

“Hard Choices”

a sermon by

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Text: “The governor again said to them, ‘Which of these two do you want me to release for you?’ And they said, ‘Barabbas.’” (Matthew 27:21)

One of the most remarkable aspects of Holy Week for me is that it presents on the one hand, one of the most historical spectacles in the history of humankind, but on the other hand it is as personal and as intimate as any of us could imagine.

Certainly the last week of Jesus’ life stands as a spectacular event in history, much as the campaigns of Alexander the Great or the fall of Rome. The characters that surrounded the death of Jesus are momentous. Rome was there with all its imperial power. One of the great religions of the world, Judaism, was also represented. Present also was one of the most towering figures of human history. There is no question. Holy Week is one of the most dramatic, grand, and momentous weeks in the history of humankind.

And yet, there is something very contemporary about Holy Week as well. Do you remember the African-American Spiritual “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” Even to ask that question is strange. Can you imagine someone asking, “Where you there when Julius Caesar was killed?”

You see, there is a sense in which all of us were present at the death of Jesus. All of the major factors in the death of Jesus involve you and me. The blindness of religious leaders who cannot see a new and larger truth, the selfishness of a business community that does not want the profitable traffic in the temple courts disturbed, the disloyalty of Judas, who cares for himself, the emotionalism of the crowd, stirred by propaganda to cry for something they didn’t really understand, the disciples who were fearful and who ran away. When our Lord was crucified, we were there.

I.

Take, if you will, Pontius Pilate. If ever a person was in a tight spot, it was Pilate. He had a very difficult situation on his hand. It was the time of the Passover Feast and Jews came from all over and swarmed the city of Jerusalem. It was a dangerous time, and as the Procurator of Rome, Pilate knew it. There had been rumors all week that this Jesus of Nazareth had entered the city. Some claimed him to be the Messiah for whom the Jews had sought, and Pilate was afraid that there could be a political uprising and in a crowded city – that was danger indeed.

But Pilate had interviewed this Jesus face-to-face. Pilate knew Jesus was innocent. He understood very well that the people seeking to rid the Jews of Jesus were the religious leaders who saw in Jesus a huge threat.

So Pilate came up with a plan. There was a custom in Jerusalem that at Passover a prisoner was released at the request of the people. So Pilate gave the crowd a choice. He would either release this Jesus called Barabbas, an insurrectionist. He had been accused of murder and trying to encourage a revolution. The other choice was this Jesus of Nazareth, whom some thought to be the Messiah. He had certainly committed no crime. Pilate thought the choice would be easy. He was sure that the crowd would demand that Jesus be released and Barabbas be held as prisoner. But the religious leaders had stirred up the crowd and the crowd demanded that Barabbas be set free.

So when Pilate asked the next logical question, “What do you want me to do with Barabbas?” the crowd cried out, “Crucify him.”

If Palm Sunday does anything, it reminds us of the impossibility of remaining neutral on all the great issues of the day. Most of us are like Pilate. We would like to sidestep the difficult decisions of life.

But Jesus forces us with a choice. “He who is not with me,” he said, “is against me.”

I wonder how many of us realize how choices affect us. Habit for example – sobriety or drunkenness, sexual self-control or the lack of it, a harnessed temper or explosive anger. If only we could be neutral. But something confronts us that is stronger than we are: “Sow an act and reap a habit; sow a habit and reap a character; sow a character and reap a destiny.”

But Palm Sunday confronts us with a dilemma. We cannot be neutral about Jesus.

II.

For one thing, when a person comes face-to-face with Jesus, that person has to make a decision. Zaccheus, the tax collector, faced such a dilemma. Jesus came to his house. And face-to-face with Jesus, Zaccheus had to change his life. So he made restitution to those whom he had cheated.

That is true throughout the New Testament. Time and time again Jesus faced people who were engaged in destructive behavior – Dives, mishandling wealth; the woman of Samaria,

mishandling sex; the Pharisees with their racial pressure, hating all the Samaritans; Nicodemus, needing to be born again. Pilate, trying to dodge the most critical choice of his life – these and many more the Master faced and always with a forced decision: will you or won't you? If only they could have side-stepped him, but they couldn't. They had to choose.

Peter Gomes, who for a number of years has been the Preacher at the University Church at Harvard, once spoke about the difficulty of preaching to young adults at Harvard. Most of the students come from very wealthy families. Most are very career-focused and many do not have much time to deal with the religious dimension of life.

