

## Encounters with Jesus: Who Is Your King?

John 18:28-19:16a

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on March 25, 2017]

### I

There is a fine and fragile line between a crowd and a mob.

Given the right conditions—

fear, for example,

and resentment,

and a sense of powerlessness and victimization—

and anger turns into rage,

rage, like fire, feeds on itself,

and a crowd becomes a mob.

Several years ago at the University of Dayton,

in what is called the student “ghetto,”

a crowd of over 1000 students celebrating St. Patrick’s Day turned into a near-riot.

It resulted in damage to a dozen cars, including a police cruiser,

broken beer bottles all over the street,

and the arrest of seven people.

It took police in riot gear from 12 departments to restore order, but the Dayton Police Department officially labeled it a “disturbance,” not a riot.

In a large crowd,

in the heat of the moment,

people will say and do things they would never say or do individually.

It is called mob psychology,

and if there is someone manipulating it,

stirring it up,

it can quickly turn violent and murderous.

## II

An angry crowd turned into a murderous mob on a Friday morning 2,000 years ago in the city of Jerusalem.

There was a prisoner, a rabbi from Nazareth (100 miles to the north), one of a quarter of a million pilgrims who had come to the city for the Passover.

He was known for teaching love and forgiveness.

But political operatives in the capital,  
    using the language of religion,  
        had convinced people that he was a threat to their values and their  
        way of life.

And so an angry crowd gathered outside the governor's quarters at the Fortress Antonia and,  
    whipped into an irrational frenzy,  
        demanded that this rabbi be executed.

“Crucify him! Crucify him!” they screamed.

Fear and anger turned into rage;  
    the crowd became a mob.

The most powerful politician in town,  
    whose job was to keep order,  
        made a calculated decision,  
            and the prisoner was put to death.

The politician's name was Pontius Pilate.

History remembers him for the decision he made on that Friday 2,000 years ago.

The great church historian Jaroslav Pelikan observed a fascinating thing about Pilate:

*“One of the many historical ironies of the Christian message is that of all the famous ancient Romans — Julius Caesar or Cicero or Vergil — none has achieved even nearly the universal name recognition of an otherwise obscure provincial (official) named Pontius Pilate, who has the*

*distinction — which he shares with, of all people, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and with no other human creature — of having his name recited every day all over the world in the (Apostles' Creed): 'suffered under Pontius Pilate.'*”

### III

More about Pilate in a moment: first let's back up five days to the Palm Sunday parade—

the procession of Rabbi Jeshua Ben Joseph  
as he enters the Holy City riding on a donkey.

Only as we understand the deep significance of the Palm Sunday parade can we fully comprehend Jesus' encounter with Pontius Pilate on Good Friday.

Frances Taylor Gench says the Palm Sunday procession stands at the intersection between religion and politics.

A number of years ago a radio talk show host caused a minor kerfuffle when he called on Christians to leave their churches if they hear the words *social justice*.

“I beg you,” he said, “look for the words *social justice* or *economic justice* on your church's website, and if you find them there, run away from your church.”

“Social justice, economic justice,” he said, “are code words for socialism, communism, and Nazism.”

Well, I'm not sure if any churches emptied out as a result of what the talk show host said.

But there is a sense in which he was absolutely right.

It's not socialism, communism, or Nazism—  
a grade-schooler knows that.

But it is about justice, and a Gospel that for 2,000 years has been challenging social structures, political and economic arrangements that work to the disadvantage of poor people and to the advantage of privileged, powerful people.

Theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff wrote an essay for the *Christian Century* on the topic “How My Mind Has Changed.”

He explained how in his comfortable Calvinist–Dutch Reformed upbringing in Michigan, he was taught that it was a Christian’s duty to live a good life and do good things.

And then he attended a theological conference in South Africa and saw firsthand institutional racism and political oppression.

He heard South African officials explain how much charity they were doing for poor blacks, and he realized it wasn’t enough,  
wasn’t close to what the Bible demands.

