

## **“24 Hours That Changed the World—A Governor, A Murderer, and Jesus”**

Today we're continuing the series of messages called "24 Hours that Changed the World." We're looking at the last 24 hours of Jesus' life, what he did, what he said, who he spent time with. The idea is that that last 24 was filled with events that Jesus chose in order for you and me to see the essence of who he was (and is). By looking at his last 24 hours, we see a very clear picture of who Jesus was, and what he calls us to be.

So far we've looked at the last supper, Jesus' betrayal in the Garden of Gethsemane, his midnight trial in front of the Sanhedrin, and Peter's denial of him. Today we're going to look closely at Jesus' interaction with Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, Barabbas, a criminal, and the crowd. As we look at this event today I want us to ask the question, "What did they want?" What did Pilate want? What did the religious leaders want? What did the crowd want that day?

Here's where we are in Jesus' last 24 hours. After his trial before the Sanhedrin, the ruling Jewish body, they put Jesus in a jail cell for what was left of the night that night. The religious leaders huddle as the night ends and the day begins (Mark 15:1). They put their heads together and said, "Okay, after what Jesus said last night, what's our next step? How do we get this done? What do we say to the Roman governor that will get Pilate to sign off on this trouble-maker's death sentence?"

They pulled Jesus out first thing in the morning to take him to the Roman ruling authority, the governor of that territory, Pontius Pilate. Sometimes we complain about how slow our justice system works, but in this case the religious leaders are pushing the case of Jesus along as fast as they can. At daybreak they have Jesus in front of Pilate. They want this Jesus thing done. They want him shut up. They want to go back to life as normal. They want to make him go away, *right now*.

But why would Jesus be taken to the Roman governor if the Jewish supreme court had already pronounced a sentence of death against Jesus? Because the Sanhedrin did not have the legal power to put someone to death. The Roman governor of that territory held that power.

Let's talk about the governor, Pontius Pilate. From Roman and Jewish records we can learn quite a bit about him. He would have been a successful soldier and administrator to have been appointed as a governor. Pilate was appointed as governor of Judea in 26 A.D. by emperor Tiberius. And he would have reported directly to the emperor. Being appointed governor was an honor but Judea was a territory that was notoriously difficult to govern. The Jews were known to be unbreakable and difficult and they hated the Roman presence in their country. There were always Jewish guerilla fighters out in the hills. When Roman convoys moved from one city to another they did it very carefully and usually during daylight hours.

If you want to get an idea about what it was like to be the governor or procurator of Judea in the first century imagine what it might be like to be named the American ambassador to Afghanistan or Iraq. You surround yourself with top-notch troops. You live behind thick walls in the Green Zone. You never go out in public without guards

who are armed to the teeth. And you know that almost anything you say or do is going to be twisted by one faction or another into a reason for killing your men.

So the Sanhedrin hand Jesus over to Pilate. Jesus is standing in front of the Roman governor. Bloody and beaten. Tied up. Silent. His accusers are making all sorts of charges against the Galilean. They know that the one charge that will get Pilate's attention is saying that Jesus claimed to be king of the Jews. That was punishable by death according to Rome because the Roman emperor was the king of the Jews. Anybody else who claimed to be king was quickly eliminated.

Pilate hears the charges but he's not convinced Jesus is the threat to the Empire. In fact Pilate's surprised by Jesus' silence in the face of accusations of being a threat to the government. Pilate asks, "Have you no answer?" Jesus is silent. Why? I think Jesus is silent because he knows why this time has come. He's said it over and over already. He knows it is time to make the ultimate sacrifice.

A crowd has gathered in front of the palace. Pilate takes this chance to do something he does once a year. He offers to release a prisoner. It was a way of pleasing the crowds; of buying some temporary popularity and peace.

It so happens that in his prison Pilate has a revolutionary. A murderer. A liberation fighter for a free Palestine. The man's name is Barabbas. Pilate points to Jesus and asks the crowd, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" It's interesting that he refers to Jesus as "the King of the Jews." Pilate's tipping his hand. Making it obvious that he thinks that Jesus should be released. Why on earth would a Jewish crowd insist that their "King" be put to death and a murdering revolutionary be set free?

The Sanhedrin stirs up the crowd and they demand that Jesus be put to death. To die on a cross is a terrible thing so Pilate wants to understand why Jesus deserves this. "What evil has he done?" The governor asks. The crowd doesn't answer. The crowd is on fire. There's a kind of energy that hatred releases into a mob. They don't explain what Jesus has done to deserve being nailed into wood. They just scream, "Crucify him!"

When people are under stress you can see who they really are. When people are under stress you can see what they really believe, what really matters to them and how they are wired. We see this in Jerusalem. In those early morning hours at the fortress with Pilate, the religious leaders, and the crowds.

