

Weekend of Sunday, April 14, 2019
Palm/Passion Sunday/"People of the Passion"/Year C
Primary Text: Luke 22:14-23:56

Sermon Title: "Merciful Servants" Joseph of Arimathea & Nicodemus

Theme

Two characters played very small but important roles in the drama of the Passion. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, are barely mentioned and yet their witness tells a story of the impact of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

Text

^{22:14}When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. ¹⁵He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; ¹⁶for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." ¹⁷Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; ¹⁸for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." ¹⁹Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁰And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. ²¹But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. ²²For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!" ²³Then they began to ask one another which one of them it could be who would do this. ²⁴A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. ²⁵But he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. ²⁶But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. ²⁷For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. ²⁸You are those who have stood by me in my trials; ²⁹and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, ³⁰so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ³¹Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, ³²but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have

turned back, strengthen your brothers." ³³And he said to him, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!" ³⁴Jesus said, "I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me."

³⁵He said to them, "When I sent you out without a purse, bag, or sandals, did you lack anything?" They said, "No, not a thing." ³⁶He said to them, "But now, the one who has a purse must take it, and likewise a bag. And the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one. ³⁷For I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me, 'And he was counted among the lawless'; and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled." ³⁸They said, "Lord, look, here are two swords." He replied, "It is enough."

³⁹He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. ⁴⁰When he reached the place, he said to them, "Pray that you may not come into the time of trial." ⁴¹Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, ⁴²Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done. [⁴³Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. ⁴⁴In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.]

⁴⁵When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, ⁴⁶and he said to them, "Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial."

⁴⁷While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; ⁴⁸but Jesus said to him, "Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?" ⁴⁹When those who were around him saw what was coming, they asked, "Lord, should we strike with the sword?" ⁵⁰Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. ⁵¹But Jesus said, "No more of this!" And he touched his ear and healed him. ⁵²Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for him, "Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? ⁵³When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!"

⁵⁴Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. ⁵⁵When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. ⁵⁶Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, "This man also was with him."

⁵⁷But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." ⁵⁸A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am

not!" ⁵⁹Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, "Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean." ⁶⁰But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!" At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed.

⁶¹The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." ⁶²And he went out and wept bitterly.

⁶³Now the men who were holding Jesus began to mock him and beat him; ⁶⁴they also blindfolded him and kept asking him, "Prophecy! Who is it that struck you?"

⁶⁵They kept heaping many other insults on him.

⁶⁶When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people, both chief priests and scribes, gathered together, and they brought him to their council. ⁶⁷They said, "If you are the Messiah, tell us." He replied, "If I tell you, you will not believe; ⁶⁸and if I question you, you will not answer. ⁶⁹But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God." ⁷⁰All of them asked, "Are you, then, the Son of God?" He said to them, "You say that I am." ⁷¹Then they said, "What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips!"

^{23:1}Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. ²They 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." ³Then Pilate asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" He answered, "You say so."

⁴Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no basis for an accusation against this man." ⁵But they were insistent and said, "He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place."

⁶When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. ⁷And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. ⁸When 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. ⁹He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. ¹¹Even 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. ¹²That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.

¹³Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, ¹⁴and 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. ¹⁵Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. ¹⁶I will therefore have him flogged and release him."

¹⁸Then they all shouted out together, "Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!" ¹⁹(This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) ²⁰Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; ²¹but they kept shouting, "Crucify, crucify him!" ²²A 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." ²³But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. ²⁴So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. ²⁵He 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.

²⁶As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. ²⁸But Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.' ³⁰Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us.'

³¹For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

³²Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.

³³When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [[³⁴Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."]] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" ³⁶The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, ³⁷and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?"

⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴²Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

⁴⁴It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, ⁴⁵while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last. ⁴⁷When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, "Certainly this man was innocent." ⁴⁸And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. ⁴⁹But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

⁵⁰Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, ⁵¹had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. ⁵²This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁵³Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. ⁵⁴It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning. ⁵⁵The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. ⁵⁶Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments. On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

Sermon

Weird isn't it. This day I mean. We started in different place with a different feel. Lent is often somber and more subdued, yet today is festive and loud. But then the traditional service you are used to is totally upset. There was that long dramatic reading that no one wants to hear – but we must. Now the sermon. It's just weird. Then after the sermon, without a Benediction, Sending Hymn, or Dismissal, I am just going to walk down out of this pulpit and leave you sitting there.

And then, oddly enough, the children will have the annual Easter Egg Hunt. It's just weird – a roller coaster of emotions.

And that is how it should be because that is how it was the last week of Jesus' earthly life.

As you know, this Lent we have been studying and hearing about "the People of the Passion" in a series by the same name. And it occurred to me this week that of all the "People of the Passion," many of whom were among Jesus' inner circle and closest friends, at the end who was left? Joseph of Arimathea, who we don't even know ever met Jesus, and Nicodemus. Both members of the Sanhedrin, the party that opposed him at every opportunity during his life, and at the end called for his death.