What was needed was not charity, but justice;  
not new aid programs, but new laws that transformed the social order.

Nicholas Wolterstorff wrote that his mind was changed from thinking that our Christian responsibility is to do charity to realizing it is to do justice,  
and that means social, political, and institutional change.

“To delete justice from the Bible is to have very little left.”

No doubt the radio talk show host would have been among those who pleaded with Jesus not to go up to Jerusalem at such a politically volatile moment,  
to stay in the safety of Galilee,  
away from the messy politics of the City of David.

#### IV

But Jesus will not stay away.

He enters Jerusalem riding on a donkey,  
and this, too, is a provocative act.

Everyone knew the verse from the prophet Zechariah that read:

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!  
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem.  
See, your king comes to you,  
triumphant and victorious is he,  
humble and riding on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zechariah 9:9)*

Think about it:

250,000 pilgrims in a city whose permanent population is 40,000,  
all there to celebrate Passover,  
to remember Israel's liberation from bondage in Egypt.

Passover was a celebration of political freedom and independence in the capital  
city of a nation that was not free or independent,  
but part of the Roman Empire,  
governed by Rome's appointed officials,  
occupied and controlled by Rome's legions.

That is the situation into which Jesus decides to ride in the very way the Bible says  
the king will come.

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, in their book, *The Last Week*, say that it  
looks for all the world like a planned political demonstration.

The way the Gospel of John tells it, Jesus knows exactly what he was doing.

The religious and political authorities have already decided that he is a  
troublemaker.

Now, after what he did on the first day of the week—  
riding into the city in the way the scripture said their king would  
come—  
they decide that he is a dangerous political threat.

They put together a plan to get rid of him—  
arrest him on trumped-up charges,  
a public show trial before the governor and a crowd,  
now easily persuaded that he is a threat to their way of life.

## V

John 18 and 19 describe the trial and the relationship between Jesus, the prisoner,  
and Pilate, the governor and judge, in great detail.

The story is presented in seven separate episodes.

Outside, on a balcony overlooking the crowded square:  
the crowd demands Jesus' death.

Inside: Pilate questions Jesus about kingship.

Outside: Pilate announces that he has found Jesus, whom he calls King of the Jews, not guilty.

He offers to set Jesus free and execute another prisoner, Barabbas.

The crowd demands Jesus' death.

Inside: Pilate orders the soldiers to beat Jesus,  
           has a purple robe placed on him  
           and a crown of thorns.

Outside: Pilate shows Jesus to the crowd and hopes for a little mercy.

The shouts are now screams: "Crucify him!"

Unfortunately, in John's gospel those accusers are always called "the Jews"—  
     as though Jesus wasn't Jewish,  
     as though all Jews were to blame for killing Jesus.

Years after Jesus' death and resurrection, animosity toward Jewish people found its way into John's gospel, making it sound as though all Jews condemned Jesus.

There were some Jews who opposed Jesus  
     and some who followed him.

There were some who collaborated with the Romans—  
     just as the Nazis appointed bishops for the German Lutheran church,  
     and the government of China appoints the Roman Catholic  
     archbishop.

Today we must repudiate every claim that Jews were responsible for Jesus' death.

Only Pilate, the official representative of the emperor, has that power.

And now Pilate needs to know: "Are you the king of the Jews?"

If so, you are guilty of treason because the emperor in Rome is the king of everyone everywhere, including the Jews.

Pilate continues to shuttle back and forth between the mob and his private conversation with Jesus.

He tries to persuade Jesus to help himself.

All Jesus needs to say is “I’m not a king. I never was, never will be.”

But Jesus won’t do it.

Pilate tries to persuade the crowd that Jesus is no threat.

The mob will hear none of it.

“You are no friend of Caesar’s if you free him,” they shout.

One more try—“Shall I crucify your king?”