*What do they want?* What is it the governor named Pilate wants? What is it the religious leader want? What is it the crowd wants at that moment, on that morning in Jerusalem? *What do they want?*

I think Pilate wants a successful career. He wasn't afraid of killing another Jewish messiah. We have records of their being almost 10 men who claimed to be a messiah around that time. They'd raise up a small band of fighters and challenge the Romans. Pilate would release his soldiers and the blood would flow. It happened regularly. What does Pilate want? He wants to survive in his career. He wants to hold onto what he has. He wants to avoid being a failure.

You see, Pilate's career was in jeopardy. When he was appointed to that area he went in and immediately infuriated the Jews. He set up his palace and headquarters right next to the Jewish Temple. It shared a wall. That infuriated the Jews. He took a large amount of money from the Temple treasury to pay for a water project. That infuriated the Jews. He had used the people and the resources of that area for his own pleasure and profit. He provoked the Jews by the symbols he allowed his troops to carry and put on their shields. He caused riots by his actions. The Jews wrote to Rome with a list of grievances. Pilate was told by the emperor that if there were any more problems that he provoked he'd be relieved of his post and called back to Rome. So when Jesus comes before Pilate the career of the governor is hanging by a thread.

What does Pilate want? He wants his career, he wants to make it. The governor wants to avoid being a failure at all costs. To do that will mean he will need to please the crowd.

What do the religious leaders want? Why are they moving as quickly as they can to get Jesus nailed into a Roman cross? They want their religious traditions to continue without change. Jesus, and his message, threatens to bring change in all sorts of ways to the people including the way they see and experience God. They want tomorrow to look like today. They want to keep things predictable and this Jesus brings change.

The Jews saw themselves as the chosen people of God. Then, Jesus shows up and talks about a God who chooses to have a relationship with all sorts of people. Not just the Jews, but all sorts of people. Jesus shows up and does crazy and new things. Like calling a tax collector as a disciple. Like sitting down at a table with prostitutes. Like telling a Samaritan woman, whose life has been a series of broken, unfaithful relationships with different men, that God wants to give her the living water of a relationship with his Son. Like announcing that God loves the whole world, *The whole world!*

Sometimes we want our traditions to stay the same so badly that we're no longer open to any new things that God might be doing. We start to think, "The world is full of too much change. Is it too much to ask for predictability when it comes to life with God in the church? Can't the way it was yesterday be the way it will be today and the way it will be tomorrow?" I understand. I know.

I've learned over the past several years that I'm all in favor of change, I like change, I embrace change...as long as I'm the one making the changes! But don't you dare change anything that affects me! Don't you change my toothpaste, or my chicken noodle soup, or my hometown, or my routine!

I spend a lot of time coaching pastors in how to guide their churches through change. Because a lot of churches would literally rather die than change the way they do worship. They'd rather die than change the style of their music, or the time they do worship, or how they reach out to others, or serve in their community.

I'm so thankful that Saint Paul's has embraced change over the years. I think we're relevant to our community because we've been willing to walk the line between traditions that give us deep roots and an openness to experience something new that God might be doing.

The religious leaders want their traditions more than they want what the new thing God is doing in Jesus. That's what they want?

What does the crowd want? They want their nation to be free, to be powerful. They want to see someone who knows how to use a sword drive out the Romans. They want to bleed the Romans, make the Romans pay for the misery that they've inflicted on the Jews. Maybe that's why they ask for Barabbas instead of Jesus. Barabbas was a military revolutionary who could rally people's hatred; Jesus talked about loving your enemies. Barabbas knew how to wield a sword and draw blood; Jesus talked about forgiving those who hurt you.

Jesus knew that the sword could not conquer Rome. He was right you know. About 30 years after Jesus' death, a leader arose, a messiah, and he rallied a fierce army. It was 6,000 men strong and they stormed the Roman garrisons in Jerusalem and the surrounding areas and they killed all the Roman soldiers. They thought they had ushered in a new day, a new beginning. Until Rome responded by sending a well equipped army of 60,000 battle-hardened troops. They came down from the north and killed 100,000 Jews in the area of Galilee (Jesus' home turf). Then they laid siege to the city of Jerusalem. Two years later they utterly destroyed the city of Jerusalem, burned it down, toppled the buildings, killed the people. One million Jews died.

The sword couldn't beat Rome. Jesus knew that. He also knew that love could change everything. Because of Jesus love, his overcoming power of love, and forgiveness, and mercy, and grace. Within the span of 250 years, Jesus' message had spread through the Roman Empire. And people who were tired of their worn out pagan gods, found in Jesus the life that really is life. Love ultimately conquered the Roman Empire. Not the sword, not uncontrolled nationalism, not violence.

