’s World”

Stanzas 1 and 2

Pontius Pilate Reflects on the Worst Day of his Life

Have you ever had one of those days that you wish you had just stayed in bed and had not had to face all of the decisions that confronted you? Or maybe it is a day on which you keep looking back and thinking if only I had not been there at that time? Or it may even be a day which you keep wishing you could re-live because if you were able to do so you know that you would do things very differently the second time around? If you have had one or more of these experiences then you can certainly identify with my story.

As I remember it, everything started very early that morning. I had hardly finished my breakfast when I heard such a commotion outside. Now I knew that it was Passover time and those Jews can get quite excited at the time of this religious holiday but generally it does not start that early in the morning. As I looked out I saw that there was a crowd and clearly they were heading in the direction of my palace dragging someone in

chains along with them.

I thought just my luck to be in Jerusalem on this day. I really hate to have to come to this capital city. It is so much quieter out at Caesarea Maritima near the coast where I generally live. I am not sure why after all my years of faithful service to the Roman Emperor I should have landed this job of being the Roman prefect over this pretty insignificant occupied area of the Empire. Mostly things were pretty quiet, but occasionally there would be a hot head or so who is crazy enough to think he could overthrow all of the might of Rome. My soldiers soon took care of that lunatic fringe. As I mentioned, I particularly did not enjoy those times that I had to spend in Jerusalem but Tiberius Caesar insisted that I be there for those special religious festivals of these Jewish people. Maybe he hoped my exalted presence would quell any potential unrest, or if some rebel did start something I at least would be there to see firsthand what was going on.

But back to that morning, though, as the crowd drew closer I heard someone talk about Jesus. Now I had heard a little about him. I had even heard that a few days earlier just I as was riding triumphantly into Jerusalem to show the power and position of Rome he was also entering Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives and that he had quite a band of people who were with him. From all of the reports, though, these were fishermen and other very ordinary folks from way up in Galilee, here probably for this Passover festival. I did not ask anyone to start investigating him because from all I had heard he and his motley crowd posed no threat to the mighty power of Rome.

I was not sure why he was being brought to my palace but when I saw that it was Caiaphas and some of the other head people of their religion that were bringing him I knew he must have upset them and all of their supposed power and authority in some dramatic way. But I still could not understand why in the world they would want to bother me with some problem he was creating with their religion, and especially not that early in the morning.

After I had heard their complaints and charges against this Jesus, I brought him to examine him myself. Join me now in reading of this examination.

Jesus appears before Pilate

Matthew 27:11-14

Leader: Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him,

Women: "Are you the King of the Jews?"

Men: Jesus said, "You say so."

Leader: But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer.

Then Pilate said to him,

Women: "Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?"

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

Pilate Reflects on His Meeting with Jesus

I had heard about him, of course, this teacher, miracle worker, so-called Messiah or King of the Jews, but I never expected I would meet this Jesus of Nazareth. If I did, I imagined he would be just like the rest of them, someone with an exalted idea of his own power and position, a crazy fanatic who dared to imagine he would take on the might of Rome. Give me five minutes and I'll usually break them down. If my interrogation is not enough to weaken them then a good flogging will generally take care of it. But not this one, though. He was just so different. I tried everything. I gave him the full works, but he just stood there in silence looking at me. It seemed almost as if I was on trial and he was the one in charge. He was very obviously innocent, any fool could see that, but it seemed as if he was not ready to do anything to help himself.

You can imagine how relieved I was when I remembered that he was from Galilee. I recalled that King Herod earlier had taken care of a similar type of religious fanatic called John the Baptist. Since he was in Jerusalem for the festival I thought maybe Herod would get the monkey off my back and take care of this situation. You can imagine how relieved I was as I saw the crowd dragging this Jesus heading off to Herod's palace.

I was just trying to finish my breakfast when I heard them again. Obviously, Herod had let me down and had refused to take care of this Jesus for me. This time, though, he was dressed in an elegant robe which obviously Herod and his soldiers had

used to poke fun of this one who claimed to be the King of the Jews. I really did not know what to do. I certainly did not want to have to face him again. I was so pleased that I remembered the custom I had established to try to win favor with the Jews by releasing one of their compatriots at the time of this special festival for them. I must admit, though, even this gesture seemed to backfire on me. Join me now in thinking about it as we read together.