You see, that is one of the difficulties that preachers have. Some of our homiletical failures are not simply due to our limited oratorical abilities. Some of them have to do with this Jesus we preach.

Jesus is not infinitely pliable. He is not always particularly congenial to our programs of human betterment or interested in the dilemmas of the affluent. When a rich young ruler came to Jesus asking Jesus what he could do to inherit eternal life, Jesus gave him a straight answer: "Go, sell what you have, and give it to the poor and follow me."

We read that the young man went away sorrowful, because he had many possessions. That is a Jesus that we don't always like to deal with. He is amazingly willing to have someone get depressed, cast into grief, and walk away grieving with possessions still intact, rather than trying to crank down his gospel.

III.

There is another point at which we are forced to make a hard choice, and it has to do with Jesus' God. Many people believe that they can be agnostic about God – that they can remain neutral, but in fact this is not so. All of us have gods. A person can give himself to money, alcohol, career, or even to family – but all of us have the things we worship. John Calvin, the great Reformer of the 16th Century knew that the human heart was an "idol factory." We all worship something – the real question is whether we worship the God whom Jesus proclaimed, or whether we choose some other God.

This past week I read in the *Charlotte Observer* an article about Bert Ehrman, who is a university professor of religion and an agnostic. He was in Raleigh at a book store promoting his books and his own brand of agnosticism. Ehrman has devoted a good bit of his studies to show how the New Testament is filled with many contradictions. In the interview with the *Observer*, he noted that his observations about the New Testament are not new. Most of them, he observed, have been around for a hundred years or more.

As I read the article in the paper, I was reminded of another professor of religion at Chapel Hill, Dr. Bernard Boyd, who taught Bible at the University for a number of years. Dr. Boyd also taught students to study the Bible critically, but for him the historical critical study of scripture led one to faith – not from faith. Over the years at Union Seminary in Richmond, I knew a number of students who were graduates of the University of North Carolina at Chapel

Hill. Almost all of them acknowledged they were at seminary due to the positive influence of Dr. Boyd.

I think that's a choice each of us has to make. What kind of witness do we want to be? Jesus, on one occasion had this to say: "He that falls on this stone shall be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter them as dust." This too, is an everlasting truth that Christ reveals. To those who accept him, he gives life. But those who reject him choose something very different.

Pilate did that long ago. He thought he was sitting in judgment on Jesus while all the time Jesus was sitting in judgment on him, and Pilate's name and memory have been broken on that rock.

Friends, all of us on Palm Sunday have a choice. We can join the multitude of those on the streets of Jerusalem who welcomed Jesus as the Messiah or we can join the mob on Friday who cried out, "crucify him, crucify him." But we cannot have it both ways. We cannot be neutral. We are either for or against.

IV.

Then, finally, I think all of us have to make a choice about Christ. Either we will follow him or we will not.

There is something very poignant about Holy Week. Most of us instinctually resonate with the events of Palm Sunday. There is something thrilling about a processional with children and palms, cries of "hosanna" and "blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

The same is true with Easter. There is something thrilling about the stories of that Sunday morning: the women who came to the tomb, the stone that was rolled away, and the word of the angel – "he is not here, he is risen."

But Easter would not be possible apart from the events of Holy Week: the betrayal of Judas, the denial of Peter, the abandonment of Jesus by his own discipleship, the rejection by the crowd that had hailed him as the king.

That is why the cross stands at the center of our faith. It is a powerful reminder to us that at the center of our faith is a conviction that God took the very worst that men and women could do and made of it something great.

What good would our Christianity be to us today if it were only centered and confined to the lovely stories of Bethlehem, with adoring wise men and shepherds and singing angels?

As beautiful as those stories may be, they are not an adequate representation of what life presents to us. Life is so often mysterious, baffling, and often tragic. There are many hardships along the way and many dead-end streets. Yet, the message of the cross is that God can take the worst that humanity can bring, and turn it into something glorious and wonderful.

That is the great gospel we encounter on Palm Sunday. The great enigma of human existence finds its match in God's revelation of Jesus Christ on the cross.

That is why we sing, at this beginning of Holy Week, the hymn that is at the center of all we are about:

“When I survey the wondrous cross,
On which the prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.”

Amen.