

*An Inconvenient Jesus* -- Lake Joseph Community Church

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Text: Matthew 27:15-23

A sermon allows the living Christ to walk among his people. DB

It's great to be back with you all after a 2-year hiatus!

Has there been a crazier two years in any of our lifetimes? It's like we packed a life-time of crazy-making into two years!

The passage we read earlier is from the Easter story. We usually keep it neatly tucked away until Lent. And we know the story so well that we sometimes miss the relevance of the pieces. I want to suggest that this passage is as relevant to our current time and place in history and to our geo-political and socio-economic location as it was 2000 years ago.

The background to the story is the Passover – an annual Jewish feast to celebrate the emancipation of Jews from Egyptian slavery and to keep alive the hope of a future emancipation. Remember, Israel are not slaves but neither are they free. They are under Roman occupation.

Jerusalem floods with people, like Times Square on New Year's Eve. And as they sit around tables recalling the good ole' days and sharing horror stories of their current situation, resentment of Roman tyrants, Roman taxation, and Roman brutality is being fueled. And as that resentment is being fueled, their blood boils. Not unlike what it must be like around Ukrainian dinner tables these days.

So, Jerusalem sizzles with tension. There are Roman troops everywhere, on high alert, watching for signs of revolt. It's a tinder keg! Jews are emboldened by numbers and Romans are on edge. The slightest misstep from either side would be catastrophic. This is the atmosphere on the ground.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes religion and state are in bed together. It's a marriage of convenience. We saw this during the Nazi regime when the church, for its own protection and preservation, colluded with the Nazi government; with Rwanda also, and down through history. We've witnessed it in North America with the church lobbying for political power and legislative control. But allegiance to Jesus is often inconvenient and dangerous. It threatens our comfort and the status quo.

So too, it was with the Jewish religious elite. They were in bed with the Roman government, and both got what they wanted.

Jesus has been betrayed by Judas, one of his friends. He's been arrested, cross-examined by the chief priests and the religious establishment. They want him dead. They want him cancelled, because Jesus has exposed them for what they are: a self-serving, self-interest group in cozy collusion with the pagan Roman government. And now this self-interest group is masquerading as God's mouthpiece lobbying the government to have Jesus killed, since *they* don't have the authority to issue the death penalty themselves. Jesus has become an irritating inconvenience. He has eclipsed them as the primary influencer of the people, threatening their power and status, their cushy lifestyle, and perhaps most inconvenient of all, their political favour with Rome.

They bring him before the governor, Pontius Pilate, a convenient regional puppet of Caesar who has no interest in settling their religious disputes and they know it. *They have to make the charges against Jesus of*

*political interest to the Roman Governor.* The only way to do this is to create a perceived threat to the Romans, so they claimed he called himself the “King of the Jews,” a title Jesus never claimed for himself.

The word “King” would certainly upset the governor and be perceived as a potential threat to Roman rule, since Rome had already appointed Herod as ‘King of the Jews.’ If they could get Pilate to suspect treason they would have him on their side. It had to be political!

Pilate then asks Jesus, “Are you the King of Jews?” The question is not theological but political. He asks not, “are you the Son of David” or “the son of God” or “the Messiah?” He’s not interested in internal, religious quibbles, but, “do you claim to be the King of Jews?” A question you’d expect of a state official responsible to defend Rome. He wants to know if Jesus is a political rival. Will this peasant disrupt order, threaten Pilate’s position, his reputation, his career? Now *that* would be inconvenient!

A “yes” by Jesus would implicate him in treason, a crime punishable by crucifixion. A “no” answer would be untrue. Jesus responds with, “You have said it.” He masterfully puts Pilate’s own words back in Pilate’s mouth. Pilate is uncomfortable. He is unconvinced that Jesus is a threat to Rome and he’s highly suspect of the religious establishment. He’s no idiot and he knows he’s being used. He even received a cryptic warning from his wife!

We pick up the story in verse 15: (NRSVUE)

*15 Now it was the governor’s custom at the festival [that is, the Passover] to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. 16 At that time they had a well-known prisoner whose name was Jesus Barabbas. 17 So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, “Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?” 18 For he knew it was out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him.*

Barabbas’ name is interesting. ‘Bar’ means son and ‘abba’ means father or teacher in Aramaic. So, his name means ‘son of a father’ or ‘son of a teacher.’ Barabbas is his last name. His first name is Jesus, a common name in first century Israel. ‘Jesus’ comes from the Hebrew, ‘Yeshua,’ which means deliverer or salvation. And if you live in first century Roman occupied Judea you name your sons Yeshua, in hopes that one of them will grow up to be that deliverer.

Barabbas was a folk hero. He was brave enough to stand up to Rome, to stand up for the religious rights of the Jews. Valiant enough to kill for freedom.

“Which one do you choose?” Pilate asked. It’s a question that rings through the centuries. “Jesus Barabbas or Jesus of Nazareth?” Jesus, son of a father or Jesus, son of God? Which one do you want? *Which one fits your lifestyle? Your Ideology?*

Jesus Barabbas was a revolutionary, an insurrectionist, a Freedom Fighter. He incited revolts against Rome (think guerilla warfare today). He may have known Jesus of Nazareth. They were both on death row for treason. And treason meant crucifixion. It was Rome’s way of terrorizing people into submission. It’s the reason it was done publicly.

There were two versions of Jesus to choose from:

two men, both freedom seekers;

two men, two different ideologies;

two men convicted of the same crime.

Had the drama played out longer they may have been cellmates on death row, both languishing in prison awaiting their fate. I wonder, would they have argued over their dreams of justice or freedom or peace?