Today we begin our Holy Week observation with into an investigation into those two lesser known characters in the Drama of the Passion. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus.

We know almost nothing about these two for certain and yet they played a pretty important role in the drama of the Passion of our Lord; they buried his body.

All that we know for sure about Joseph of Arimathea is that he is recorded in all four gospels as:

- *Matthew 27:57* rich man from Arimathea, ... a disciple of Jesus
- *Mark 15:43* a respected member of the council (Sanhedrin)
- *Luke 23:50* A good and righteous man
- *John 19:38* a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews

That's it. He doesn't appear anywhere else in all of scripture.

We know slightly more or less about Nicodemus. He is not mentioned in the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. He is only mentioned in the Gospel of John, and only three times there.

Nicodemus was the Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin who came to Jesus at night to do some investigation. Scripture doesn't tell us whether he was doing this for his own edification, or if he was sent by the Sanhedrin. But he did begin by saying:

John 3:2"**Rabbi, *we* know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do *apart from the presence of God.*"**

I tend to think that the "we" in this passage is an indication that he might have been sent as a representative of the Sanhedrin, who by Chapter 3 had already been meeting and scheming to come up with a solution to the *Jesus problem*.

But also in that same sentence there seems to be an acknowledgement that what they (presumably Nicodemus and other members of the Sanhedrin) have heard and seen cannot be accomplished "apart from the presence of God" which I take to mean, they acknowledged that Jesus is from God. Yet they schemed on.

The next time Nicodemus showed up in scripture is in Chapter 7, where the Sanhedrin had sent the Temple Police to arrest Jesus, but they came back without him in custody. The infuriated leaders of Judaism ask how this insolent insubordination could have taken place, when the police answered, "Never has anyone spoken like this!"

Mark and Luke both use the term "spellbound" to describe how the people were affected by their interaction with Jesus. Though John doesn't use that exact word, in effect, the leaders ask the police if they too are *spellbound* by Jesus!

It is in that conversation that Nicodemus spoke up and asked, ⁵¹"Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" And so as a result of asking a procedural question about fairness, Nicodemus too, was looked upon with suspicion.

I review this to indicate to you that Nicodemus was an honest and fair man, who took the time and put himself in jeopardy with the power in Jerusalem, to meet and find out about Jesus firsthand.

And then, when he found himself inside a group willing to break their own laws and have a man killed out of jealousy, especially Jesus, whom he had met face to face, he was willing to speak up against their plot.

Did he or Joseph, for that matter, do enough to stop them? Obviously not, but I think by now we can argue, Jesus was going to die; Jesus had to die; it was all part of God's plan to save the world from itself. Nothing could have stopped it.

And then the last place Nicodemus showed up in scripture is as the partner of Joseph of Arimathea. And since the Passion Reading we just hear moments ago was from Luke, and did not include Nicodemus, here is the passage that includes Nicodemus from Gospel of John:

John 19:38 After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. ³⁹Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. ⁴⁰They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. ⁴¹Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. ⁴²And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

So, at the end who is it that does the dirty business of tending to the respectful burial of the body of Jesus? None of the Twelve. They have all scattered in fear of their own lives. None of the others of his disciples either – it was risky business to be known as a disciple of Jesus at that moment.

It was two members of the Sanhedrin, the same body who called for his crucifixion and whipped up the mob to yell, "Crucify Him!"

As I already mentioned, the synoptic gospels have kind words to say about Joseph. John reserved judgment on Nicodemus. But I think, what could be said about these two is, though there was nothing anyone could have done, they did what they could do to bring some level of respect and dignity to this person they admired from afar. They, at least, did the right thing – and at great risk to themselves and their own reputation.

I wonder if you can relate to Joseph and Nicodemus.

Personally, I will tell you that I will always do the right thing – but honestly, my life has never hung in the balance.

How about you. Will you do the right thing – even when that might mean hardship, or even death?

Being Christian in this country, which was founded by people seeking religious freedom, means that we are free to worship as we feel called. But in our culture today, there are many who, if they knew you were Christian, might ask how we could possibly believe in a God who allowed himself to be killed in such a heinous way, and who was raised from the dead! "Raised from the dead? You believe that stuff?"

They aren't going to persecute you for your answer, but are you willing to do the right thing and at least say, "Yes, I believe. Let me tell you why."

God revealed in Jesus Christ has done all the hard work of salvation from the cross and through the grave. We believe that we get to live on eternally with Jesus Christ when our mortal lives are over, and all he asked at his ascension was that we tell others that Good News! Will you do the right thing?