

Midweek 4 - March 13, 2024 - SJ - God on Trial: Misconceptions

Luke 23:1-12 - Then the whole assembly rose and led him off to Pilate.<sup>2</sup> And they began to accuse him, saying, "We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Messiah, a king."<sup>3</sup> So Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "You have said so," Jesus replied.<sup>4</sup> Then Pilate announced to the chief priests and the crowd, "I find no basis for a charge against this man."<sup>5</sup> But they insisted, "He stirs up the people all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here."<sup>6</sup> On hearing this, Pilate asked if the man was a Galilean.<sup>7</sup> When he learned that Jesus was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time.<sup>8</sup> When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform a sign of some sort.<sup>9</sup> He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer.<sup>10</sup> The chief priests and the teachers of the law were standing there, vehemently accusing him.<sup>11</sup> Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked him. Dressing him in an elegant robe, they sent him back to Pilate.<sup>12</sup> That day Herod and Pilate became friends-- before this they had been enemies.

Dear followers of Jesus:

No one mentioned in these verses really understood Jesus. Let's start with the "*whole assembly*" that led Jesus away (Luke 23:1). This is the Sanhedrin—the chief priests and teachers of the law, the group that put Jesus on trial. They heard Jesus confess that he is the Son of God, but they didn't believe it. They said Jesus was worthy of death, but they didn't have the power to carry out the sentence. So they brought him to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.

Their official accusations consisted of two lies and a half-truth. The first lie: Jesus was misleading the nation. In fact, he was doing the opposite; he was trying to straighten the twisted teachings that false leaders like themselves were teaching. The second lie: Jesus opposed paying taxes to Caesar. In point of fact, Jesus had memorably said, "*Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's*" (Mark 12:17). The half-truth? He "*claims to be Messiah, a king*" (Luke 23:2). This was true, of course. Jesus did claim to be the Messiah, the Chosen One, because he is. And he is a King. But the way they presented this truth was meant to make him seem like he was posing as an earthly king—a threat to Rome—which he certainly was not. The Jewish leaders didn't understand Jesus because they didn't want to.

Pilate didn't understand but for a different reason. He probably had heard of Jesus, but you get the impression he didn't know much about him. Early on a Friday morning, a crowd materialized outside his headquarters in Jerusalem, shoving forward this plain-looking man and accusing him of claiming to be king. Pilate's response tells us what he was thinking, "*Are you the king of the Jews?*" (Luke 23:3).

We'll hear more about this trial next week. For now, let's just say that Pilate didn't see Jesus as a king. He sensed this man was no threat to Caesar. Pilate's goal was to send the whole assembly home, but the Jewish leaders persisted. When they mentioned that Jesus was from Galilee, Pilate saw his out: Galilee was the jurisdiction of Herod, who happened to be in town for the Passover. Perfect! Pilate sent Jesus to Herod.

Herod may be the most interesting figure in this text. He had wanted to see Jesus for a long time. I wonder if he had any idea that three decades earlier his father had killed all the baby boys in Bethlehem to get rid of this Jesus. Herod had had a complicated relationship with John the Baptist: Herod liked listening to him, but sometimes he had wanted to kill him. Eventually he had John beheaded, but only at someone else's request. Now there was another prophet like John—but this one could do miracles! Herod was intrigued.

You can imagine Herod's excitement when they brought Jesus in. Let's see what this prophet knows! Let's see what he can do! But Jesus did no miracles. He answered no questions. Only the Jewish leaders had anything to say—more accusations. What a letdown! As Herod's anticipation turned to disappointment and then boredom, he and his soldiers had some fun at Jesus' expense and sent him back to Pilate.

The people who put God on trial in our world today have a lot in common with the people in this account. Like the Jewish leaders, some people today seem to be against Jesus because they feel his teachings are a threat to them and their way of life. They know him and don't like him. Like Pilate, others seem less motivated by hate than by apathy. They don't know much about Jesus, but they aren't much interested. They have other things to do.