Two brands of deliverer were on trial: Jesus Barabbas whose goal it was to restore the Kingdom of Israel and enact revenge on their enemies, and Jesus of Nazareth, who came to inaugurate the Kingdom of God for the world and to *forgive* enemies.

Pilate can't decide. (Matt. 27:20-23)

20 *But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed.*

21 *"Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor. "Barabbas," they answered.*

22 *"What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" Pilate asked. They ALL answered, "Crucify him!"*

23 *"Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate.*

*But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"*

Here's a politician backed into a corner. He feels defenseless against the crowd, threatened by Rome, warned by his wife, and he knows he's being played! But he's stuck, trapped in the politics of the system.

And what does self-preservation require? What does self-preservation cost? Truth and justice. He knows Jesus is innocent, but he fears the crowds; fears the disorder and wrath of Rome; fears for his reputation and career. He sees a way out and he takes it. He takes a poll and asks the crowd to decide. And the fickle crowds whom Jesus loved and healed, betray him -- deny him. You see, self-preservation requires killing or colluding, violence or complicity. The religious establishment colluded; the state killed.

Pilate knew Jesus was innocent. The religious establishment knew Jesus was innocent. The crowds knew Jesus was innocent. But Jesus Barabbas aligned with their political agenda. Jesus of Nazareth did not. The crowds *adored* Jesus of Nazareth. But they *idolized* Jesus Barabbas.

We sit comfortably 2000 years after the resurrection and wonder with amazement, disgust even, 'How could they?' We're astonished at the fickleness of the crowds and underestimate the depth to which this political-military brand of Messiah was embedded in their hopes, dreams, and expectations. In their religious worldview. Maybe in *our* worldview? It's crowd of Judases and Peters, and of us.

The crowd was faced with a choice: Jesus Barabbas or Jesus of Nazareth? Freedom *fighter* or freedom *giver*? Empire builder or Kingdom builder? Which Jesus did they want? Which version of deliverer? One who will *kill* for Israel or one who will *die* for the world? One who grasps for power and seeks revenge or one who divests himself of power and loves his enemies? One who seduces with pseudo-peace or one who promises lasting peace through self-sacrifice, reckless generosity, and radical love?

Jesus Barabbas conveniently feeds their lust for power and revenge. Jesus of Nazareth inconveniently challenges us to peace and justice with weapons of forgiveness, love, self-sacrifice -- weapons that don't achieve political power or satiate revenge.

Rather, the justice and peace that Jesus offers is messy and costly and inconvenient. It means turning the other cheek when we're insulted or slandered, standing in solidarity with the marginalized when it's inconvenient and costly. It means not being concerned with who gets the credit, loving our enemies and blessing those who curse us. Maybe it means voting differently for the benefit of others rather than ourselves.

Do they want Jesus, Son of *the* Father, or Jesus, son of *a* father? Jesus *the* teacher or Jesus, son of *a* teacher? The crowd was faced with a choice between Jesus Barabbas, a known insurrectionist, or Jesus of Nazareth, an innocent man. *A choice between sacrificing justice to ensure order or ensuring order at expense of justice.*

Their interest was self-serving. They wanted someone who would fight for *them* now. Someone strong and powerful who would use the weapons they liked and trusted, to gain tangible power -- political power -- to gain a voice in the halls of power.

This narrative demonstrates the pervasive and universal lust within all of us to resort to what is safe, what is known, what suits our desires and protects *our* interests.

Pilate's question echoes hauntingly through the centuries: *Do you want Jesus Barabbas or Jesus, Son of God?*

We might do well to pause and consider how well our lives reflect the Jesus we claim to follow. We all have a tendency to recreate Jesus in our own image and to co-opt him for own agendas -- political, personal, military, and economic. Jesus becomes a brand and the cross its logo.

This isn't new. Two thousand years ago people attempted to co-opt his message for their own personal and political goals, and when faced with two Messiahs they chose the one that served their personal and political agendas.

It's too easy to separate ourselves from this story. We weren't there. It wasn't our choice. We wouldn't have done that (we console ourselves). But wouldn't we have? Every day we're faced with the same choice between Jesus Barabbas or Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, son of a father, or Jesus, Son of *the* Father. Jesus of the sword or Jesus of the cross.

Every day we have choices to make to serve our own self-interests or to walk in the way of Jesus. To choose meekness over power; justice over collusion; freedom of child slaves over our favourite chocolate bar; kindness over having to have the last word; forgiveness over resentment; and the list goes on. Following Jesus is not about demanding our Christian rights. That's Jesus Barabbas. It's about following Jesus of the cross, dying to self. What does *that* look like?

Every day we must ask ourselves: is how we live true to Jesus of the cross and the kind of self-giving lifestyle he calls us to? Jesus is not an addendum or accessory to our lives. He's actually an inconvenience and gets in way of the self.

May I suggest that if Jesus isn't an inconvenience, he may not actually be Lord of our lives.  
*If Jesus isn't an inconvenience, it may not be Jesus of Nazareth that we're following.*

Two thousand years ago Pilate asked: "Who do you choose: Jesus Barabbas or Jesus of Nazareth?"  
Two thousand years later, Jesus is still asking: Who do you choose: Jesus Barabbas or me?

The *crowds'* dilemma was: Which Jesus would endorse their ideology?  
*Our* dilemma is: Whose ideology will we endorse?

There were two Jesuses on trial that fateful Friday. We know which Jesus was chosen. Which Jesus would we choose? Which Jesus *do* we choose?