The response is one of the most chilling sentences in the New Testament:  
**“We have no king but Caesar.”**

## VI

So here’s the picture John paints for us:

A politician doing everything he can to preserve order,  
 trying desperately and ultimately failing to remain neutral;

People whipped into a rage out of their own fears;

Religious leaders obsessed with their own privilege and the security of their institutions,  
 willing to deny the very foundation of their faith and vow ultimate allegiance not to God, but to the emperor.

And in the middle of it all, Jesus, who alone seems to know exactly what he is doing—  
 steadfast,  
 strong,

quietly defiant,  
 standing there with the purple robe over his shoulders,  
 the crown of thorns on his head,  
 his back torn open by the flogging—  
 the King.

“Sometimes you have to decide who your king is,” says Frances Taylor Gench

Sometimes life places you in a situation where you can’t remain undecided, safely neutral.

In the documentary film *Bonheoffer*, archival newsreel footage shows German Lutheran bishops in their clerical collars, on the platform at Nuremberg, before a huge crowd, shaking hands with Adolf Hitler and raising their right arms in the Nazi salute.

Contrast that with the story of Henri Salmide, a former German naval officer, who was serving in Bordeaux, France, in August 1944.

He was ordered to destroy the city’s port facilities and docks,  
 among the most extensive in France.

Salmide, like many others, knew that Germany was losing the war,  
 so he took his life in his hands, and disobeyed orders.

He blew up a Nazi bunker,  
 escaped,  
 and joined the French underground resistance.

In an interview in 1977, he was asked why he did it.

He said, “I acted according to my Christian conscience.”

Our choices may never be that dramatic,  
 but in a hundred decisions we make every day—  
 how to relate to others,  
 what to think and do about issues that confront our society,  
 how to spend money,  
 what causes to support,  
 whom to encourage,

whom to oppose,  
whom to vote for—  
every day we decide who is our Savior, our Lord, our King.

The late George MacLeod, minister of the Church of Scotland, founder of the Iona Community, said,

*“I simply argue that the cross be raised at the center of the marketplace as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on a town garbage heap; at a crossroad of politics so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek . . . and at the kind of place where cynics talk smut and thieves curse and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he died, and that is what he died about. And that is where Christ’s people ought to be and what church people ought to be about.”*

Seminary professor Barbara Lundblad told how one of her students, an Anglican priest from South Africa, shared a story about what it was like to believe Jesus was King during the days of apartheid.

“Our whole congregation was arrested,” he said, “for refusing to obey the government.”

All 240 members of the congregation were arrested and put in jail—  
from babies to a 90 year old man.

“At least babies and mothers were kept together,” he added.

The pastor himself was imprisoned for a year.

To claim that Jesus is King can be dangerous.

## VII

We might wish that Jesus had not come to the city,  
to the intersection of religion and politics,  
but he did, and so he comes today.

He comes in and through the issues that challenge us and vex us:  
how to spend our resources;

military budgets and education budgets;  
 health care and jobs,  
 housing and immigration,  
 juvenile justice and courts and prisons;  
 halls of congress and state legislatures and city councils.

We might wish Jesus would stay away,  
 but Jesus doesn't.

He rides into the city and there would be Lord and Savior and King.

His crucifixion is not so much what sinful people did to him,  
 as what a loving God did and does for us.

Read carefully how the Gospel of John tells it.

The crucifixion is not so much a substitute for punishment that you and I deserve,  
 as a sign, an expression of God's great love for the whole world.

*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son.*

This is the picture of Jesus that emerges from John's account of Palm Sunday and the Passion.

He is not a victim, meekly submitting to a cruel fate.

This Jesus is strong,  
                                   steadfast,  
   courageous,  
   quietly defiant.

He will carry his own cross.

He will walk steadily up Calvary's hill to his death.

He will face his hour, his death, not in terror  
           but in love—  
           deep love for his friends and his followers and his mother;  
           deep love for God.

When it is over he will say,

*“It is finished.  
It is complete.  
All has been accomplished.”*

Crown him in your heart this day.

Give him your hope,  
your trust,  
your love,  
your commitment.

He will die, as he lived—  
as a King,  
my King,  
your King.

**All praise to him.**

Amen.

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