Then there are those like Herod. They've heard about Jesus and are intrigued by him. Maybe they've heard that he was a friend of sinners and assume that in him they will find an ally who will approve of their choices. Perhaps they think of him as the original rebel, an inspiration for their political cause. Or they've heard that he can help turn lives around, so they picture some magician who will wave away their troubles. When they learn more and realize that's not who he is, they lose interest or even turn against him.

What about us? Where are we in this account? Sadly, there is no one in the account we can emulate. But can we consider, for a moment, whether we might have something in common with the antagonists in this story—perhaps even Herod? There are times when we misconceive who Jesus is. We treat him like a divine vending machine, expecting him to dispense blessings for us and then getting angry when we put in our money and a blessing doesn't drop. Or we gladly accept the good he sends but chafe under the trouble, as if there could be a Christ or a Christian without a cross. Perhaps we think we can enjoy his forgiveness without forgiving others or without fighting against the sins that need to be forgiven. We know better.

The problem—the thing we share with everyone else in this story—is an inward focus. The Jewish leaders were thinking only about their political and cultural influence. Pilate was thinking only about his job. Herod was thinking only about his entertainment. We're sinners like them. Our sin is like a warped lens that distorts our view of Jesus so that we see what we want to see.

I said that there is no one in this account for us to emulate. Of course, that's not true. Jesus is here! But Jesus . . . well, in some ways Jesus fades into the background in this account. For the most part, he keeps quiet, unwilling to do tricks for Herod and refusing to answer more false accusations. When he does speak, he is respectful and truthful. He is steady and faithful and perfect.

In fact, Pilate and Herod confirmed this! Pilate sent Jesus to Herod because he could detect no crime; Herod sent Jesus back for the same reason. And these were men who had no trouble finding reasons to hand out cruel punishments. Luke notes that they became friends that day. They also teamed up, unwittingly, to exonerate Jesus. And Jesus *was* innocent. That innocence of Jesus is what you now wear, bright like the robe they put on him.

Let's not let Jesus fade into the background. Look at your God on trial. If you're keeping count, these are now his second and third trials of that Friday morning. He hasn't slept. At every stop he receives abuse and mockery. He knows this path will lead to the cross. But that's where he wants to go, because he knows who he is—your substitute, your sacrifice, your Savior.

This is the Jesus we want the world to see! He's better than a magician who can wave away our troubles; he's the Messiah who washes away our sin. He's more than an inspiration for those who fight for freedom for the oppressed; he frees us from death and hell! He has such love for sinners that he cannot just approve of our sins and leave us trapped in them, but he forgives us and empowers us to fight against them.

As we present that Jesus to the world, there's no question many will continue in their blindness. Because of that, we can expect some mockery and opposition. If others don't understand Jesus, they won't understand us. But I do think we have opportunities, especially with those people who, like Herod, are intrigued about Jesus for one reason or another. It would be hard to find people in this country who haven't at least heard of him. What do they know about him? Have they heard that he has power? that he is tender and compassionate? that he taught peace? that he has a special heart for the poor and downtrodden? It's all true! But there's more to say, and we'll be happy to say it.

Jesus will make us bold. He stood before a governor and a king. Just three days earlier, he had told his disciples that they too should expect to be called before the authorities. The Bible tells about some who were—like Peter and John before the same Sanhedrin or the apostle Paul before another Herod and other Roman governors. We probably won't be called before kings and governors, but we can expect to stand before people who have some misconceptions about Jesus, and we can show them the real picture.

I said no one in this narrative understood Jesus. But that's not entirely true. As Luke wrote these verses, he imagined one who did: the reader. He wrote for a believer named Theophilus, but by the Spirit's inspiration he also writes to us. You and I hear these words today—we know who Jesus is. We know it by—and only by—the Spirit's power. Our eyes have been opened to see that the man on trial is our God and Savior. That's God's gift to us and our gift to the world. Amen.

***May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. Amen. (2 Thessalonians 2:16,17)***