

**Weekend of Sunday, March 17, 2019**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent/"People of the Passion"/Year C**  
**Primary Text: Luke 23:1-25**  
**Sermon Title: "The Axis of Evil"**

## **Theme**

*Today we will take a closer look at these two men who have pivotal roles in the Passion. Some would argue that **Pilate and Herod** are to blame for the death of Jesus Christ, but are they, or were they just players in the drama of the Passion.*

## **Text**

<sup>1</sup>Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. <sup>2</sup>They began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king." <sup>3</sup>Then Pilate asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" He answered, "You say so." <sup>4</sup>Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no basis for an accusation against this man." <sup>5</sup>But they were insistent and said, "He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place."

<sup>6</sup>When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. <sup>7</sup>And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. <sup>8</sup>When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. <sup>9</sup>He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer. <sup>10</sup>The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. <sup>11</sup>Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. <sup>12</sup>That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.

<sup>13</sup>Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, <sup>14</sup>and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. <sup>15</sup>Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. <sup>16</sup>I will therefore have him flogged and release him."

<sup>18</sup>Then they all shouted out together, "Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!" <sup>19</sup>(This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) <sup>20</sup>Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; <sup>21</sup>but they kept shouting, "Crucify, crucify him!" <sup>22</sup>A third time he said to them, "Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him." <sup>23</sup>But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. <sup>24</sup>So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. <sup>25</sup>He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.

## Sermon

The phrase "**axis of evil**" was first used by President George W. Bush in his State of the Union address on January 29, 2002, and often repeated throughout his presidency, to describe foreign governments that, during his administration, sponsored terrorism and sought weapons of mass destruction. The Axis of Evil back then was identified as Iran, Iraq, and North Korea.

I borrowed that name for this weekend's sermon because I think it could be argued that these two "People of the Passion", Pilate and Herod, were in the unique position, having both the authority and responsibility, to stop the scandal that was the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Pilate is the first of the two to make an appearance in the drama of the Passion.

The Roman Empire in the First Century was vast and could be difficult to control. So wherever possible, the Romans gave limited civil authority to local indigenous leaders. In the case of Judea, that civil authority was given to the Jewish Sanhedrin presided over by the High Priest. However, the High Priest was appointed by the Romans, and so as often as the prefect could avoid it, he would let those local authorities handle their own people. You will hear more about them next week and in the 5<sup>th</sup> Week of Lent.

Pilate was a prefect or procurator of Judea. He was the eyes and ears of the Roman Empire in Judea, and if he did his job well, Rome would never hear a report about the people or territory he was commissioned to control. His function was primarily military. He had authority over a small legion of perhaps 3000 soldiers to call upon to keep the peace. As a representative of the Roman Empire he also had limited judicial functions, but as I said, if at all possible, the prefect would let the local people handle their own affairs. It was only when and where local jurisdiction ran out that the prefect would have to step in.

Enter the itinerant preacher, Jesus of Nazareth.

The religious professionals, the Sanhedrin, the priests, rabbis, Sadducees and Pharisees hated him and wanted him to be killed. Again, we will talk about their reasons and motives next week, but it is a fact, they wanted him killed. So when Jesus was taken into custody by the Temple guard, he was first interrogated by the

Sanhedrin led by the High Priest Caiaphas. Of course, we know that their verdict was "guilty" before he was ever captured and interrogated. And the charges they leveled against Jesus and found him guilty of, which we will talk about next week, merited the penalty of death. But the problem for them was that their authority ran out before capital punishment. They had to get the Roman authority to see this case their way to get the verdict they wanted. This is where the Gospel Reading for today began.

Saving the charges for next week, Pilate asked Jesus if he was indeed the King of the Jews. An affirmative answer would certainly have ramped things up, but Jesus turned Pilate's question into his answer, "You say so." (23:3)

I suspect that Pilate either thought Jesus was a deranged lunatic – which he did not seem to represent, or the victim of jealousy. Obviously, Pilate went with the latter and announced, "I find no basis for an accusation against this man."(:4) But the Jewish leadership was insistent and upon hearing that Jesus was a Galilean, Pilate pitched the Jesus problem over the wall to Herod. And since Herod was also in Jerusalem, Pilate ordered Jesus be sent to Herod.

Now, this Herod is Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, who was King of the Jews at the time of Jesus' birth and the one responsible for the slaughter of all those innocent boys in an attempt to kill Jesus.

It will probably surprise you to learn that Herod was an ethnic Jew. That means his ethnicity was Jewish, but he did not practice his faith, at least not very actively.

You will recall that it was this Herod, Herod Antipas, who fell in love with his brother's wife, Herodias. So the two of them got divorced from their spouses and married each other. I am sure that made for awkward Thanksgiving dinners. This was incestuous by all accounts and it was John the Baptizer who called them out on it. Now it is interesting to note that though Herod was not a practicing Jew, he enjoyed hearing John preach and respected his unconstrained independence. Of course, it was that characteristic that got his head chopped off.