Jesus offers to Release Jesus

Matthew 27:15-26

Leader: Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them,

Men: **"Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?"**

Leader: For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him,

Women: **"Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him."**

Leader: Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. The governor again said to them,

Men: **"Which of the two do you want me to release for you?"**

Women: **And they said, "Barabbas."**

Men: **Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?"**

Women: **All of them said, "Let him be crucified!"**

Men: **Then he asked, "Why, what evil has he done?"**

Women: **But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"**

Leader: So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying,

Men: **"I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves."**

Women: **Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!"**

Leader: So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

Pilate Reflects on the Choice of the Crowd.

Who would have thought it? These so called upright law-abiding people choosing a murderer rather than someone who had done good rather than hurt people, and who had spoken about love rather than hatred. I was amazed. How I hated them for what they were doing. Even more how I hated them for what they were making me do. I know my wife was right for once but could she not understand there was just no way I could get out of this predicament. I tried to show them I did not feel that I was responsible for what was happening as I washed my hands. I heard them accept responsibility for his blood, but still wonder how many people will keep blaming me and holding me responsible. It soon became clear to me that they really did not like how I was wanting to treat this Jesus of Nazareth who claimed to be their King. Read with me now how they reacted again to what I did out of respect for him.

Pilate Puts an Inscription Above the Head of Jesus on the Cross

John 19:16-22

Leader: Then Pilate handed Jesus over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate,

Women: "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but, 'This man said, I am

King of the Jews.'"

Men: Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written."

Pilate Reflects on the Reactions of the Chief Priests

There just seemed to be no way of pleasing those priests and that crowd. They were just blind to anything good in this Jesus, and determined to do all in their power to humiliate him and to get rid of him. With all of their attitude, and all that they had said to me you can imagine my surprise later in the day when I had a visitor at my palace. Let me read to you about this visit.

Joseph of Arimathea requests the body of Jesus

Matthew 27:57-61

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

Pilate Reflects on the Visit of Joseph of Arimathea

What a contrast to all that I had seen during that terrible day. Even one of those Jewish leaders seemed to have some care and compassion for this Jesus of Nazareth. Maybe, like me, he too had seen that he really was innocent, but that he also had gotten caught up in all of the hatred and animosity towards this Jesus from his fellow leaders. It certainly did my heart good to have him come to request the body of Jesus. Maybe, just maybe, there is some good in some of these people after all. Just as I began to feel a little more encouraged about them and have some hope for them I soon found myself being frustrated and disappointed again when early the next morning there was another knock on my door. I would invite you to read with me now what happened.

The Chief Priests Demand an Armed Guard at the tomb of Jesus

Leader: The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said,

Women: "Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise again.' Therefore command the tomb to be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, 'He has been raised from the dead,' and the last deception would be worse than the first."

Men: Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can."

Leader: So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone.

Pilate Reflects on the Request of the Chief Priests

Could they not leave me in peace and let me get some rest after such a terrible day the day before? But here they were again at my door. Could they not even let the dead rest in peace. They should have been pleased that they had managed to have this Jesus crucified, especially against my better judgment. Now it seems that even this will not satisfy them. What will it take to please them? I sure hope that I will never have another day like that day. These twenty-four hours have changed my life forever, and I certainly do not think that the change has been for the better. I hope that you will never have to deal with such demanding, ungrateful people yourselves.

As I have shared how I keep remembering that terrible day in my life, I would like to invite you to think of a day in your own life that you wish you could forget, or a day you wish you could re-live and in which you could make other decisions than those which you made.

As you think about that day in your own lives and the people who made that day so terrible for you I would like to share with you a report that one of my soldiers brought

to me. He was there as one of those responsible for crucifying that Jesus of Nazareth. He said that just after they had crucified this Jesus as he hung there on the cross in all of the pain and agony they heard him cry out, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

I just hope that in that prayer he was not just thinking about the soldiers who were obeying my orders to crucify him, but that he was also thinking about me. I wonder also, is it possible that he also was including those who had brought him to me, and who had made my day so terrible by the way in which they forced me to treat this man whom I knew to be innocent? I certainly hope he was including them, and I hope that at some time I can look at them in such a forgiving way myself. As I keep thinking about them I would invite you to think about those people who made that day you remember so terrible for you, and to think what it would take to look at them with the eyes of Jesus and to forgive them.

Now I would invite you to take a minute to pray for that person or those people.

As we move through Lent I would invite you to share in the challenge of Lent to take just one minute each day this week to pray for this person or these people.

Closing Hymn No. 28 “Onward Christian Soldiers” Stanzas 1 and 4

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.