Love for country is a good thing. But love for God, for Jesus Christ, that's got to be the foundation of everything. The crowd loved their nation, their flag, more than they did the new thing God was doing in Jesus Christ. Any time that happens, a nation is doomed because it forgets that it's called to serve the world, to love the world, to give sacrificially to the world, to bless as it has been blessed. If a nation forgets that, it's doomed.

The crowd wanted Judea to be safe and free. More than anything else. They chose Barabbas. It looks to the crowd like there is more power in the sword than in the words and life of Jesus. They want what they think is best for their country, even if that means the teacher from Nazareth will carry a cross and die on a cross. What do they want? What do you want? What do I want?

If we had been standing there on that morning outside the palace, and Jesus was standing there in front of us, what would we do? What would we say? The answer to that question has to do with what it is we really want.

What do you think Jesus wants as he stand there? **Jesus wants to set prisoners free.** The very first time Jesus stands up to read scripture and speak in his hometown synagogue, he chooses to read the opening verse from the 61st chapter of Isaiah? **"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners" (Luke 4:18, NIV).**

That brings us to Barabbas. There isn't much scholars can tell us about the man named Barabbas. He was a murderer and a revolutionary. (Luke 23:19 tells us that.) The Romans would take anyone who was a part of an armed uprising against the Empire and nail them to a cross. Sometimes you could ride for a

hundred miles down a highway in the Roman Empire and there would be a cross with a crucified rebel every hundred yards or so.

We don't know much about Barabbas but Jesus is willing to take his place. Jesus is innocent. Barabbas is guilty. But Jesus is willing to take the place of Barabbas on the cross. He will die. Barabbas will live. But it isn't just Barabbas Jesus sets free but it's all of us. Jesus wants to throw open the doors of whatever cell of fear, or sin, or guilt, or addiction, or anger, or greed that is shutting us in. Jesus wants to set us free from those places that trap us, and limit us, and keep us from being in a trusting, loving, obedient relationship with God.

I know a woman who hit bottom last week. Her addictions, her decisions caught up with her. What started off as a source of fun and pleasure had become a prison. So last week her mother had to take her to a treatment center. What that daughter may not know is that Jesus went with her to that treatment center to take a huge part in her recovery, if she'll let him. He wants, more than anything, to set her free.

Jesus sets free all those who accept the gift of his saving, changing, love. The cell door is thrown open by the power of his love, by the self-giving love of God we see on the cross. There's something about God that drives him to always work to set us free. Barabbas. You. Me. Everybody.

Jesus stands in front of Pontius Pilate, in those early morning hours, and is showing us another way. Jesus is showing us God's way. The way of love lived out.

Mahatma Gandhi, for three months in 1917, read 1Corinthians 13 to himself over and over and over. When his supporters, working to gain India's independence from Great Britain, would begin to consider violence he would tell them to read the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Paul's letter to the Corinthians.

Once, for a New Year's gift to his nephew, he sent the young man a handwritten copy of the 13th chapter of Corinthians. He talked about his own struggle to learn how to love as God wants us to love. Gandhi described love as a dagger and said, "If we could get hold of this dagger (of love) and get also the strength to stab ourselves with it, we could shake the world."

My mom has done some pretty amazing things in her life. She has a friend named Jane who has battled MS her entire adult life. She's in her 70's now and the MS is winning that battle. It's kind of sad to see, but my mom is fearless in the face of stuff like that. She goes by and visits Jane, takes their old friends by to talk and laugh and eat desserts. My mom will give Jane's husband a break by staying with her so he can go and do a few things just for himself.

One of the times mom was there Jane lost control of her bowels. Jane was so embarrassed she just cried. My mom just waved it off, found towels, fresh clothes, cleaned up the mess, cleaned up Jane. As my mom was on her knees cleaning up the mess on the floor with a bucket and rag Jane looked at her and said, "Why are you doing this for me?" My mom said, "Because I love you, and because Jesus loves you."

Love puts Jesus on a cross. Love puts us on our knees. And this kind of love changes the world. It has the kind of power swords and bombs can't touch. Jesus us wants us to know that. Jesus wants us to see that. Jesus wants us to live that.

What do you want? What do you *really* want? Is it career stuff that drives you, or your devotion to family, or a desire to please the crowd, or the need to have things stay the same, or is it what God wants? Will what you want lead to someplace good or will it lead you to someplace bad, some lifeless, painful place? It's your life, it's your call. In his last 24 Jesus wanted you to see something. What do you see?

And for today that's the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*I thank two pastors for their resources in this message: Dr. Mark Owen Fenstermacher, pastor at Trinity United Methodist Church, and Rev. Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection.*