Herod's involvement is only recorded by Luke. I don't know what to say about that. Well then, Jesus showed up and scripture says that Herod was rather happy about it because he had heard about Jesus' ability to perform miracles, and was in the mood

to be amused. Jesus, however remained silent and said or did nothing in front of Herod. So Herod's soldiers "treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate." (23:11)

So, having already interrogated Jesus, Pilate called the Sanhedrin together and told them he found Jesus not guilty of their charges. He even mentioned that Herod came to the same conclusion. So, finding Jesus innocent of all charges, he never the less, ordered him to be flogged and released. Yea, that seems fair!

Well, that got the Sanhedrin fired up and they began to get shout and become unruly. Pilate, sensing he had to do something, gave them a bad deal. Apparently there was a custom of goodwill that at the Passover, he would release a captive – probably normally a political prisoner. He offered them a prisoner by the name of Barabbas. Little is known about Barabbas, and what is written is speculative. Of course, the crowd's mind was made up, it didn't matter who Pilate offered them; Jesus was going to die.

Three times, according to the Gospels, Pilate tried to defend his own verdict, but the crowd prevailed and so, according to Matthew's Gospel, as a symbol of his disgust, Pilate washed his hands of the case in front of them.

We have the benefit of looking back on these events, but the only reason this story is tragic and matters to us is because of who Jesus turned out to be. But in that moment, Jesus was really not that different, just another Jew to Pilate and Herod. The road leading into Jerusalem was lined with crosses with bodies on them as a reminder to other would-be kings and messiahs that that is the way the Romans dealt with insurrection.

The troubling thing for me and maybe for you too, is that given due process, Pilate and Herod found Jesus not guilty of anything. But because it was Passover, and Jerusalem had swollen to many times its usual population, they needed to keep the peace, and the Sanhedrin was fomenting a riot among the Jews.

They could have done the right thing and dealt with the consequences as leaders should do, but they both took the coward's way out. Pilate washed his hands of the situation, but he couldn't really do that. The Jews had no authority to order execution. So basin of water or not, he permitted, no, ordered Jesus' crucifixion.

Let me ask you this; have you ever had to compromise your integrity to save your own skin? Both Pilate and Herod found Jesus innocent and yet did not do the right thing. For the sake of appearances in Rome, to avoid a riot, they wasted an innocent Jewish man's life. Perhaps they were able to justify it in their own minds.

Have you ever been forced to do the wrong thing? Ever had to knowingly turn your back on your own integrity?

One time, when I was managing a manufacturing plant in South Carolina, my boss, the VP of manufacturing didn't like one of my best team leaders and told me to fire him. He was offended that I asked why, and when he told me his reasons they were lame. I told him I would not fire him based on what he had told me and then he looked me right in the eyes and told me it was him or me.

I fired the guy, but had a hard time living with myself until we made the situation right, which is another story. Having done a dirty deed myself, I have on occasion questioned my integrity and wondered what I am made of, wondered if I had a spine at all, and I only had to fire a guy, not kill him.

We might find it easy to blame Pilate and Herod for Jesus' death. It is a fact, they were tools of the Roman Empire and simply took the easy way out. But, you will hear this again and again over the next three weeks that I am of the opinion that both Pilate and Herod and the rest of the "People of the Passion" were really powerless to do anything about the crucifixion of Jesus. They and all the others were, in my opinion, bit players in a drama written and directed by God, God' self. And the reason I say that is because of the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ for God's creation and specifically for us, human beings.

Over the millennia of human civilization, we, human beings, have proven ourselves incapable of living godly lives, and because of the sinfulness of humanity, God closed the gates to the Garden of Eden, a metaphor for Heaven or Eternal Life with God. And that simply would not do for God. And so God implemented God's final solution to save the world from its sinfulness.

So Spoiler alert: It is interesting to discuss and debate who was responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, but the need for atonement is ours, and God's perfect

sacrifice was his son. God, the Father sent his Son, Jesus Christ to the cross in order to save us from our sinful selves.

What can we learn from the examples of Pilate and Herod? Only that they were sinners too, same as us. Will we do better, knowing their story? If my story is any indication, no, I doubt it.

But thankfully, they, Pilate and Herod, are not the stars of the drama of the Passion. Jesus Christ is. And from his cross he said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (23:34)

And I choose to believe that those words are for us too.

### **Prayer**

Heavenly Father, it goes without saying that we are not worthy of the sacrifice of your son, but it breaks our hearts that you love us enough to do so. Send your Holy Spirit to dwell in us to guide us in godly living all the days of our lives. And though we can never repay you, we do offer you our thanks and praise. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen