

Second Sunday in Lent • March 12, 2017

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Matthew 27:11-26

“At the Crossroads: Judgment”

Times of crisis aren't the best times for making decisions; yet, they're often times when big decisions need to be made. A crisis, in other words, is a crossroads. It's an opportunity to go one way or another. It's a time to render judgment on the situation before you. The English word “crisis,” in fact, comes directly from the ancient Greek word κρίσις, which refers to the judgment in a legal case, the decision handed down by a judge. Today you heard how Pontius Pilate, in a time of crisis, handed down one of the most world-shaping judgments in all of history.

Pilate served as the Roman prefect of Judea for about a decade – at least three times longer than the average term. By most accounts, he wasn't really considered a “friend of the people.” As a military figure and representative of the Empire, Pilate was responsible for maintaining law and order in the region. He put down uprisings and rebellions – and when negotiation didn't work out, he would do so with harsh force. Pilate knew that his standing with the emperor would depend on how well he kept the peace in his little corner of the world. The people he'd been tasked with overseeing didn't make that easy on him. It probably didn't help that he offended the people on the religious level. While Pilate probably never really understood the Jewish faith, his role as judge in a case brought by the religious leaders there in Jerusalem would cement his place in history.

What did Pilate see when he looked at the accused, this Jesus of Nazareth? Pilate understood that there was something more going on here than the Jewish High Council was laying out for him. They'd reached their own verdict of blasphemy, but they didn't have the authority under Roman rule to put Jesus to death. The Council had translated their accusation against Jesus into political terms in an effort to get Pilate to judge Jesus guilty. They said that Jesus was a rebel who claimed to be king, and that he would keep people from paying their taxes to Caesar – two of the key responsibilities that Pilate, as the Roman prefect, was tasked with enforcing. In truth, the Council was probably unconcerned with a threat to Roman rule; however, they needed the governor's approval for Jesus' execution. The death penalty was a key right that the Roman rulers reserved in maintaining law and order across the Empire.

But Pilate saw through the pretense. He knew that the religious leaders were jealous of Jesus, that this unusual teacher's ministry threatened *their* authority and income, not Caesar's. After taking the time to question Jesus one-on-one, it all became clear. While Pilate might not understand just who Jesus of Nazareth truly was, he certainly understood that Jesus wasn't guilty or deserving of death. On top of all that, Pilate's wife came to him after a dream, warning her husband to let Jesus go and have nothing more to do with him. In Roman culture, dreams were often views as omens; this particular dream may have been sent from God as further indication of Jesus' innocence. Pilate, the judge, understood the case and the situation of the accused. So why did Jesus end up on a cross later that same day?

Pilate needed to keep up appearances before the emperor if he had any hope of keeping his role in the government. The Council recognized this as Pilate's pressure point, so they jabbed it. Seeing that he wasn't just going to go along with their plan to get rid of Jesus, they called Pilate's loyalty to Caesar into question: “If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar,” they cried out. (John 19:12) And when Pilate, hoping for the crowd's decency, allowed the crowd to choose freedom for either Jesus or Barabbas, a thief and killer, the Council stirred up the people to pick the clear criminal.

Pilate had come to a crossroads, a time of crisis. Even though he was aware of Jesus' innocence, Pilate was even more keenly aware of the dynamics of his own position. If he chose to free Jesus, there'd be consequences. Sure, he could put down a riot – he'd done so before – but how would that look to the higher-ups in Rome? And what if the Jewish leaders went and attacked him behind his back by taking the story to the emperor? What really mattered more: spare the life of one innocent man, or risk the peace of the nation and his own future as prefect? Give the crowd what they want and don't risk their displeasure. It might have even seemed like common sense. Fear can have that effect. In the time of crisis, under public pressure, Pilate chose to hand Jesus over for flogging and crucifixion. He handed down the judgment of death to someone who'd done nothing wrong.

Don't judge Pilate, though. How many times have you made a choice that would make life easier for you, even when you knew it wasn't the best choice, or the right one? How many times have you caved to pressure from outside influencers just to go along with what others think you should do, rather than following God's instruction for living? You've been in times of crisis. You've had to make judgments big and small. Sometimes those decisions have been guided by fear or love of self, seeking comfort or convenience. If we're faithful to Jesus' call for complete perfection in life (Matthew 5:48), we have to admit that we make bad choices. You and I, along with Pilate, stand convicted.

That's why we needed Jesus to go to the cross.

In the time of crisis, Jesus' judgment wasn't guided by fear or love of self. His judgment was guided by his love for you. Jesus may have gone to the cross because of Pilate's judgment, but it was ultimately Jesus' faithfulness that led him to take the way of the cross. Christ chose to be silent before his accusers, to undergo judgment for you, for me, and even for Pilate himself. He did it to carry the weight of our bad choices, along with all the pain that those failures have caused. He did it to bring forgiveness and freedom that will carry his people through all the times of crisis that will come.

Just this past week, another judge heard a verdict that came in a time of crisis. The Wyoming Supreme Court handed down a censure (a formal criticism) of a Ruth Neely, a municipal judge and member of an LCMS congregation, because she had commented (back in 2014) that her religious beliefs as a Christian would prevent her from presiding over same-sex marriages. Judge Neely was never asked to perform a same-sex marriage, and had never refused such a request. In fact, Wyoming law doesn't require Judge Neely to perform any marriage. Moreover, according to the minority decision of two of the five Wyoming Supreme Court justices, the people who work with her "have expressed unreserved confidence that she will be absolutely fair and impartial to all litigants, whatever their sexual preference." Even though Judge Neely had done nothing wrong, she has faced judgment for her faith.

While your times of crisis might never result in a newspaper headline or cement your place in history like Pontius Pilate, **following Jesus means letting your faith guide your judgment, not fear or love of self.** That's not easy, especially when pressure from outside influencers would have you take a different way. But in times of crisis, you can look to the cross. Because of Jesus' faithfulness, because he was judged for you, you are made new by God's grace each day. Because of Jesus' faithfulness, God has judged you forgiven and set free.

Amen.